# Detective FICTION MARCH 25¢

Get Thee Behind Me... by JOHN D. MACDONALD



## Detective FICTION MARCH, 1951

VOL. 155

#### CONTENTS

NO. 4

| BIT |     |   |   |    |
|-----|-----|---|---|----|
| N   | ove | e | Н | 29 |

| GET THEE BEHIND MEJohn D. MacDonald | 2  |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| THE MISFIT BULLET                   | 18 |
| THE TWO DEATHS OF BARNEY SLABAUGH   |    |
| Cornell Woolrich 8                  | 37 |
| Short Stories                       |    |
| DOOM SERVICE                        | 8  |
| UNTIMELY VISITORJohn Bender 6       | 59 |
| ILL WIND                            | 3  |
| SANDTRAPJohn Blake 8                | 31 |

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#### NEXT ISSUE PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 9th

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It is not often that an author spices a story with two heroes. One was George Cooper doing a quiet job in a quiet way. The other was Allan Farat, a sleek debonair hood who killed for pleasure. Around this dichotomy, John D. MacDonald has woven an exotic tale of deception that challenges the memories of a woman in love.

### GET THEE BEHIND ME ...

by JOHN D. MacDONALD

doing a quiet job in a quiet way, thankful for these quiet years after the bad years—the very bad years. And then in March he was driving a big raspberry convertible down Route 19, through Tarpon and Clearwater, heading for St. Pete and the Bradenton ferry, and he wasn't George Cooper any more. His name was Allan Farat and the states of Illinois, Ohio and Michigan were all interested in his whereabouts.

He sat slouched behind the wheel in the expensive and too-sharp suit, staring ahead at the narrow asphalt of Florida, tinged green by the ovoid sun glasses. He felt excited, uncomfortable, afraid and almost entirely unreal.

Abelson had put it to him nicely. You had to give Abelson that.

"Understand, Cooper. We can't order you to do this. We'd like you to do it. If you feel you can. It's going to be hot and it's going to be dirty. We'd rather use somebody who has

their hand in. But we can't find anybody who looks even remotely like Allan Farat. But you—you could be Farat's brother. You'll get the right dye job on your hair and we'll have a good man put a scar on the bridge of your nose and you'll be Farat. Look at the picture again. Go ahead."

The glossy print had been placed on his desk. A strange feeling to see yourself, even to the way you hold a cigarette, sitting in an unknown nightclub with a blonde you never met.

"It's weird, Abelson."

"Weird enough to jump at. We know this. We know Rocko Kadma, after all these years of staying nicely deported, is on his way back. We think Allan Farat helped with the arrangements. We know that they're so cute that we can't get near them. But you can, Cooper. You can go climb in their pockets."

"Nice," George had said, "but what about Farat? A little awkward if he shows up, isn't it?"

"He won't. He's dead. We trapped him, alone, outside of St. Paul three weeks ago. He made a fuss. Somebody shot for the gun shoulder and hit him in the throat instead. It's been kept under cover. We've got his car and his clothes and his luggage and his rings and a dossier a foot thick. But we can't demand that you do it, Cooper. That's up to you. Don't answer right now. Think it over."

Abelson had been cute, and Abelson had known right from the beginning what the answer had to be. Big paternal Uncle Sam had been paternal long enough. George had been OSS in the Far East. A rough boy. A big, fast, rough, smart boy. The kind you can stick behind Jap lines for eighteen months and hope for the best. Seventeen would have been all right. Eighteen had cracked one George Cooper open-right down the middle. Eighteen months had turned him, for a time, into a retrogression case. Back in the sixth grade, he was. And worrying about Geography Regents when they air-snatched him out. One intensively trained intelligence agent ruined by those last four weeks.

Nobody blamed George. He knew that. Eighteen months was just a little too long without relief. And, of course, the malaria, yaws, chiggers and a touch of amoeba hadn't helped a bit.

But Uncle Sam is paternal. Shift the boy to another agency when the OSS fades out of the picture. Keep him under the wing because somewhere along the line he lost the willingness or ability to make decisions.

And so the quiet years. Put this

paper in that file and write a letter based on form 3000Z. Check in at nine and out at five and take your thirty days leave. Live in a room and lock the door at night and move away from people who don't like those three A.M. screams that come along sometimes when you dream that they've brought in a regiment and cut you and your Kachins off from the mountain hideout.

Abelson laid it on the line without saying so. He said, "You're the only one we can use. Think it over. You've been trained to think on your feet." There was something unsaid, like, "You've had a free ride for five years, boy. Here's a chance to earn your keep. If you pass it up, you'll be let go one of these days."

Abelson said: "Being a single guy you can drop out of sight this way." He didn't say, "This is one where we wouldn't want to send a guy with a family."

That was in January. Think it over on Sunday, George. So he thought it over. He thought of being frightened. Genuine fright isn't a harmless expression. It does something. It churns up through your guts day after day and keeps exploding in your brain until at last something has to give.

He thought it over until the sweat soaked the sides of his pants at the beltline where it had run from his armpit. He didn't know the file on Farat. He knew a lot of files on Farat's buddies. Nice playmates. Nothing blatant. Just the quiet sense of mercy and justice that you would expect in a hooded cobra.

Get off your back and earn your keep, boy. The free ride is over.

Driving south through Florida, along the gulf coast, Cooper thought that it would be less confusing to change from Cooper to Farat if there had only been one Cooper. But there were two Coopers. One was the pre-eighteen months Cooper. Ready to eat the world like a crisp red apple. Then the post-war Cooper. The one with no taste for apples. The quiet one in the quiet years.

He had gone to Abelson and said, "I'll do it."

Three words that were like a fuse. In seven weeks you have to unlearn somebody named George and learn somebody named Allan.

Where were you at Christmas time in 1942?

What was your number in Atlanta? Who was your cell-mate? What time was mess?

How do you sit in a chair? What's your favorite drink? Where did you buy the pinstripe? How many miles on the convertible? Where is Alice? What's your pet name for her? How do you like your steaks? Do you play the horses? How do you bet? How much do you tip a barber?

Abelson gave him the final briefing. "You're good, Cooper. You are Allan Farat. Enough to give me the creeps. I've talked to Farat. Now you've got it. His car and his clothes and his guns and his snotty expression and his cocky walk. Here's your roll. Sixteen hundred. We found a letter on him. Here it is. It doesn't tell much. Just that Kadma's going to arrive at the

Hutcheon place on Catboat Key near the end of March and he wants to thank you. We've got a completely negative report on the possibility of keeping the place under observation.

"Your job is this. Go in there. Find out who wants Kadma back in this country. Find out who financed it. Find out what they want him for. Get all the dope and get out. Memorize this paper and destroy it. It tells you how to get in touch with two good men we'll plant in Sarasota. We have every confidence in you, Cooper. Tonight you'll be picked up and taken to where the car is hidden. Take any route you want. Stay out of trouble on the way down. If you get in a spot where it will help you to prove your association, you'll find credentials tartaped to the underside of the lid of the air filter in the car."

And the convertible droned south over the asphalt, rolling through the scrub country.

He could feel it in the way he was treated. The hotel desks. The clerks dared show only the very faintest contempt. Service was quick and good. And when the room doors were closed and he looked in the mirrors, he knew why. The surgeon had been good. He'd added that tiny extra bit of fullness to the outside corners of the upper eyelids. The scar on the nose matched the scar on the corpse to the last milimeter.

A tall black haired hood with lazy eyelids and two hundred dollar suits and an air of amused insolence and a habit of calling all strangers "Luke". Women looked at him in the way they had once looked at the pre-war George Cooper.

On the short trip down he tried to bury George Cooper. He tried to think as Allan Farat, who had killed for profit, would think. And—above all—he kept from thinking about what he might do under strain. The free ride was over. The quiet years were ended. All the letters had been written and all the papers had been filed.

But he couldn't help remembering what the psychiatrist had said at the army hospital. "If you avoid tension and irritating situations, there is no reason why you shouldn't live a normal, happy life."

He'd used the wrong word. Happy. George Cooper had existed. Nothing more.

And now the knowledge was clear—dredged up from the depths of Abelson's brown eyes—George Cooper might very probably cease doing even that. A hell of a man to send on this sort of a deal.

But Abelson had covered it. "You see, Cooper. There's no one else."

the center of Sarasota, stretching a narrow way into the Gulf. It wasn't as developed as Siesta Key or Longboat Key. Now, with the destination close, he felt a curious and deceptive calm. Abelson's maps had been thorough. Maps in the modern manner which were made by a loafing plane of the pleasure type, equipped with camera.

He knew where to turn off the potholed concrete onto the sand road even without the help of the neat green and bronze sign which said "Carla Hutcheon". The road curved down through a thick growth of mangroves and scrub to the causeway pictured on the map. It was hardtop laid on a hundred yards of fill across a bay. As he drove across the causeway he could see, on either side of the closed gate, the tall fence enclosing the bay side of the little island, a cabin cruiser moored at the left. He stopped with the front bumper almost against the closed gate and pressed the horn ring in a long loud blast that sent up a flapping circle of birds.

An old man in stained khakis ambled into sight, heading for the gate. A sparse white beard was stained lemon at the corners of his mouth. The heels of his shoes dragged in the dust as he walked. Cooper remembered his acquired character in time to give the horn another long blast. The old man shifted into a jerky trot, frowning with annoyance.

Near the gate he swerved over to a phone box fastened to a palm bole.

"What's your name, mister?"

"Farat. Open up or I'll bunt it down, Luke."

"Got orders, mister. Got to phone the house."

"Make it fast, Luke. We got a hot sun out here."

"Farat you said?"

The old man phoned. It seemed to take a long time. Cooper blasted the horn again and the old man glared. "Can't hear with you doing that, mister."

He hung up and came over and

opened the gate. Cooper started fast enough to make the old fellow jump to one side. He drove around a few bends and down through a narrow lane of trees that opened up with surprising suddenness. The house lay squarely ahead, just beyond a big concrete parking apron. It was long, low, sprawling, theatrical. Vertical redwood and white limestone, acres of glass and roof-decks with bright umbrella-ed tables. It followed the line of a crest and beyond it the white sand sloped down to the dancing blue and soap-sud crests of the Gulf.

Cooper was overly conscious of the shutting of the gate behind him. At any time on the trip down he could have turned back. Even while waiting for the phone call to be put through, he could have twisted the car around and roared away. But now it was done.

He turned the ignition key off with the feeling of performing an irrevocable act. He got out and stretched the stiffness out of arms and legs. A picture out of the file on Farat appeared. He was a curly blond with narrow shoulders, red pulpy mouth, tiny hard blue eyes. He stood there and the shock was evident in those blue eyes. He wore swimming trunks and a beach coat with matching design of bright red sailfish on a white background. The carbine in the crook of his arm was completely out of place in the sun glare.

"Hi, Billy," Cooper said idly.

Billy shifted the carbine. It was aimed at Cooper's middle and a thin tan finger was through the guard. "I

thought it was a gag," Billy said. "I thought somebody was doing it for a laugh. What's your angle, Farat?"

"No angle, Billy. I'm just here to say hello to Rocko."

Cooper couldn't figure it out. Billy Lemp seemed to be undone by something beyond his comprehension.

"How long does this go on, Luke?" Cooper asked.

Carla Hutcheon came quickly out of a door that opened onto the parking apron. When she saw Farat she stopped dead and all expression left her face. Cooper had memorized her history. She was in her middle forties. Once upon a time she had been very lovely. Nick Floria had found her dancing in a small Chicago club. For six years she had been Nick's girl. When Nick had a slight difference of opinion with the Syndicate and ended up in the lake with cinderblocks wired to his ankles. Carla demonstrated unexpected executive talent by whipping Nick's lieutenants into line and taking over his territory, after convincing the Syndicate that she could handle it.

She had grown in many ways. Profits were invested in legitimate enterprise, and she hired bright and honest young men to run them properly. There were resort hotels and a chain of deluxe tourist courts. She was cold, competent and thorough. A big hard-mouthed brunette with pretty eyes, mahogany tan over a body gone to fat.

"Have you gone completely crazy, Allan?"

"Got a nice room for me, Carla?"

Billy appealed to her. "What the hell will Rocko think?"

"Shut up, Billy. Let me think. It looks as though he thought that by coming here he could make that other business look like a frame. But even Farat isn't that stupid, are you, Allan? Tell mama, Allan. What's on your sly little mind?"

"You know better than that, Carla. I'll do my talking to Rocko."

"How many words do you expect to say? Three? Four?"

"It'll look funny," Billy complained. "Him here like this. Like we were crossing the Rock."

Billy moved closer. Cooper's mind was racing while he tried to keep his expression calm and untroubled. The file had been incomplete. There was something Abelson hadn't known. There was evidently a very good reason why this was the last place the genuine Farat would have come to. And this deviation from expected behavior by the fraudulent Farat had caught them flatfooted.

"Rocko knows me better than that." Carla said.

"Let me take him over in the woods," Billy said. "It'll look better. We can show him to Rocko."

"Not with Barbara here, stupid!" Carla snapped.

Billy moved another step closer. The eagerness was in him. Cooper could sense the slow upward spiral of the diseased mind that would seek any rationalization to justify killing. Abelson had warned him about Billy.

Carla still seemed indecisive. Cooper felt the claw and drag of fear, like a cat that swung from his flesh. The hot sun felt cold on the back of his neck. Fear gave his muscles explosive speed. He slapped the carbine barrel up and to the side with his left hand, feeling the whip-crack of air against his cheek as the carbine spat flatly, and then chopped his right hand over and down onto the exposed angle of jaw. The carbine clattered onto the concrete. Billy took two wild running steps away from Cooper and went down onto his face, the beach coat flapping up to cover the back of his head.

Cooper snatched up the carbine, held it flat out on both hands and presented it to Carla as she backed away. "When it's due," he said, "I don't want to get it from little Willy there."

Her face changed. The reluctant smile spread heavy lips. "All right, Allan. You may have gone crazy, but but you still move the way I like to see. Stand the gun inside the hall-way there. And put your top up. It gets damp at night."

"What was that shot, Carla?" a clear young voice asked.

They both looked up. A young girl stood on the edge of the sundeck over their heads, outlined against the deep blue of the sky. She wore a one-piece strapless bathing suit of aqua velvet, and hair like some new amalgam of copper and gold hung warmly to tanned shoulders. She stood poised there and Cooper saw the broad fore-head, level eyes, wide firm mouth below the small tilt of nose. In stance and pose, above him as she was,

Cooper thought of some statue erected to that one year of strengthened promise and untried beauty that each woman has in her lifetime.

Carla exhibited an entirely unexpected concern over Billy as she ran to his side and turned him over tenderly. She explained, "Billy was carrying the gun and he stumbled and fell and it went off, dear."

Billy's left cheek had been gouged deeply by the concrete. He opened virulent blue eyes, focused them on Cooper and said, "You—" He got no further as Carla's strong brown hand was clamped over his lips.

"You were clumsy, Billy," Carla said.

Billy sat up. He glanced up at the girl on the roof edge. He looked over at Cooper. "I sure was. I won't make that mistake again."

"Run along and fix your face, Billy," Carla said.

He got up and shuffled moodily toward the house. "Allan, this is my sister, Barbara. Barbara, Mr. Farat, a new houseguest."

"Hello," Barbara said absently. She had a troubled expression. She turned and walked out of sight.

The lapel of Cooper's jacket. Her voice was low and hoarse. "There's one house rule, Farat. Leave Barbara alone. I know your habits. Don't talk to her unless you have to. I've put that kid through the fanciest schools there are. She doesn't know from nothing, Farat. She thinks my friends are peculiar. I tell her you

have to have that sort of friends when you run hotels. I'm trying to get her out of here before Rocko arrives. If you spill one little thing to her, so help me, the body we show Rocko won't even look like you."

He pushed her hand away. "Draw me a picture, mama."

"I mean it, Farat. All the way down the line." She grinned suddenly. "Anyway, you won't have any time for Barbara. Not with your old friend here." "Who?"

"Alice. Who else? She came the way I thought you were going to come. With a gun in your back."

"How is she taking it?" he asked. It seemed like a safe question.

"You know Alice, Farat. She's taking it with rye."

"How about that room? How about somebody to carry my stuff?"

Within fifteen minutes he was in a ground floor bedroom on the south wing. A dark blue wall-to-wall rug. Squat blonde furniture. A tiny bath with glass shower stall. Huge windows overlooking the Gulf. A heavy airconditioner set into the side window. Once he had closed the door the weakness struck him. He walked over to the bed and sat down heavily. His hands shook as he lit a cigarette.

One thing was now certain. The job they had done on him had been good. So good that there had not even been any comment about any small change in his appearance. He trembled for a long time and when the trembling ceased, he felt enormously weary. He ticked off in his mind the people he had seen. The old man in khakis.

Carla, Barbara and Billy. Two young men in white coats, with Mexican or Cuban faces—a tall angular woman glimpsed through the swinging door into the kitchen.

He glanced at his watch. Nearly one o'clock. He unpacked, shook the wrinkles out of Farat's clothes, hung them carefully in the big closet. From the attitude of Carla Hutcheon, he suspected that he would not be permitted to keep Farat's guns for very long. They were nice weapons. Smith and Wesson 38's with stubby barrels. The underarm strap of Farat's holster was stained with the dead man's perspiration.

On a hunch he looked carefully around the room. He found a six inch square grill set into the ceiling of the closet and guessed that it was a hedge against humidity and mold. The two screws came out easily. He set one gun, with full chambers, out of sight over the edge of the closet ceiling and replaced the grill. It would take some time to recover the gun, but it gave him the feeling of having done one small constructive thing. Carla had said he could have lunch any time he wished. How would Farat have dressed? He decided on faun slacks, a grey-green sports shirt. Then, as the day got cooler toward evening, he could add the bright jacket of yellow Irish linen.

He put his hand on the knob of the door and it took all his will to turn it, walk casually out. He stopped in the hallway and lit a cigarette with Farat's lighter, a heavy French butane job. The house was quiet.

The monotonous thud of waves on the beach seemed to be the only sound. The main portion of the house was a huge room with a glass wall that faced the beach. The center portion of the glass slid to one side to form a ten foot opening. It was open and sea breeze blew into the room. The look of the room reassured him. It was not a room for violence. It was a room out of an architectural magazine. It had the sterility of any room where the decorator is given too free a hand.

One of the white jacketed boys was dusting, with a lazy economy of movement. Another picture from the Farat file sat in a deep chair, and the name jumped immediately into Cooper's mind. Garry Susler. One of the old crew from Nick Floria's day. Absurdly like a cartoon of a hood, or of the god of war. A cropped bullet head and prognathous jaw and inch-high brow and pulped nose, mounted on a round fibrous body.

The masked grey eyes flickered toward Cooper. The heavy face didn't change expression. "Some guys can't learn," Susler said in a husky-hoarse voice.

"What's she got you doing these days, Garry? Walking the dog?"

"Talk big. Go on. Talk big."

Susler pulled himself out of the chair and came over. "Patties high, boy. This won't take long."

Susler patted him quickly in all the likely places. "So you're clean. Now go out and play. Have a happy time while you're still breathing, Farat."

"It's in my suitcase, the grey one

with the green stripes at each end. Holster and all. Put it where the salt air won't get at it."

"Only one? Not like you, Farat. Is the other one stashed in the car?"

"Only one this time. I had to get rid of one."

Susler gave him a sardonic bow. "If you don't mind, sir, I'll look for two, sir."

"Who else is around, Garry? I've only seen Carla, Billy and you. And Carla's sister."

"Just one more. One you don't know. Bud Schanz. Or maybe you do know him."

"Should I?"

Susler shrugged. "He brought Alice in. Found her in Cleveland and got her taken drunk so she sobered up here. The two of us were going after you, but you saved us the trouble."

Cooper walked through the wide opening in the glass wall. Susler lumbered off down the hallway to the south wing. Cooper paused on the terrace. He snapped the cigarette down onto the sand. Gulls dipped along the surf line, calling in their gamin's voices, like rowdy children at play. Far out a pelican folded his wings and dived with a splash like a small frag bomb.

He had done the last thing that Farat would have done. Appear here of his own volition. It compounded the problem by making it necesary for him to think of some reasoning that would fit Farat's possible plans. To appear here had the nasty ring of suicide. The same glint had appeared in the eyes of Billy, Carla and Susler.

They had looked at him the way they would have looked at a man already dead.

One of the swarthy boys came out the opening behind him, carrying a tray of drinks. The boy turned to the right across the terrace and went down the two shallow steps at the side, walking cautiously on the sand. Cooper followed him at a slower pace. As they passed the corner of the building, Cooper saw the group in gay colors.

Carla sat on a striped towel, her arms resting on her heavy flexed knees. Billy, the bandage white against his face, lay nearby on his beach coat, his body oiled. A taffy blonde lay spread-eagled on her face on a maroon blanket. She wore a Bikini suit of bandanas, casually knotted, and, as with all Bikini suits, the rear view was more ludicrous than entrancing. A strange young man sat beside the taffy blonde, using a trick backrest of aluminum and blue canvas. He wore skin-tight trunks in violent cerise. Barbara was a figure in the distance, walking along the surf line. Billy, Carla and the young man stared expressionlessly at Cooper. The taffy blonde didn't move. Cooper paused, lit another cigarette, moved toward the group.

#### CHAPTER 2

#### Let's Pretend

THE BOY picked up the empty glasses, handed full ones deferentially to Carla, Billy and the stranger,

set one in the sand near the blonde's elbow.

Cooper said, "Bring me a bourbon and water, boy. A heavy shot and mix it."

The boy looked at Carla. She nodded. He turned and hurried away, two of the empty glasses tinkling against each other. The venom in Billy's small blue eyes was as unwinking and contained as the look of a caged snake.

Cooper grinned lazily at Billy. "They shouldn't let you play with firearms, Luke."

The boy hissed and gathered his thin legs under him. "Settle down, Billy," Carla said in a quiet voice. "Allan, this is Bud Schanz."

Schanz was exceptionally handsome. His features were even and
regular without being pretty. His hair
was brown and crisp. His body was
symmetric, well muscled. It was the
eyes, Cooper decided, that gave him
away. They were bland and cold and
absolutely empty. The eyes of a pure
psychopath—a person born without
the ability to distinguish between
right and wrong—conscienceless, ambitious and utterly dangerous.

"You saved me a trip, Farat," Schanz said in a soft cultured voice.

"Maybe an unsuccessful trip," Cooper said.

Schanz looked at him for a moment and yawned like a tawny cat. "I hardly think so."

"I look easy to take?" Cooper asked. "Quite," Schanz said.

"Wake her up, Bud," Clara said. Schanz reached out a bare foot, planted it on the taffy blonde's shoulder and shoved hard. The blonde didn't respond until the third push. Then she muttered angrily and came up onto her elbows, blonde hair across her face. She threw it back with a quick toss of her head. "Say, whataya trying to . . ."

Her eyes were pallid, robin's egg blue. They locked on Cooper. The pupils were tiny and black from the sunglare. She looked at him with complete, helpless, desperate horror. She was the girl in the photograph Abelson had showed him. And even while she stared at him. Cooper noted the odd resemblance between her and Barbara Hutcheon. Their faces were the same shape-broad through the high cheekbones, uptilt noses, wide mouths. Yet, while Barbara's face gave an unforgettable impression of strength, this face was weakness—a China doll, vacuous weakness.

"Allie!" she wailed. "They got you too!"

Billy laughed helplessly. Schanz smiled gently. Carla let out one hoarse yell of laughter.

"Worth the price of admission," Carla said. "She's been telling us that sooner or later you'd hit here with a group of boys and tear this place apart and rescue her just like the movies."

Alice had put her face in her hands, flat against the blanket. Her shoulders shook with the force of her sobs.

"She says she's too young and too pretty to die," Schanz said. "She ought to hire somebody to write better lines for her." The boy came up with Cooper's drink. He sat in the sand beside Carla and drank deeply. Alice said, between sobs, a glimmer of hope in her voice, "It's some kind of a trick, isn't it, Allie?"

"Sure," Billy said. "He's got it all figured out. He's got an atom bomb in his pocket and a helicopter in his suitcase. Right, Farat?"

Barbara turned up toward the group. "Cut it, all of you," Carla rasped. "You hear me, Alice?"

"I hear you," she said in a small dismal voice.

Barbara stopped a few feet away. "What's wrong with her?" she asked.

"Billy hurt her feelings. He called her a lush," Carla said.

"That's right," Billy said, "didn't I, Alice?"

"Yes," she said in a dull tone. She swiveled around and sat up. She reached for a small towel and wiped her eyes. She saw the glass. She grabbed it up, tilted it high and finished it, her throat working, her hand shaking so that some of it spilled from the corner of her mouth and dripped from her chin.

"Swim, Bud?" Barbara asked.

Schanz rose effortlessly to his feet. "Sure thing," he said.

Cooper glanced over at Carla and saw her mouth tighten. The two of them walked side by side down toward the surf.

"Nice looking couple," Billy said nastily.

"Shut up, Billy. She'll be leaving soon. Before Rocko comes."

"That's what you've been saying

right along, Carla. And she's still here. I got it that Bud is sweet-talking her on the side."

"I'll kill him," Carla whispered.

"Now why do you act like that?" Billy said lazily, his eyes a-gleam. "Bud is a promising guy. Look how Rocko trusts him. Hell, if you weren't too good for Nick, why should she be too good for Schanz?"

Carla got up without a word and picked up her striped towel and spread it out fifty feet away and a dozen yards nearer the surf. She kept her eyes on the two who were swimming with lazy, long strokes out beyond the whitecaps.

Billy chuckled evilly, stood up and stretched his thin arms. "I'll go shake 'em up about lunch. Have a fine time, lovers." He put on the beach coat and walked toward the house.

Alice lay back and rolled onto her side, her cheek propped against her palm. Her body lacked the compactness of Barbara's. It had a lushness that was overwhelming, even embarrassing. The sea masked her low tones. Carla couldn't hear at that distance.

"What're we going to do, Allie?"

"What can we do?" he said.

The pale blue eyes stared widely and solemly at him. She pouted. "You haven't kissed me yet. You mad or something?"

He looked at her. The blue eyes were faintly narrowed, speculative. To refuse would be out of character, he decided. He kissed her. Her mouth had a soft wet lack of substance, a melting, distasteful looseness. She

pushed him away and there was an odd look on her face. She grabbed his wrist with surprising strength, turned his hand palm-up and looked at it before he could think to close his fingers.

"Who are you? You're not Allie. Who are you?"

"Have you gone nuts, kid? Is the sun getting you?"

Her voice was low. "I'm not that drunk, baby. How many times you think I read Allie's palm? A hundred times maybe. I know how, Lines don't change. Not like that. Who are you?"

"Allan Farat, kid."

"How'd you get his clothes? I know that outfit."

He yawned. He could hear the quickened thud of his heart, feel the greasiness of the cold sweat on his ribs. "You better go see a good head doctor, honey."

"Even the voice is wrong now I listen good. And the hair above your ears is wrong. You think I don't know Allie better than I know myself? Mister, you're good enough to fool anybody except me. But this is little Alice, friend. Allie's girl. You can't fool me."

"I say you've gone crazy, kid."

She got up onto her knees and sat back on her heels, her mouth going firm. "All right, mister. What have I got to lose? I'll tell the others. Maybe they can check good and find out you're a fake. Maybe it'll be so interesting, they'll give me a break."

"Not so loud," he whispered tensely. She smiled. It wasn't a pretty smile. "That's as good as telling me, isn't it? Now give with the rest."

His mind raced. Bad luck she had to be here. Abelson had told him that she would be dangerous. He stood up. "Come on. We'll take a walk."

Carla glanced at them as they passed her, then looked back out to where two heads swam close together.

When they were a hundred yards away, Alice said, "All right. Who are you?"

"Police. A federal agency."

"Where's the rest of them?"

"There isn't. Just me. I'm not here to make arrests. I'm here to get information and get out."

She stopped and looked at him. "And you came walking right in here thinking they'd let Allan Farat walk right back out again?" He nodded. She began to laugh with a hysterical note in it. Her face was screwed up, distorted. He grasped her bare shoulders and shook her, hard.

"Listen, Miss Fane. You're in danger here, aren't you?"

"Danger, he says. I'm dead. Standing right here I'm dead, unless Rocko has changed a hell of a lot, or unless the real Allie comes and gets me out of this." Her face changed. "Where is he? How come you've got his clothes?"

"He's dead," Cooper said flatly.

"No," she said. "No!" Her knees gave way and she fell into the traditional pose of helpless grief.

COOPER YANKED her back up onto her feet. She was blind with sorrow, loose in his hands. He steadied her and hit her three times, hard, with the flat of his palm. The red fingermarks jumped out on her cheek.

"Do you want to go on living?" he demanded. "Do you?"

"Who killed him?"

"Police. He put up a fight. Answer my question. Do you want to go on living?"

"I—guess so. Anyway, I don't want to die the way Rocko will want me to die."

"Then maybe I can help. But can't you see? They sent me here without enough information. I don't know what this is all about. I know you were brought here against your will. I know they were going after Allan Farat to bring him here too. It would have to be Rocko's orders. What's his grudge against you and Farat?"

Her face was slack. "Oh, just a little thing. You're a cop. Don't you know how they got the evidence that deported Rocko?"

"It was a tip," Cooper said. "That's all I know."

"And it told you where to look, didn't it? And told you what you'd find?"

"I don't know about that. I was with a different agency then."

"I was Rocko's girl. One of Rocko's girls. Allie was bag man for Rocko, doing the pickups from all the territories. Allie and I, we—got sorta friendly. But Rocko never wanted anything real bad until he found out somebody else wanted it. Rocko began to get wise about Allie and me. I guess we went a little crazy. That was five years ago. I found out where

Rocko kept the papers the government wanted and couldn't find. I told Allie. We worked it out. We timed it just right. They came and got Rocko the night Rocko was waiting for Allie to come with the collections. They got Rocko, and Allie and I ran out with a hundred thousand cash. We hid for a whole year, living pretty good, out on the west coast.

"Then we got a message from Rocko. He'd guessed the whole thing. In the message he said that we didn't have to worry, that he wasn't going to have anybody take care of us. He was saving that for himself. It gave Allie and me a creepy feeling. The money went too fast. We dropped a big wad of it on the tables at Reno. Allie had to go back to work two years ago. Before that you people didn't want him. But you know how things went bad for him when he went back to work. He stepped right into that federal rap and had to run for it. A month ago we got the message that Rocko wanted to see us and thank us here at Carla's. We decided to split up for a while. I got lonesome. I met Schanz. I thought he was nice. And I went on a binge and here I am."

Cooper said, "We thought Farat had helped make the arrangements to get Rocko back in this country."

She laughed flatly. "That's a funny joke. All you had to do was say 'Rocko!' and Allie would jump seven feet in the air. Hell, we were afraid of our own shadows after we got that note."

"Who is bringing Rocko back? And why?"

"Don't ask me. They deported him and you know as good as I do what happened to the country they deported him to. I heard Carla talking to Schanz. It sounded screwy to me. Something about how many of Rocko's friends were coming in."

"Is Carla financing it?"

"Not her, friend! Rocko's got something he can use against her. But I don't think she's paying the shot. She just has to play ball by letting him come in here."

"Can we get out of here?"

"Sure. We can dig a hole and go to China. I got out of the house one night. They've got all that damn wire and a guy with a rifle at the gate and a guy at each end of the beach. One day I sobered up and tried swimming. They bring that launch around in about twenty seconds and they've got a big pole with a hook on the end. The guy with a hook acted disappointed that I climbed in without any argument."

"Farat couldn't swim."

She pursed her lips. "Now that's an angle. Everybody knew Allie was scared of water. They won't watch you so close."

"And I've got a gun."

"Oh, sure. You've got a gun. Mister, they even took the nail file out of my manicure set."

"When does Rocko come?"

"Tomorrow night, they say." She shivered. "I got to have another drink."

"Look. Pretend I'm Farat. Tell yourself all the time that I'm Farat. Then you won't make any slips."

She tilted her head on one side. "Allie had a meaner look than you got."

"If you see me doing anything out of character, let me know, will you?" "Why should I?"

"Because I'm the only chance you have."

She nodded slowly. "A little bitty chance, but the only one. You're right."

They walked back up the line of surf. Barbara and Schanz came out of the water, laughing. Barbara looked at Cooper and Alice Fane. She said politely, "Do you swim, Mr. Farat?"

"I don't know. I never tried."

She ignored the rudeness of his tone. "You should learn. It would be very easy in this water, it's so buoyant."

"Want to teach me?" he asked.

She gave him a long look. "Not particularly. What's your business, Mr. Farat?"

Schanz said easily, "Real estate. He has some properties Carla is interested in."

"How very apt!" Barbara said in a gay tone. "And dear Mr. Susler manages tourist courts, and Billy is an accountant and you, Bud, are an expert on food buying." She laughed gayly, and her eyes were hard. "Isn't it odd, Bud, that Susler won't talk about tourist courts and Billy doesn't know a debit from a credit and you don't even know the price of beer? I wonder if Mr. Farat knows as little about real estate. What sort of baby does Carla think I am?"

"A pretty baby," Schanz said mildly, "who shouldn't ask silly questions."

Carla strode down into the group. "Exactly what is going on?" she demanded.

"Little sister doesn't think I sell real estate," Cooper said.

"Lunch will be ready soon, Barbara," Carla said. "I suggest that when you go to your room and change, you also pack your bags. You'll leave today."

Barbara lifted her chin. "I will not leave today. I'll leave when I get ready."

"You'll leave today."

Barbara looked at Cooper and then at Schanz. "Why don't you have one of these gentlemen hit me on the head and take me away by force? They seem to be the type." She pushed by Carla and walked up toward the house without looking back.

"Damn, damn, damn," Carla said softly.

"You're not kidding her a bit," Bud Schanz said. "Why don't you let her in on it?"

"Why don't you keep your nose out of my family?" Carla said tonelessly. "I'll handle her."

"You're doing great," Alice said, "Great!"

Carla turned and watched Barbara enter the house. Once the girl was out of sight she turned and hit Alice in the pit of the stomach with a hard brown fist. Alice sat heavily on the sand, gasping and crying. Carla swung a bare foot back. As she started to kick, Cooper pushed her off balance.

The kick missed and Carla staggered, nearly fell.

Schanz, behind Cooper, moved quickly. Cooper felt the hard hands on his shoulders. Schanz yanked him back, levered him across one strong hip and dropped him flat on the packed sand. "Let's all play," Schanz said gently.

#### CHAPTER 3

#### Thoughts of Terror

THERE WERE just the three of them on the moonlit terrace. The silver moonlight, glinting on the waves, fought with the softer, more golden radiance from the two lamps in the main lounge. Cooper sat at a table with Carla. Alice was alone at a table ten feet away, her head down on her arm, snorting from time to time in her sleep.

Cooper took the ice tongs, dropped two cubes into Carla's glass, added an inch of bourbon and filled the glass from the siphon.

"Thanks," she said. He felt her eyes on him. "You've changed, Allan," she said, "You can sit and be still. Instead of jumping about, pacing, talking."

"Old age, maybe."

It was a time for quiet intimacy. Cooper had steered the two of them into that situation. Billy, Bud, Susler and Barbara were playing dogged bridge in one end of the lounge.

"Why are you cooperating with Rocko?" he asked.

She had been looking out across

the sea. She turned her head quickly. "Don't be a fool! You crossed him up. Look where you are!"

"I came here on my own, didn't I?"

"Which is something I can't understand. You can't get out, you know. Why did you do it?"

"Skip that for a moment, Carla. Who is back of Rocko?"

"I don't know. That's the truth. But I can tell you I don't like it. This sounds pretty silly, coming from me. Scruples, I mean. Nick made it off bootlegging. When that folded, I was already into other deals. Slots, numbers, bolita. Taking it away from the suckers begging to be cleaned. Buying the law, buying my own protection, keeping my boys in hand. I always had the idea that sooner or later I could let it all go. Play lady. And, believe me, I was damn close to that point when-Rocko got in touch and planted Schanz on me. I don't need any more dirty money, Allan. I've made plenty of that kind. And I'm afraid I'm going to make money out of what Rocko is going to do."

"Just what is he going to do?"

"You tell me, Allan. I'm to pick up the next island down the key. I'll be reimbursed. Rocko is coming in with a few men in advance of a bigger outfit. I don't know who they are. But that island is going to be a base of some sort. Not for smuggling. You can do that a lot better down around the Ten Thousand Islands. As near as I can figure it, Rocko is working for somebody. He'll be in charge of a base. The job of the base will be to fix up foreigners with enough identifi-

cation and training so that they can stay in this country. I don't know what for. Spys, sabotage. Who knows?"

"What are you going to do about Barbara?"

"Tell Rocko about her the minute he gets here, and hope he'll play ball. What else can I do? She won't go. I can't force her to go."

"Why don't you try to block Rocko if you don't like the sound of it?"

"With what? Billy? Susler? My three guards and two houseboys? That is a laugh. I've been cutting down the organization for the past three years."

"Maybe the law would help you."

She snorted. "You're getting naive, aren't you? For myself I wouldn't care too much. I've been in a lot of tight places since Nick was killed. But he can use Barbara like a handle. And she, Farat, is the only thing in this world that means anything to me. Anything at all."

"Then you better get her out of here."

"What would you suggest?" she asked acidly.

"Go in a room with her and close the door. Put the cards on the table. Tell her what you've been and how you're mixed up in this and can't wiggle out."

"I don't want her to know about me."

"Do you think she hasn't half-guessed?"

"But she still isn't sure."

"Okay, Carla. Take your choice. You know Rocko and you know how attractive your sister is. Take a chance on Rocko, or else come clean with Barbara. Stop kidding yourself."

"I might never see her again, Allan."

"Wouldn't that be a pretty healthy thing? For her?"

"Stop pushing me!"

"Suit yourself. It's none of my business anyway. I just hate to see you making a mistake."

He made her another drink, made himself a light one. They sat in silence for a long time. Carla sighed. "Damn you, Farat. You're right. I've got to do it."

"Then do it now. Get her out of here tonight if you can."

Carla went to the doorway and called Barbara. The girl said, "One minute. This hand will finish the rubber."

Alice snorted again. Carla said, "Take her and put her to bed, Allan." "What room?"

"The one on the right just this side of yours."

and surprisingly heavy. As he walked through the lounge toward the corridor with her she slid warm heavy arms around his neck, looked up at him with bleared blue eyes, then snuggled her taffy hair close under his chin, burrowing into his nack. He glanced at the table and saw Barbara watching him with cool objectivity, as though he were some lesser form of life.

He turned her doorknob with the

hand under her knees, edged through the door with her, dropped her roughly on the bed. He turned on the room lights and looked at her. She made a sleepy sound in her throat, shifted her position and began to snore gently. He closed the door, found her purse. As he had hoped, there was a pencil in it, an old letter. He tore a piece out of the back of the envelope.

He wrote quickly, "Miss Hutcheon. Please leave. In Sarasota phone 2-8883. Tell whoever answers that Cooper requests raid as soon as possible. At least twelve men."

He folded it into a tiny square, gave Alice a quick look, turned out the lights and left the room. Carla was standing near the table waiting for Barbara to finish. Only three cards were left in dummy. Barbara was playing the hand. As she pulled in the last trick, Cooper leaned over and gathered up the cards and said, "Look, I'll show you a good trick, kids."

"I'm afraid I'm not interested," Barbara said, pushing her chair back, "Thank you, gentlemen. That makes it an eight rubber. Somebody owes me eighty cents."

"It'll only take a minute," Cooper pleaded.

"Shove off," Schanz said delicately. Cooper fanned the deck and thrust it at Barbara. "Come on. Take a card. It won't hurt you to take a card."

She sighed and took one. He put the deck on the table. "Now put the card back in the middle of the deck. That's right. Line up the edges. Now give me your hand." He reached out and took her wrist. Her fingers were cold.

He held her hand tightly, pushed the tiny wad of paper into her palm and closed her fingers around it. He looked into her eyes. She was so tall her eyes were only a few inches below his. He saw them widen a bit with surprise.

"Now by just looking into your eyes, Barbara, I can tell you what that card was." He risked winking at her, and he knew his face had gone pale.

"What was it, then?" she asked, and he knew she would not give him away.

"The eight of clubs. Right?"

"Right," she said without interest. "A good trick. You can let go of my hand now."

He did so, and was relieved to see her shove her hands casually into the pockets of her slacks and walk with Carla toward the terrace door.

"You made a great hit then, buster," Susler said hoarsely. "If you can play bridge, sit down."

"His game used to stink," Billy said.

"I'll back it for a penny a point on the side." Cooper said.

Schanz looked at him and pursed his lips. "Okay. Set game. You and me against Billy and Susler. Want the same bet, Garry?"

"You're on."

"You know the rules, Farat," Billy said. "Cheat any way you want to, but every time you're caught, it's five hundred above the line for us. Cut for deal."

Schanz won the deal. They watched him like hawks as he dealt. He picked up his hand and sorted it, said, "Two spades."

Billy on his left said, "What do you know? I got twelve cards."

"And I got fourteen," Susler said. They both threw their hands toward the middle of the table. Schanz reached out with blinding speed and slapped Billy's cards down so they could not mingle with Susler's.

"Now let's count those twelve cards, one at a time," Schanz said.

"You win. There's thirteen," Billy said. Susler licked his pencil and gave them five hundred points above the line.

"What's with Carla?" Susler asked.
"More pressure on the kid. But it won't work," Schanz said.

"Even if she levels?" Cooper asked.
"She won't. Not with the kid,"
Billy said firmly. "I pass."

Susler suddenly looked up from his cards. "What's that?"

They all listened. Schanz ran to the doorway to the terrace. He looked out, then turned with a slow grin. "Game's over, boys. They're coming in, twenty-four hours ahead of schedule. They're blinking out there now."

Carla came running in. She hurried to the wall, opened a small panel, threw three switches. The beach was immediately floodlighted so brightly that small dips and humocks in the sand made jet black shadows. Cooper looked for Barbara and could not see her.

There was a bone-jarring thud against the side of Cooper's skull. His

vision swam and his knees sagged. He turned and managed to make out the face of Billy, distorted with glee. Billy's words of explanation came from a long distance. "Least we can do is let Rocko find him on his back, Carla."

The misted arm swam up again and came down. Cooper dropped to his knees. He knew that Billy was pulling the blows, making it last. He tried to cover his head and the sap landed on his forearm, numbing his hand. Carla called out and he couldn't make out her words. The next blow drove him down toward the rug and he melted through it down to a place where the sea had a hollow murmur and no night was ever as black.

ome white explosion of fear deep in the blackness drove him up like a rocket, bursting out into the light. He knew he was on a bed. He looked up at a ceiling, closed his eyes again. The light hurt them. He moved the arm that hurt and his fingers touched warmth and softness.

He turned his head then, opening his eyes, and saw taffy hair spilled on the white pillow, saw the straining seams of the pale blue dress Alice had worn when he carried her into the bedroom. The dress brought back all the rest of it, and brought new fear with it.

He sat up and stared into the face of Rocko Kadma. It was not the face of the pictures in the file. That had been a plump face, with the eyes set in comfortable pads of flesh, the mouth tiny and smiling and forever pursed as though held in by a taut drawstring. Now the scant flesh of the face hung in the bloodhound folds of the old stretched skin. Only the tiny mouth was the same. And the dancing glint in the little dark eyes below the high bulge of the naked skull.

Kadma wore a suit of European cut, spotless linen, burnished shoes. This was the man whose ruthlessness was legend, whose scores of victims danced forever in the deep currents of the lakes and the rivers.

He looked like the neat little proprietor of a neighborhood butcher shop. The slim foreign automatic in his lap between the plump thighs, and the long bulge of the silencer—they were anachronism.

"Go on, Allan, my best friend. Look at what you die for, my best friend. See if worth it."

Allan reached for a cigarette. He froze with his hand in his shirt pocket. The tiny shrunken mouth of the silencer was aimed between his eyes. "Just cigarettes," he whispered.

"Take out slow, my best friend."

Cooper slowly pulled the half-empty pack out of his pocket. He took out the lighter with equal slowness. He lit a cigarette and drew deeply on it.

"Hand trembles now, eh? Bad nerves, my best friend?"

"You want to play cat and mouse. Go ahead."

Kadma bowed his head on his short neck. "Thank you. Thank you."

The room door was shut. "What do you want, Rocko?"

Rocko looked through him and be-

yond him. The pursed mouth twisted. "Better you should have killed me long ago. I tell you about five years. Know what five years is? This my country. I come here when twelve. Fifty-one when I go. A young fiftyone. Now fifty-six. But an old fiftysix. You see that, eh? My mirror say it too. You kill me slow, Allan. Should have been fast. Better for you."

"I thought you'd land on your feet."

"Over there, boy, nobody is on his feet. Twice I damn near starve. Eat garbage. Sleep in fields. You think I'm gone forever, my best friend. Not Rocko. Rocko makes new friends. Rocko can help new friends. Back on top now."

"On top, or are you taking orders?" The little dark eyes went completely mad for the space of three heartbeats, so mad that Cooper tensed for the impact of the slug. Then madness died. Lids slid down to cover half the eyes. He said very softly, "When I think I die over there, I think about you. You and that woman. Gives strength, my best friend. Much strength to keep living. Someday I say I find you and talk to you. Like this. In room with gun and her. Door closed. A big dream, Allan. Dream for a long time. Nice to dream when it comes true, eh?"

"What are you going to do?"

Rocko frowned. "You know me. Twenty, thirty times smart fellas try to fool old Rocko. All die, not too easy. Even when they do no harm. You, you hurt me worse than any-

body in the world. Anybody. So I keep thinking. How can you die? What way is good? Hard to say. I think of hundred ways. Where you scream five, six days before dead."

A cold hand closed on Cooper's heart. It was tragedy and comedy. In Burma it had been the fear of torture, not the fear of death that had finally broken him. He had found the Britisher that hot airless afternoon in the small clearing. The man had lived until nightfall. Cooper could still remember his screaming, thin and endless, like the cry of an insect in the jungle.

And he had come five years and fourteen thousand miles to face it again.

"Why laughing?" Rocko blandly. "Funny, eh?"
"Was I laughing?"

"You come here alone. Why you do that?"

"Maybe there's something you don't know, Rocko. Something important."

"Old Allan. Always one for the bluff. Drawing two pair, betting like full house. Always."

"What will you get out of killing me?"

Rocko gave him a puzzled frown. "What do I get? I show you. Wake up her. Quick."

Cooper shook Alice awake. She smiled out of her sleep at him and reached for him. Then something warned her. She looked over toward the chair planted with its back to the closed door. Her complexion turned to an ugly greenish yellow and her

mouth sagged. She romped onto her knees, completely sober, the words bubbling wetly on her lips as she pleaded.

"Shut mouth!" Kadma roared.

She stood there on her knees near the foot of the bed, her lips working, without sound. Rocko gestured with the automatic toward her as he looked at Cooper. "See the dronk thing? Ugly thing. Cheap thing. Half million of them around, all for asking. For that dronk thing and for one collection you do that to Rocko, best friend. Disappoint, Allan. Lousy judgment. No sense. Ugly blonde dronk thing. Not worth much trouble. Not worth more trouble than this."

He aimed the gun casually. Cooper felt his lips form the word 'NO!' but without sound. Alice made a rusty cawing noise in her throat and the egg-blue eyes bulged. The gun made three separate sounds, like the slamming of the lid of a tiny wooden box.

For a long moment she stayed poised on her knees. Then she sat back slowly onto her heels, put her palms, one over the other, flat against the soft swell of her stomach. She made a face, such as a child with a tummy-ache would make.

The cords stood out in her throat and all at once her face was grey and tired and very old. "I—wanted a chance—to tell you about Allan—but you . . . ."

The lid of the little box snapped again. The black hole appeared at the inside corner of her left eye. She sighed and toppled off the bed to her right, her head striking hard against the polished floor. The high heel of the right shoe was tangled in the spread, holding the leg twisted up at awkward angle.

"Dronk thing," Rocko said in righteous disgust. "Better dead."

Cooper tried to hold back the fear. But it roared up through his brain like a fire in a stairwell. He scrambled across the bed, tripping over her body, crawling into the furthest corner of the room, crouching there like a child avoiding punishment. He didn't know what words he was screaming, but above them he could hear the long roll, the ripe fruity roll, of Rocko Kadma's joyous laughter.

#### CHAPTER 4

#### Time Sensations

was wet with spittle. He could hear no more laughter. When he looked up he saw that Rocko was gone and he was alone with the body. He had never felt a deeper shame, even in childhood when shame can be the cruelest weapon. He tried the door. It was locked on the outside. Unlike his room, the windows were steel casement type; the portions that opened were too small to squeeze through.

The grotesqueness of her position bothered him. He gently untangled the heel, lowered her leg to the floor. He straightened her body out, covered it with the spread. She had bled very little. He heard a distant shout of laughter and he could not recognize the voice. He went into the small bath and sat on the flat edge of the diagonal tub and smoked three cigarettes.

Getting out of this alive no longer seemed so important. He knew that if through some miracle he could escape at this moment, it would do him no good. He would have to carry within himself the sharp memory of the way Kadma had broken him. It didn't help to blame what had happened during the war years. He knew that wasn't good enough. And he would have to live with himself in the future. There could be no return to the quiet years. Not after this.

Thus it had to be considered a turning point. To yell cop would be too simple. The credentials were there, taped under the car hood, to prove it. Even Rocko wouldn't be insane enough to kill him once he knew that he was an impostor.

No, this hand was going to have to be played with Farat's cards, poor as they were. He knew that it was a crazy, foolhardy decision. But he could see no other way to regain his own self respect.

Farat or Cooper, either one, would have to find a way to get out of the room. That was the first problem. He went back into the bedroom and tried not to glance at the body on the floor, silent under the spread. But he had to look. One strand of the taffy hair was visible under the edge of the spread where it rested on the floor near her head.

He took a cardboard match and pushed it into the keyhole. It struck the key, still in the lock. He began to search through Alice's things to find tools for the next step. Finally, in the bureau drawer, he found a pair of eyebrow tweezers. When he tried to get a purchase on the key they slipped off. But when he wound adhesive tape around the gripping surfaces, he found that he could make them work. He turned the key slowly. Luckily it was a new lock, well oiled, and it worked smoothly.

He heard the tumbler click over and he tried the door. It opened. He shut it silently and re-locked the door from the inside by the same method. It would be better to have a plan. And a weapon. The weapon was not hard to devise. One nylon stocking with a thick glass jar of deoderant cream in the toe. He swung it against the pillow, testing it. It would crack a skull with the greatest of ease.

He put the improvised sap in his pocket, with the top of the stocking hanging out. He felt as though he had gone beyond fear, had arrived in some new place where there was only a cold and objective calm.

As he started to review the floorplan of the house, he heard the faint rattle of the key. He stepped quickly to the wall and flattened himself out beside the door, the improvised sap in his hand. The door opened and Carla Hutcheon slid through. She gasped as she saw him, then held her fingers meaningfully to her lips and closed the door.

"Alice?" she whispered.

"Dead."

"I thought he'd done that. You're

next, you know. So there's no reason why you shouldn't help me."

"Why do you want my help?"

"It's Barbara. I'd only begun to tell her when I saw the blinker light. I told Rocko about her. I pleaded with him. He said he'd have to have a look at her first. He insisted on talking to her alone. I couldn't stop him. Now I don't know what he's done to her. She does anything he says. They're out there now, making her take one drink after another. I can't trust Billy and Susler to help me. I can trust my help and the guards."

"How many came with Rocko?"

"Five besides Rocko. In a big seagoing launch. She's moored in my basin near the causeway."

"What are they like?"

"Tough, competent, silent. They act like military people. They talk together in their own language. One of them is older. He speaks English. Very good English. He seems to be in charge, and he seems to be a little sore at Rocko. I think Rocko took orders from him until they came ashore and now Rocko won't listen to him. Anyway, that's my hunch."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Help me get Barbara out of here. I don't care what happens to me. I've got to have somebody drive the car she goes in. The way she acts, she won't go willingly. You'll have to make her go."

"That sounds like a good trick."

"Shut up and listen. They're on guard, but I think I can smuggle you out of the house. Here are the keys to your car. I took them out of your room. Go around and get into the car and get down on the floor. I've fixed it so my gate guard will let you through. When I'm certain you're all set, I'm going to go in there and get Barbara away from them. Even if I have to kill somebody, I'm going to get her out of that situation."

"What time is it now?"

"After two in the morning."

"How are you going to-"

"Do as I told you. Now don't make a sound. Follow me."

She looked out at the hallway, beckoned and slipped out. He followed her. She went quickly into the room she had originally given him. He followed her in. She closed the door and leaned against it. He could hear the shallowness of her breathing. "So far, so good," she said.

THE FLOODLIGHTS were still on. The room was lighted by the reflected glow. She went across the room and opened the window. "Stay close to the side of the building, Farat. The shadows will be thicker there. Go around in back and get in the car and keep your head down. Go on."

He climbed out, wondering if he might be making a mistake not to get the gun he had hidden in the room.

"All clear," she whispered. He kept to the deep shadows. When he reached the corner of the house and looked around, he saw that the parking apron was also lighted. The long car glinted in the light. He held the keys tightly to prevent them making any sound. A man was walking slowly across the

apron toward the back of the house. When he was silhouetted against the light, Cooper recognized Susler's battered profile, heavy shoulders.

Susler had the look of a man taking an evening stroll. He stopped and cracked a light from a kitchen match with his thumbnail. The flare lit up his face for a moment. He shook the match out and threw it aside. He stood for a moment, and then walked directly toward the corner where Cooper hid. Cooper pulled his head back and stood up. He knew that as soon as Susler rounded the corner, he'd see his outline against the flood-lighted sand of the beach. He stifled an impulse to run and waited, barely breathing.

Susler's measured step grew closer, his heels audible above the muted crash of the waves a hundred yards away. Cooper moved away from the house to give himself room to swing. He shortened his grip on the weighted nylon. Susler rounded the corner, made a grunt of sudden surprise which mingled with the hard thud of the heavy jar striking the top of his head. Susler staggered, put one hand out against the corner of the house, and straightened like a man with a heavy load on his back.

Cooper struck again, harder than before. Again Susler caught himself by grasping the corner of the house. Cooper had the nightmare feeling that he could not strike hard enough to batter the man down. He took a half step back, held the nylon at the very end and swung it in a whistling arc. Susler went down with all the shock-

ing speed of a window shade pulled loose from the roller.

Cooper knelt and touched the man's head. He felt the nauseating looseness of shattered bone under the scalp. He wiped his fingers on Susler's jacket, and noted that Susler's feet were still out in the light. He got the heavy man by the wrists and pulled him back into deep shadow. He searched the man twice before convincing himself that Susler was unarmed. The fallen man's breathing grew sharper and more shallow and then faded off into a whistling sigh that was lost in the sound of the waves. Cooper could find no pulse.

Once again he looked around the edge of the building. Three cars stood silent under the light. He ran to the convertible, crouching as he ran. He opened the door and crawled in onto the floor beside the driver's seat. He dared not shut the door behind him. By sense of touch he located the keyhole and the ignition key. He inserted it and turned it.

His nostrils were filled with the smell of leather upholstery, floor dust and rubber matting. He crouched in the darkness like a wary animal and tried to still his breathing.

He waited in the shadowed darkness until his legs grew cramped. She had failed. She was not coming. He slid up onto the seat and over behind the wheel. The gate man had been prepared by Carla. He would let the car go through. And that was all he had to know.

He put his thumb on the starter button, without pushing it, and measured the turn-around space with his eye. Yes, he could make it in one fast swing. Then, even if the guard didn't open the gate, the car was big enough to smash through it and sturdy enough to keep running. If the impact stopped it, he could leap out and run across the short causeway and lose himself in the swamps on the other side.

Cooper sat rigidly for a long time. He took his thumb from the starter, and put his hand on the door button. He opened the door and stepped out. The breeze stirred his hair and cooled the sweat on his forehand. He went back the way he had come, stepping over Susler's invisible body, sliding down along the shadows to the window. Carla hadn't closed it. He grasped the sill, pulled himself up and slid over onto the floor of the room. The closet was four steps away. He found the grill in the darkness, stuck the fingers of both hands through the holes in the grill and wrenched hard. One screw pulled loose. He bent it down, reached up, found the cold metal of the gun.

Time moved on parallel tracks and at this moment he had reached a point of intersection. In one time he stood in the closet of Carla Hutcheon's house, and in another time he stood on the jungle floor in the heavy gloom, motionless, a gun cool in his hand while ten feet away on the trail he heard the sucking sound of the boot-steps of the patrol in the yellow clay, the clink and jangle of equipment, the flat song of the commands. In both time tracks the sweat prickled

in the stubble of hair on his neck.

When, long ago, the patrol had passed, he had slipped into a mindlessness that cancelled memory until, weeks later, he started to recover in the ward of the general hospital in Calcutta. And now, due to that flaw he could sense in himself, he stood on the edge of the same pit of darkness. He was like a man who concealed from others a mortal wound.

He walked with no attempt at stealth to the door, opened it and went into the corridor. At the end of the corridor he could see the gold-hued lamplight of the main room of the house, hear the murmur of voices.

The corridor seemed without end. He walked down the corridor and came out into the lounge and stopped, the gun held rigidly in front of him with the awkwardness of a child who plays with a cap gun for the first time.

#### CHAPTER 5

#### **Bullets Unrationed**

The scene was graven on his mind with frozen clarity. He sensed the unreality of it—as though it were a scene in memory rather than a picture of here and now. Like awakening with the guilt-sense of drunkenness on the previous evening, remembering little, then having one scene leap into vividness in the mind—a scene separate and apart, with no memory of how it came to be and no memory of how it ended.

As he appeared conversation had ceased. All of them stared at him. Schanz sat on a deep windowseat, hands locked around one knee, smoke from the cigarette in the corner of his mouth a grey ceilingward line, eyes calm, dead, unstartled.

Billy Lemp sat with a half deck of cards in his left hand, a single card in his right hand, poised to drop it, face up, onto the cards in front of Rocko. His narrow face was vulpine and white in the light. The card he held was a four of diamonds.

Two of the strangers sat side by side on the deep couch. Hard, competent, watchful, red-brown from sun and sea. Close-cropped hair and wide blocky faces. Another one of the same cut sat at the card table on Rocko's right, heavy lips spread in a childish uncomprehending grin. The fourth stranger stood behind Rocko. His was not a peasant face like the others. It was a lean, knotted face, whiptwisted with the experience of years of strain, of intrigue. Carla had said there were five. Only four were in the room. Cooper had the feeling that the fifth stood a pace behind him, smiling.

Carla was in a deep armchair, slumped to one side, her cheek pillowed on the arm, one hand hanging limp so that half-curled fingers rested on the rug. Her eyes were closed.

It was Barbara, facing Rocko, her back to the corridor entrance, who was the first to move. She turned stiffly and looked at Cooper. Her face held the stiff dignity of the very drunk. Her eyes were solemn and glassy.

"Enter Mr. Cooper," she said thickly, "Pride of the Marines, or the FBI, or the Immigration Service or the Narcotics Bureau or something. Sorry, friend. Couldn't get out of here to go fix up that raid."

"Put your hands up," Cooper said. No one moved.

Rocko said, "Cooper? Cooper? What you say, sweet darling? Is not Cooper. Is old friend. Allan Farat. In the morning he digs hole for himself and for dronk blondie."

"Put your hands up!" Cooper said. He pointed the weapon at Rocko's face. He lifted it and aligned the sights, as though firing on a shooting range.

Rocko smiled, almost sadly. "Am tired old man. Too tired for games. What can you do? Nothing, best friend. Too many here."

"He's not Farat," Barbara said, "He's Cooper." She took the note out of the pocket of her slacks and tossed it on the table. "He gave me this."

"You think I don't know best friend, sweet darling?"

"Why did you hit Carla?" she yelled with a loudness that startled Cooper. She half stood up, reaching across the table with her fingers curled, clawing at him.

Rocko moved his face back. Barbara fell across the card table. The legs gave way on Billy's side and she slid, face down, across Billy's knees. With the table out of the way, Cooper could see that Rocko's small, thick, white hand was steady in his lap, holding the silenced gun with which he had casually killed Alice Fane.

Cooper pulled the trigger, knowing even as he pulled it that he was too late, that the pain which knifed into his right shoulder had spoiled his aim. The man with the stupid smile jumped and clamped Cooper's right wrist in two powerful hands and twisted. Cooper went down heavily and the smiling man jumped up, holding the gun and looking at it as though he had acquired a new toy.

Billy had untangled himself from Barbara and jumped back, knocking over his chair, leaving Barbara sprawled on hands and knees.

Cooper sat up, feeling the spreading wetness in his armpit. The man who had been standing behind Rocko, the man with the air of command, staggered back several steps, planted his feet. Dark red began to discolor his grey shirt on the left side above his belt. He shoved his left hand inside the belt to press it hard against the area.

His anger cracked at Kadma like a whip. "Ah, you had everything arranged, Kadma. There would be no trouble. No trouble at all. I played along with your childish ideas of revenge."

Rocko stood up slowly. He thumped his chest with his free hand. "Please to shut up. You boss until we land. Rocko is boss here. Never forget that."

The lean man moved carefully back to a chair and lowered himself into it, his hand still wedged under his belt. "Go wake up that woman," he ordered. "Find out how I can get a doctor here. This is a bad wound." Rocko shrugged. He walked over, grasped a handful of Carla's black hair, shook her head brutally. Her head wobbled loose on her neck.

"Stop that! Take your hands off her, you dirty little man," Barbara said. She was standing, not far from Billy. Schanz was the only one who hadn't moved. He sat with all the comfort and quiet appreciation of a spectator at a play.

Rocko let her head drop back. He slapped her exposed cheek twice. Then he grunted and bent over her and pressed against the side of her throat with a thick thumb.

He shrugged. "Very funny. Is dead. Didn't hit very hard."

Cooper edged back toward the wall. He looked at Barbara. There was shock there, and grief—but also an enormous anger. Billy was staring stupidly at Carla. One of the men had gone from the couch over to the wounded man. They talked in low tones.

"Very intelligent, Kadma," the wounded man said, "Enormously efficient. You killed the one person who could make this whole plan function properly."

"Can get another front," Rocko mumbled.

Barbara whirled and ran for the terrace. Billy gave a gasp and started after her. Cooper lunged forward and caught Billy's thin ankle. Billy went down with a jar that shook the room. He was up like a cat, his lips pulled back from his teeth. He kicked hard at Cooper's face. Cooper caught the first blow on his arm. The second kick

struck him between the eyes. Billy turned and ran again. Two of the strangers went with him, and so did Schanz.

POOPER SHOOK the dark mists out of his eves and looked out the glass wall to the floodlighted sand. It was like a strange game played at night. The pursuer and the pursued. She ran toward the water but a figure cut her off. She doubled back, swerved away from a second and, for a moment, seemed to have eluded all of them. But another dark figure cut across from the side, turning her back again. As she ran down toward the sea a second time, one figure gained on her, merged with hers and they tumbled over and over on the packed sand. They all came slowly back toward the house, and she was between two of them.

"Find the telephone and get a doctor here, Kadma," the wounded man demanded. His complexion had changed. It was grey under the heavy tan. His voice had lost some of its force.

"A doctor comes here," Kadma says. "He finds gunshot wound. What then? He has to report. We can't kill him. That's no good."

"By the time he makes his report we'll no longer be here, Kadma."

They came in with the girl. The sand had scraped her chin and her bare elbow. She was sullen and defiant.

"What you saying?" Kadma demanded of the wounded man.

"That you've made such a bloody

mess of all this, that we're giving up the idea. We'll leave as soon as the doctor treats me. Once we're out in the Gulf we can radio the ship to stand by. There's still time to catch her."

"Is crazy!" Kadma said thickly. "Five years I wait to come back. Not leaving now. Staying here. All planned. New face from plastic surgeon. New name. Everything new. Nobody takes Rocko away now he's here."

The weak voice strengthened. "I told them you were unreliable, Kadma. We can't risk leaving you here. And we can't risk leaving any of these people alive. You'll get a doctor immediately and as soon as I am treated, we will leave."

Schanz said calmly, "Now you're being unwise, aren't you? I have a fair idea what you're after. I'll pick up the strings of Carla's organization. Give me six months. At the end of that time I think I can promise you a setup that you can use. It will run smoothly. I can do the job you thought Rocko could do."

The wounded man stared speculatively over at Schanz.

"What is?" Rocko demanded. "You work for me, Schanz. I put you here to get Carla in line. You got my messages. You got Farat and the girl here on my orders."

Schanz looked at Rocko with visible distaste. "Correction. I was working for you. You were very shrewd up until the time they deported you. I didn't know you'd changed. Now, Rocko, you're a blunderer. You've

lost the touch. If you'd killed Farat and the girl quickly and neatly and kept your hands off Carla's sister, none of this would have happened."

"You know what we want," the wounded man said. "A quiet base accessable by boat. Stocks of the proper clothes. Current periodicals so that our people can be up to date in casual conversations. But are you certain you can get out from under the trouble here?"

"Yes, if you take Kadma with you. All this needs is a little stage management."

"You tell him to take Rocko away again," Rocko said thickly.

"You're all through, Rocko," Schanz said calmly. "You should have known that a long time ago."

Rocko lifted the gun and shot Schanz in the forehead. Schanz remained on his feet for a long second. His eyes were wide, staring. They rolled up as though he sought to look at the tiny black hole, at the blood gathering on the lower edge of it. As Schanz folded gently down onto the rug, Rocko sidled over toward the wall like a wary beetle. The small dark eves were filled with dancing, animal lights. His shoulders were hunched and the tiny mouth was open showing the frame of little pointed teeth, like the mouth of a manta ray. Even as the wounded man shouted a hoarse order, Rocko shot again. He hit the man who had twisted Cooper's gun away from him. He hit him in the base of the skull and the chunky man went down, not as Schanz had fallen, but with the horrible slackness of a severed spinal cord.

"Billy!" Rocko called with a shrill note in his voice, dropping behind the chair which held Carla's body.

Billy pounced on the gun the man had been holding. Cooper had gotten his legs under him by then. He thrust against the wall, drove hard for the corridor, grabbing Barbara's unresisting wrist, yanking her along with him. Behind them he heard the deepthroated slam of the 38 revolver. He counted three shots. Barbara had come out of her trance of shock. She raced at his side. He ran to his room at the end of the hall, pushed her inside, yanked the door shut.

"Out the window," he said. "Fast!"

He followed her out. He knew that he was losing blood, but as yet he could detect no weakness. He felt the raw pull of torn muscles when he tried to use his right arm. Each breath she took was a sob. He guessed that she was close to hysterics.

She went along the shadows as he directed. She fell and suddenly she screamed. He had forgotten Susler's body and guessed at once that she had fallen over it, had touched it with her hands in the darkness. He yanked her up, swung her against the wall, slapped her. The scream stopped. She took a deep, shuddering breath.

"Sorry," she said, her voice completely calm.

"Take it easy. Look around the corner. If you don't see anyone, run for the convertible. The key is in the ignition. I'll be right behind you.

You better drive. I'm not sure of my arm. You can horse it around in one swing."

She looked around the corner, then began to run. He followed her. Their footsteps sounded too loud on the concrete. Both the doors were open as he had left them. She got behind the wheel and fumbled for the starter. He reached across her and pressed it. The big engine jumped into roaring life. He yanked on the lights and she swung the wheel hard, tires screaming on the concrete, the car rocking almost onto two wheels.

As the lights swung onto the road leading to the gate, they outlined a man running toward the house. Cooper saw at once that he was the fifth man, and guessed that he had been on guard at the boat.

As the car leaped toward him the man stopped, flat-footed. Metal glinted in his hand. He shouted something.

"Run him down," Cooper ordered harshly.

The man fired twice at point blank range, jumped to the side and fired again. The car roared by. Cooper cursed as the motor began to cough and miss. They made the next corner and the motor died.

"Brakes," he said. She jammed them on hard. He opened the door, yanked her toward him. She stumbled out after him and he pulled her along, plunging through brush that whipped his face, tore at his clothes. When he judged that he was twenty feet from the road he dropped and pulled her down into the circle of his left arm. With his lips near her ear he whispered, "Not a sound, now."

#### CHAPTER 6

#### Come and Get Me

bites were like hot needles. He felt her trembling and instinctively held her closer. Another shot came faintly from the direction of the house.

"I think he went up to the house," Cooper whispered.

She said in a toneless whisper, "He took me into his room and he told me that he was Rocko Kadma and Carla had worked for him before he was deported and that Carla was still making money out of rackets. Money that sent me to school and bought me clothes. I knew when he told me that I had guessed the truth for a long time."

"Don't talk about it."

"I have to talk about it. He said he liked me. He said that if I was nice to him, nothing bad would happen to Carla. Then I had to sit while they played cards and he kept giving me drinks and winking at me. A horrid pasty little man like that. Then Carla came in and tried to get me out of there. He said no. She started to scream at him and he hit her. I saw him hit her. Her face went funny and she fell back into the chair. She's dead. I didn't know she was dead. I wanted to be nice to the little man so he wouldn't hit Carla again. But she was already dead."

He put his hand across her mouth. "Easy, easy."

Again she took a deep shuddering breath. He took his hand away. "I'm all right, I guess. I should have known. But you see, I'm so much younger than she is. I can remember when we lived in the apartment. I guess I was twelve. Nick used to come there. Then he died. She sent me away. There was always enough money. Maybe too much money. But she was good. Tell me she was good. Please."

"She was good to you, Barbara. Maybe that's enough."

She began to weep. It was a release for her. She made very little sound as she cried. It did not last long. Enough starlight came through the thick branches overhead so that he could make out her face. She lay on her back, his left arm under her shoulders.

"What will we do?" she asked quietly.

"Try to get through the gate and across the causeway."

"What will happen back at the house?"

"They'll kill Rocko and Billy. I think the man I shot will die. The one who was in the road will tell the others we're here in the brush someplace. I think they'll look for us."

"Shall we go to the gate now?"

"Stay close behind me. Take hold of the back of my belt. Try not to make any noise."

Though they tried to be quiet, they seemed to make a great deal of sound.

Cooper stopped every few feet to listen for any sound of pursuit. He risked going out onto the road. Once on the road they hurried recklessly. They turned the last corner and saw the heavy gate ahead. A gasoline lantern made a blue-white glare that showed a man in silhouette, his back against a tree, head bowed, rifle across his lap.

"Sleeping," Cooper whispered. He pushed her back into the shadows. "Wait right here."

He walked with enormous care, picking each step, circling to come up behind the tree. At last his outstretched fingers touched the rough bark. He moved to the side, poised, then jumped out and grabbed the rifle barrel and yanked with all his strength. It came free with so little resistance that he stumbled and fell to one knee. The man leaning against the tree had toppled over onto his side. It was the old man who had opened the gate for him. He was breathing. The sparse white hair over his right ear was matted with blood.

He turned at the quick sound of her steps as she ran to him. The gate was closed but not locked. He pushed it open and she went through first.

At that moment he heard the shout behind them, on the road. He glanced at the hundred yards of causeway and cursed himself for not putting out the gasoline lantern. Even with it out, the starlight would be too bright on the exposed causeway.

"Down the shore line," he whispered, pushing her ahead of him.

She ran. Once she slipped and went

into the water up to her knees, scrambled back up onto the slope of the bank.

Ahead he saw the basin, the jetty, the two cruisers, one moored on either side of the narrow wooden jetty. He told her to stop and listen. There was the sound of someone crashing through the brush on the other side of the fence. Then that sound ceased.

He forced her down below the angle of the bank. Even at that distance the lantern made highlights and shadows. The rifle was a bolt action. He crouched and yanked the bolt back, shoved it forward and locked it. The noise it made was loud in the silence of the night. The small waves of the bay lapped against the sleek sides of the launches.

He lay diagonally along the bank, aimed carefully and slowly squeezed the trigger. The glaring white light went out and for a moment the night seemed twice as dark. Immediately he regretted his decision. The light had given him his best chance to prevent anyone slipping out the gate. Now all shadows seemed to move with stealth and silence.

He doubted if the pursuers would know English. Even if they didn't, the sound of their voices might give him a clue as to number and position.

"Hallo!" he called.

The voice that answered was so near that he jumped. It was just the other side of the wire fence, not ten feet from them.

"Hallo youself, best friend," Rocko said.

Cooper jacked the next slug into the chamber, wondering how many were left in the clip. He said quietly, "You can't do anything, Rocko. There's a fence between us. How about a compromise?"

Rocko laughed. "Big words, eh? You and sweet darling making a deal with Rocko. Funny. Not tonight, boy. Not this night. I got to kill you and sweet darling. For you I got two reasons, one of them old. For her, only one. Nobody will be left to know Rocko is back."

"That won't do any good, Rocko. The government knows you were coming. Every road out of this area is blocked. Two to one the coast guard has a couple of boats out there in the night, waiting."

"With two pair always betting like a full house, best friend."

He had centered the rifle on the patch of blackness that he felt sure contained the stalker. He pulled the trigger, worked the bolt quickly, fired again.

There was a groan, a heavy thud, a long bubbling sigh. Barbara moaned softly. She stood up, above the edge of the bank. Cooper made a frantic grab for her and missed. Rocko's gun made its tiny clacking sound. She turned half around and dropped face down into the water. Cooper grasped the waist band of her slacks and pulled her up onto the bank.

R OCKO LAUGHED ripely. "Good-by, sweet darling. Now just you, Farat. Old fox Rocko fooled her. Just like he fooled those guys who brought

him in the boat. You shot the big boss. I shot one. Billy got himself two. Last one kills Billy and while he's so busy with Billy I write my name—Rocko—tack, tack, tack, right up his back. Nobody fools Rocko, best friend."

"There's still one of them you didn't get!"

"Ho, you mean that stupid one from the boat, eh? The one who came running in so fast with the gun in his hand? The one I shoot as he runs in and he keeps running and busts the plate glass with his head? That one you mean? Is like old times in there, best friend. Is like when you and me and Smoker climbed on Neli's vacht that Sunday morning eleven years ago. Easter morning and you were just a punk then, best friend. Remember how it looked. All dronk. Smoker cut so many throats with that big knife his arm got tired. In there it looks like when Smoker got finished on Neli's yacht. Then remember we burned it and took off in Smoker's speedboat?"

"Come and get me, Rocko."

"Now I don't talk any more. I move around quiet. You don't know where I am any more. Pretty soon I kill you, best friend."

"If a snake doesn't get you first," Cooper said.

"Huh?" Rocko said. There was alarm in his voice.

"Didn't Carla tell you, Rocko? She filled that whole patch of brush with poisonous snakes It discourages visitors."

"Don't make jokes with old Rocko."

"Go ahead. Crawl around in there."

"You know I don't like snakes, best friend." His tone was accusing and plaintive.

"She told me she had coral snakes, rattlers and moccasins."

There was a long silence. Cooper dug in the mud at his feet, found three small stones. He flipped them over into the brush in a high arc, heard them patter in the leaves.

"No snakes, Rocko? I can hear them from here even."

"Best friend, I been a little crazy. I don't want to kill you. Honest. Look, kid. You and me, like old days, eh? I still got connections, kid. They'll still listen to old Rocko."

"Go ahead. Move around in that brush a little."

"No, kid! I don't want to walk. My skin is crawling. They're all around me here, kid. Let's make a deal, kid. A partnership. Split everything down the middle, better for you than the old days."

Cooper tossed some more pebbles in. "Sounds like they're moving in on you, Rocko. Hear 'em in the leaves?"

Rocko made a thin high bleating sound. The brush crashed as he began to run. Cooper could not be sure of his aim in the darkness. Rocko, still making thin cries, plunged toward the road and the gate.

Cooper pulled Barbara up onto higher ground and took off after Rocko, following the outside of the fence. Rocko was ahead of him. He was still fifty feet from the gate when he saw Rocko race through the gate and out along the causeway.

He started to aim the rifle and then he knew what he had to do, and why he had to do it. He climbed up onto the causeway. He stood, feet spread, rifle lowered.

Rocko was running silently.

"Turn around, Rocko!" he shouted. Rocko spun, dropped, fired in one startling demonstration of the animallike coordination of his thick old body. The slug made a humming sound like a taut wire and he felt the breeze on his cheek as he lifted the rifle and fired. On the heels of his shot came the harsh screech of a ricochet. He worked the bolt, aimed and fired again. When he tried to fire again, the hammer fell on an empty chamber. He stood in the night and looked at Rocko a hundred feet away. He could make out the oval of the face against the dark clothes that were like a shadow in their stillness.

It could be another ruse. His wounded shoulder had begun to throb with each beat of his heart. The recoil of the rifle had done it no good. He walked slowly toward Rocko. He stood and looked down at him for a long time. He knelt, found matches in Rocko's pocket and lit one. A small pudgy butcher, fast asleep. A tiny mouth, still pursed with a look of puritanical disapproval, but puffed with surprise at the bullet which had sped between the parted lips.

He walked back, drugged with weakness. There were certain things to be done. He accomplished them with dogged, unthinking purpose. He carried Barbara to the gate. He could carry her no further. He walked to the house, found car keys in Carla's room, took them out to the sedan, drove down and pushed the convertible off into the brush.

He drove by it to the gate, got out, lifted Carla into the back seat. He drove across the causeway and out onto the main road that ran the length of the key. He turned toward Sarasota and kept squinting his eyes and turning his head to new angles in an attempt to still the shifting dance of the road ahead—the road which would not stay still in front of the wheels.

He remembered thinking that his speed was dangerous, glancing down at the speedometer and finding he was going fifteen miles an hour. He reached the center of the resort city. The streets were deserted. Dawn was not far away. He was nosing toward the concrete island in the middle of an open square. There was no strength left either to turn the wheel or tread on the brake. The car hit with a grinding jar and rebounded. He fell forward on the horn ring and the blast of the horn filled his ears and the whole world, slowly dimming away, diminishing, as he slid down into darkness . . .

RANT, THE AREA MAN, looked like a pro footballer turned bond salesman. He stared again at Cooper in the hospital bed and said, shaking his head, "Brother, I saw it, and I can hardly believe it. Her house boys, cook, and guards, all except the old fellow, ran for cover. We've picked up all but one, and we'll get him soon.

He's probably hiding out in Ybor City. Even if they did know anything, we wouldn't need their testimony."

"What about the group who came in with Kadma?"

Grant gave him an owlish look. "Brother Cooper, you don't know anything about any group and neither do I. All we know is what we read in the papers. Gang War on Catboat Key. Racket Boys Shoot It Out. Citizens Demand Investigation. Twelve Slain, Including Two Women. Just between us girls, those five are such high level stuff that nobody gets to know from nothing. A flock of airborne little men came down, made with the mystery and departed."

"How do they feel about me, Grant?"

"Opinion is somewhat divided, Coop. If a few were left around to answer questions, I think they'd like you better. And you were the boy they had qualms about! They thought you'd blow the works by cracking up at the wrong time."

"I did crack," Cooper said, remembering the scene in the bedroom.

"Sure you did. You got so nervous, you went all to pieces. Don't forget, Coop, I've read the transcript of what you dictated yesterday. Hiding guns, playing one group against another, inventing snakes, then pulling a windup scene with Rocko that smacks of the days of the golden west. You cracked up great."

"What will happen?"

"To you? The doc up in Washington will restore your boyish beauty to

keep somebody who used to hate Farat from taking an unexpected crack at you. Then they'll probably assign you to something easy to let you get your breath."

A forgotten feeling flooded into Cooper. He felt once and a half life size. The world was a shiny red apple. Pick it up and take a big bite.

"What are you grinning about, chum?"

"Nothing."

"You're grinning and I haven't even told you my news yet."

"What news?"

"They're letting you up today. But they want you to stick around. And to keep you out of trouble I'm giving you an interim assignment. To last until they order you north. I want you to stick with the Hutcheon girl. She's pretty grim about the whole thing. I suppose that, in a way, we're partially responsible. I've got a list of the sour balls in Carla's organization. The kid sister will have to gather up the strings before it falls apart entirely—the legitimate enterprises. You can help the kid wash out the questionable ones and show her how to act like a boss. A million and a half worth of resort properties is a nice bundle, even after the tax hack."

\* \* \*

Ten days later Cooper, sprawled on the beach under the golden fist of the sun, heard Barbara say, at his elbow, "A big help you are!"

He yawned, stretched and sat up.

He looked approvingly at her. She wore the aqua velvet suit he had first seen her in. "Taking time out for a swim?"

"No thanks to you, Mr. Cooper," she said severely. Then her face lighted up. "Coop, I think we've found him. Wonderful experience and all that. He says that he can take over right away."

"On the percentage we talked about?"

"Yes. Coop, will you talk to him too? Give me your opinion of him?"

"Aren't you getting a little dependent on me, woman?"

She looked down and drew lines in the sand with her finger. "I guess so."

"Is that good?"

"Doesn't that depend on you?" she asked without looking up.

He thought then, of the quiet years, of the time when he kept to himself because there was nothing in him to give. No strength to share. He looked at her shining hair and thought how strange it was that in the very moment of his finding himself again, he should also find her, as though fate

had kept her carefully in the wings until time for her to walk on stage.

Cooper reached out and took hold of the hand, stilled the drawing of lines.

"I wanted to give it a longer trial run," he said.

"You either know or you don't."

"Since you put it that way, Barbara . . ."

Her lips had a warm firmness, a substance to them. Her hair had the smell of sun and sea.

He looked up then and said softly, "Darling, your whole big hotel is staring at us."

"Our hotel, friend."

She got up and started walking down toward the boom of the surf. She looked back over her shoulder with a manner and look distilled of pure femininity.

When he started after her, she ran, but it seemed to him that she wasn't running as fast as she could. Deep in her glowing hair was the white patch that marked the place where the bullet crease was bandaged. He caught her approximately twenty feet from shore.

PROPHETIC

By Joseph C. Stacey

In Cairo, Egypt, an Arab vendor set up shop in the shadows of the Pyramids, and was making a good thing of peddling ancient Roman coins, ("guaranteed genuine") until police came, took a peek at the coins, and promptly put him out of business.

a peek at the coins, and promptly put him out of business.
"Quite a boner had been pulled," police revealed. "The coins had been stamped with the date 50 B. C., but fifty years before the birth of Christ, not even the most brilliant of Romans could have known that He was going to be born!"

"Where do authors get their ideas from?" The case history of this story is a prime example. Robert Turner, standing by his twentieth-floor hotel window, was so awed by the frightening drop to the street that he began to bonder upon the thoughts of suicidal-minded persons. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, and a sinister-looking bellhop appeared ... A man about to jump ... a crooked bellhop interfering at the psychological moment—of such stuff are stories born. And so, Robert Turner didn't get out on the town that night.

He wrote this story, instead. . . .

# DOOM SERVICE

# by ROBERT TURNER

E STOOD by the opened window a long time, looking down, trying to work up the courage or final desperation or insanity or whatever you want to call it, to climb up onto the sill and launch himself out into space. Twenty stories up. A long, long fall. He would probably black out before he hit. At least that's what he had heard. There would be no pain. He would feel nothing. Just oblivion forever.

It had seemed very simple right up until this final moment. Nothing to it. A man wanted to kill himself, he did it, that was all. But now, a million and one things flashed through his mind. It would be messy. Even though he'd taken care to insist on a hotel room that faced on an airshaft instead of the street, so that he couldn't possibly fall on anybody, hurt some innocent bystander, it would still be a messy business. He'd figured that there wasn't any really clean way, so what was the difference. but now he wondered if this would be the right way. It would be a terrible thing for Anne who would have to identify him. And thinking about Anne led to thoughts about young Tommy. He could hear the boy:

"But where is Daddy, Mommie? Why isn't he coming home? He can't stay away forever. He's got to come home sometime."

Tommy was at the perpetual questioning age. He wouldn't let up on Anne for a minute. And sooner or later the kid would learn the truth. They'd try to keep it from him until he got older but somehow it would slip out. Somebody would shoot off their big mouth at the wrong time. He could almost see the look of horror on Tommy's round, bright face, the tears welling into those longlashed brown eyes so much like Anne's. How could he do something like this to Anne and the kid?

Yet if he didn't do it, maybe the other would be worse. Which was worse, to go to jail on a bum check rap and disgrace your wife and son that way—or to take your life? At least this way, the one, two, three, quick and out the window way, there was the insurance. It had been in effect long enough to be incontestable. They had to pay off, even on a suicide. And the twenty-five thousand would enable Anne to pay off his debts and still have enough left over to start out anew.

He stood there, looking down, feeling a touch of dizziness and his stomach curling from looking down from this height for so long. He wondered why everything had to happen the way it had. It was almost as though some giant hand had been moving the pawns of fate against him. For the past year, nothing had gone right.

A year ago he'd been sitting on top of the world. His comic strip, even though handled by a small syndicate, was picking up papers satisfactorily. It wasn't any "Terry And The Pirates"; it wasn't any ball-of-fire but he was making a comfortable fifteen thousand a year out of it, including the advertising assignments. The trouble was, they'd been too optimistic, he and Anne. They'd been spending eighteen grand a year. They'd

been living to the hilt of his income and then some.

When things began to break against him, they'd come thick and fast. First only one or two papers began to drop his strip. Then it was ten . . . then twenty. It seemed that the popularity of western comic strips had worn thin. And then the syndicate dropped it altogether. It was a blow but they could have weathered it. He had enough comic magazine assignments to bring them in seven or eight thousand dollars a year. But that wasn't enough. Not with the load of debt he was carrying. Creditors were sympathetic. But they wanted their money.

Then Tommy had that fall from a tree. Doctors, hospital expenses. It had gotten to be a little too much for him. He'd always been a social drinker. It wasn't difficult to drift over the edge, to try and drown his troubles. That didn't help. He missed a couple of magazine deadline dates and lost assignments. The vicious cycle began. The worse things got financially, the more he drank to forget them. And the more he drank, the worse things got. . . .

Last week had capped it off. During this bad period, he'd worked up a new comic strip and one of the big syndicates was very enthusiastic. He'd been promised an advance check of a thousand dollars to seal the deal. In his optimism that at last things were turning in the right direction again, he'd done a foolish thing. He was so sure that the syndicate contract was in the bag, he'd sent out his

own personal checks to the most demanding creditors. He figured that by the three or four days it would take for the checks to get back to his own bank, he'd have the syndicate money. He would be able to get the cash into his own account in time to make his own checks good.

Then the crippling blow had fallen. At the last second the syndicate had turned thumbs down on the strip. One of their salesmen had decided that it would offend people in certain sections of the country, that they'd miss out on certain big circulation papers in those sections. It was all off.

He was stuck, then. All the checks bounced. Sick with disappointment and worry, he'd been forced to tell Anne the whole thing. She'd been brave. She hadn't let it get her down. She told him to call the people to whom he'd sent the checks and explain. He'd done that and they were all fairly decent about it, except one company. Their credit manager was a big-mouthed, scurrilous individual who informed him that since the check had been for over a hundred dollars that it came under the heading of grand larceny. He'd said, in effect, to get the cash up to make good on that check within three days or the cops would be out after him.

He'd tried. He'd gone to friends, to publishers. The friends were sorry but they either didn't have it or figured he wasn't a good risk. The publishers had already extended themselves too much with advances to him. He couldn't get the money to

make good. He was cornered. The three days were up today.

Tonight, here at his favorite bar in the Hotel Corinth, with each drink it had come more and more urgently to him that there was only one way out. He was sick and broken with his troubles. He was convinced that he was a failure and that everybody would be better off this way. He knew that Anne would take it hard but she'd get over it. At the point in his drinking where he was usually getting pretty soggy, tonight it hadn't affected him that way. His thinking had seemed sharper, clearer than ever. even with the deep depression that was upon him. It had seemed the easiest, most logical thing in the world to walk from the bar into the lobby of the hotel, go up to Danny Shea. the desk clerk, and ask for a room. A room high up and on an air shaft so the street noises wouldn't reach him and keep him awake.

That was an hour ago and here he still stood, not quite able to yet go over the edge—figuratively or literally. He began to wonder if it was just that he lacked the courage, if he was a coward. He never did find that out. Someone knocked on the door.

He turned stiffly from the window, stared at the door. Who could be calling on him? Nobody knew that he was here. He finally decided not to answer, to pretend that he was asleep, hadn't heard the knock. But they didn't let him get away with that. They kept knocking. Not too loudly, but persistently. Finally the steady, irritating sound of it broke him out

in a temper. He strode the door, yanked it wide.

woman stood there. She was almost as tall as he was. She was built with that ampleness of figure that stops just on the eye-blinding side of being too much. The black silk jersey dress she wore contrasted with the burnt-orange red of her softly falling, shoulder length hair, the translucent whiteness of her true redhead's complexion. Her eyes were wide-set and slightly slanting at the outer corners. Her mouth was the red of crushed berries.

"Mr. Parker?" she said. Her voice had a soft huskiness that made you think of a fingernail scratching gently on velvet. "Mr. Jud Parker?"

"Yes," he said. He could feel his eyebrows go up in surprise. He recognized this woman, though he didn't know who she was. He'd seen her downstairs in the hotel bar a number of times the past few weeks. Sometimes he'd catch her studying him in the backbar mirror with veiled interest but always, just as he'd decide that perhaps there were other things besides liquor to make a man forget his troubles, she'd finish her drink and leave the bar without another glance at him. But this was crazy, her coming up here to his room, tonight of all nights, at a time like this! And she knew his name!

"Can I come in?" she said. She smiled and her teeth were even and shiny clean. "When you didn't answer right away I was afraid I was too late."

Numbly, he stepped aside and let her enter the room. Without being asked, she swept past him and went over and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Jud let the door slam behind him and leaned against it, fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette. For a moment he almost told her to get out, that he was broke, that he was in no mood to play games—or, to be perhaps set up for some kind of a sucker rap. But then his curiosity got the better of him.

"Too late?" he said. "What do you mean too late? I wasn't going anywhere."

She wasn't looking at him. She was looking toward the opened window where the curtains were blowing gently in the Fall night breeze. "Weren't you, Jud?" she whispered. "Let's not fence. A man checks into a hotel, without baggage, alone. His face is a mask of worry. He's been trying to drown himself in liquor for weeks. He insists on a high room, overlooking an airshaft. Did you think you were being subtle, Mr. Parker—Jud?"

That shook him. A little weakly, he answered: "I guess not. You said we wouldn't fence. All right, what do you want? How do you know so much about me?"

She laughed, a thin, high, musical sound—but empty, without warmth—like the tinkling of glass chimes. When she'd finished, her greenish, slanting eyes fastened on him with almost hypnotic intentness. "You don't really want to kill yourself, do you,

Jud? If there was any other possible way out you'd take it, wouldn't you?"

He shrugged. "You, apparently, are telling me. Go ahead with it."

"Suppose there was a way out? Suppose I could tell you one?"

"Naturally, if it sounded good, I'd take it."

She put her hands behind her on the bed, leaned back and let her head go back and stared up at the ceiling. The line of her throat was very lovely. "In some ways it would be almost like killing yourself. You would have to disappear. You would never see your family again. Never. You'd have to understand that. But it would have been the same the other way." She gestured lazily toward the open window. "Wouldn't it?"

Her words were confusing him, making his head begin to ache. He could see himself in the dresser mirror, a man a little better than medium height, with thin, sensitive features, drawn by months of worry. His eyes, deep in their sockets, looked as dull and lifeless as teddy bear eyes. Almost angrily, he said: "What are you getting at?"

She seemed not to notice his anger, impatience. She held one hand out before her, examined the claw-like carmined nails on the ends of the long, graceful fingers. "There would be money in it for you," she said. "Cash. Five thousand dollars. Enough for you to get to Central or South America and start a new life. And everything else—for your family and creditors and all, would be just the same as the other. Almost every-

thing will be the same. Except for the very important item to you. You won't have to die. You will go on living." She turned her eyes toward him again, suddenly. "How does that sound to you?"

"Crazy," he said. He made an impatient gesture. "I don't know whether this is a gag or what but let's quit it. It's drawing too thin."

She shook her head. "Not crazy. It isn't any gag. It can be done, just as I've outlined. In practically no time at all." She fished down inside the bodice of the silk jersey dress, pulled forth a wad of bills. She unfolded them, riffled them. They were all hundreds. "Here's the five thousand."

His eyes stared at the money, fascinated. "How does all this work—and why?"

"There's another man, your height, your build, your complexion, the same kind of slightly wavy, thinnish blond hair. Except for a few dissimilarities of feature, he could be your double. I noticed that the first night I saw you down in the bar several weeks ago. I started to think about this idea then. I started to check on you. It began to look very good. Your circumstances fitted into the plan admirably. Tonight I was going into the bar and speak to you, proposition you. But you saved me a lot of trouble. Danny, you know, Danny Shea, the night desk clerk, told me about you checking into a room. We knew what you had in mind. Hotel clerks get so they can spot those things. Danny's smart. He could tell, too, that you weren't quite ready. He said to let you stew awhile and it would be easier to talk to you."

"I take it that Danny is in on this with you?"

"Yes." She smiled. "Danny and I—" she paused and her eyelids got sleepy and contented looking as a well fed cat's. "We're quite fond of each other, if you know what I mean. Danny's down in this other man's room, now, waiting for me to call and say that it's okay. You know, the man I described who is so much like you."

Slowly, it was beginning to come to him, even though his mind fought against the horror of it, even though it seemed impossible, senseless. He didn't say anything. He couldn't even seem to put any questions into words, anymore, as though he was afraid of the answers he'd get. He heard her warm, pussy-willow-soft voice going on:

". . . your hotel room key in his pocket. Danny will testify that he was suspicious, called and that you sounded all right so he let it go. What will they do, fire him?" She laughed. "He'll be wearing your clothes. You'll wear his when you leave here. He'll have all your identification on him. You won't have his; that will be destroyed. You'll have to make arrangements to get yourself some new identification for your new life. You see, Jud, this man is going to save you a sudden, jolting drop into hell. He's going to take it for you. He'll go out that window for you, Jud Parker, and to everybody else in the world but

the three of us, it'll be you down there, broken and dead on the pavement of the airshaft. Your wife will get the insurance. Your creditors will be paid. Jud Parker will be dead—but you'll be still alive. You understand?"

He understood. He could feel perspiration, like icy brook water, trickling along his thinned ribs. He kept rubbing the moist palms of his hands along his trouser legs. His tongue felt thick, but somehow he managed to get words out, finally:

"How can you do that? How can you make somebody jump out the window in my place?" All the terrible possibilities of this proposition were beginning to come to him. "Is—is he already dead?"

She shook her head. "We aren't that crude. He's passed out . . . drunk. I mickeyed him. And in case you're worrying about them checking too closely on the identification—well—that's a chance Danny and I'll have to take. We don't think there'll be any reason for them suspect it's not you. To narrow the chance down, we're going to lower him out headfirst, let him fall that way. There won't be much of his face to identify." She got up off the bed, stood up. "What do you say, Jud? Shall I call Danny, ask him to bring—"

"Who is it?" he cut in. His voice sounded high-pitched, scared, like a kid in a haunted house. "Who's the guy you're doing this to—and why?"

"My husband," she said. "You don't need to know his name nor mine, even. That's unimportant. So

are all the details of the why, but I can give you a rough idea. He's got to disappear, Monty has. He can't be killed; his corpse can't be found. You see, Monty's very wealthy-and very bitter about having married me. He has a son, by another marriage. He's made a will, leaving everything to this son, if he dies. So killing him would do me no good. But if he just disappears, everything will be fine. The will won't take effect for seven years. By that time I'll have all his funds. They will have been lost . . . in some poor investments he made before he died. You understand? It will be easy to work. I've already made a tentative deal with his lawyer, a smooth crook who will do anything for the right amount of cash."

"I see," Jud Parker said. As the woman had been talking, he'd seen the greediness eat at her beauty. Her features had seemed to sharpen, making her look a little like a female Satan, with her green eyes so wildbright.

Jud Parker's mind. He told himself that he couldn't do this. It wasn't right. It was being party to murder. But then he told himself that this woman and her Danny wanted her husband's money very badly. If he refused, they'd find somebody else or some other way to get rid of him. He wouldn't be saving the man's life. If he refused, he, Jud Parker, was right back where he started from, with his troubles. He'd either have to take the jail rap on

the bum check, leaving Anne and Tommy with that disgrace and stuck with his killing pile of debts—or once again try to work up the courage to do away with himself. Somehow, he realized, now, that he'd never be able to do that.

"I—I don't know," he said. "Can't you give me some time to think about it?"

She shook her head negatively. "No time, Jud. It's got to be done soon, very soon. Monty might not stay under the effects of that Mickey too much longer." She walked toward the phone, picked it up, held it out toward Jud. "Get room eighteen fourteen for me. I don't want anybody remembering that a woman called from your room."

Woodenly, almost as though some power outside of himself was moving his legs, he stepped toward her, took the phone from her hands. He hadn't said he would do what she wanted, yet she assumed that he would. He was going ahead with it. He asked for the room that she'd named. Then she took the phone from his hand. She said:

"Danny? It's okay. Bring him up. Use the fire exit stairs and be careful, Danny." That was all. Just like that.

Jud had to sit down. He almost fell into the chair. Neither he nor the woman spoke. It seemed like hours before there was a knock on the door again. He watched the woman's subtle grace as she walked across the room to open the door. Danny Shea slid awkwardly inside, lugging the figure of a man, with one of his arms thrown around Danny's neck, like he was drunk.

Danny Shea was a husky guy. Jud Parker had never paid too much attention to him before, although he'd spoken to him several times at the bar, downstairs. But he saw now that he was the kind of hefty-shouldered young guy, with a darkly handsome, somehow reckless looking face, that women would go for. The suit he was wearing would cost a hotel clerk's month's pay. Danny had apparently already done well by his association with this woman.

Danny Shea let the man he'd been carrying fall limply to the floor. Jud found himself staring at the woman's husband as though he was already dead. He saw where she was right, and that this Monty did answer the same general description as himself. The man's face was against the floor and he was glad of that. He couldn't have looked at his face without thinking what it would look like after these two dropped him out of the window—head first.

Something seemed to crack suddenly inside of Jud Parker's head, with a terrible flash of pain that ran all the way down to his ankles. He looked at Danny Shea and the woman, the beautiful, deadly redhead in the black dress, and for an instant he had the wild sensation that this whole episode was some wild alcoholic hallucination. But then Danny Shea's deeply vibrant, over-confident voice said: "You're smart to work with us, Parker. It's a swell out for you." And he

knew that it was real; it was happening.

At the same time he knew what that cracking in his head was. The shock of this thing happening to him had stunned him sober. He suddenly knew that he couldn't go through with it. He found that his voice was steady again as he said: "Sorry to disappoint you, kid. I wouldn't have any part in such a rotten murderous deal if you paid me a million."

Both Shea and the woman looked at him as though he'd suddenly spoken to them in Arabic. Then they turned their eyes toward each other. Parker saw spots of feverish color flame on the redhead's high white cheekbones. Her eyes pulled back at the outer-corners and gave her once again a feline look, but this time like a cat at bay, with its fur up and its back arched and its long claws unsheathed. She called him a name. She whirled at Shea, her fists clenched:

"You!" she said. "You were so sure he'd do it. How could he turn it down, you said. But he isn't going to do it. He is turning it down. Now, what are we going to do? He knows the whole thing. We can't let him go out of here, knowing what he knows."

Jud Parker started to make a break for the door. But then he saw it was too late. He wouldn't make it. Danny Shea was snatching a shiny, nickleplated automatic from his jacket pocket. His good-looking features were now darkened with the blood of anger. His lips were pushed out, loosely, sullenly. His voice was poisonous as he said:

"Shut up, Myrna! Shut your shrewish mouth. You blow up too quick. You go to pieces in the tight spots. Maybe you aren't the dame I thought you were. There ain't nothing wrong. He ain't backing out. You'll see. You know why? You're going to take this rod, Myrna, and hold it on him. Then I'm going to strip off Monty's clothes. Parker's going to take off his. We're going to go right ahead as planned. After it's all over, then let Parker decide he wants out. He'll be in on it. He'll have taken part in the murder. You and I'll swear to that, Myrna. Let him try to back out, then."

Parker stared at the gun, the deadly little black hole in its snout. He suddenly laughed, a quick, rasping, humorless sound. "That's funny," he told them. "What's going to make me stay here and watch you do that?"

"This," Shea said. He hefted the automatic.

"I see," Parker said. "If I don't, you'll kill me, is that it? That's very funny. You forget why I came up here, took this room, Shea. I want to die. Thanks for an easy way to do it. It's simple to let somebody else do the job for you. Like a one-man firing squad and the choice is taken out of my hands. Go ahead and kill me, Shea. I'll appreciate that."

Deliberately, he turned from them and started toward the door of the room. He hadn't meant a word of that. He was bluffing. He was sure they wouldn't, couldn't, shoot him. It would bust up their whole scheme. He hoped. Because Jud Parker now knew that he didn't want to die, that it was no way out, that it never is, that instead of helping Anne and Tommy, it would be a dirty trick on them. All of that was quite clear to him now, after the sickening shock of all that had happened here in this room.

Too late, it came to him that they could go ahead with their plan just as well if he was unconscious and that then he would be forced to go along with their scheme, under threat of being made a party to the murder. He heard the swishing noise of the automatic coming toward his head. He twisted his head and half hunched it down into his shoulders as the blow struck. Some of the force was taken from it. It only stunned him. He turned and grappled with his hands. His fingers found Danny Shea's thick, muscled throat. But Shea was forty pounds heavier, younger, stronger. One of Shea's fists sunk into Parker's stomach and it felt as though it had gone right through to his backbone. It made him deathly ill. Then the fist hit at his face and the room lights swirled and flashed on and off. But somehow he managed to hold his grip on the big man's throat, his thumbs sinking into it.

Then, as though at a great distance, he seemed to hear someone shouting, a man's voice, shouting: "Help! Help!" There was the sound of wood splintering, a crashing noise. He noticed that Shea's punches at his face and stomach were getting weaker. The lights stopped whirling and came on again and stayed on. He

felt Shea break away from him, stagger backward and he saw that the hotel clerk's handsome features were purpled and he was clutching at his throat, gagging, his tongue sticking out, his eyes popping. He noticed too that Monty, the woman's husband, was no longer on the floor. He was talking and gesticulating excitedly to three men who were standing with drawn revolvers in front of the broken-in door of the hotel room. They were big men, with hardbitten faces.

Jud Parker had to go over to a chair and sit down. He just about made it. One of his eyes was swollen almost shut. Blood was running from his nose and a couple of his teeth felt loose and sharp against his tongue. Dazedly, he watched Monty come toward him, grinning. He allowed the other man to pick up his sore hand and shake it. He heard Monty explain that he'd been suspicious of his wife and this Danny Shea ever since they'd first come to live at the hotel. He'd hired private detectives to check on her. They'd learned that not only was she seeing Shea, but that they'd cooked up this plot to get rid of him, Monty.

"You see," Monty said, "I had our room wired. We have recordings of all their conversations. We heard how they figured to use you and—" He broke off and a look of concern came over his face. "Oh, I say, old man, in my excitement I didn't realize how battered-up you are. Here, one of you men call an ambulance to get this chap to a hospital. He needs some patching up. And listen, Parker, old

boy, don't worry about anything. I—uh—I'm familiar with your circumstances. I'd like to help you out, in turn for your part in aiding me to nab these two redhanded."

Jud Parker just sat there, looking up at the other man's lean, kindly face. He was wondering what would have happened if he'd agreed to go through with Myrna and Danny Shea's plot. It made him shudder.

He came up out of the chair. "Before I go anywhere, I have to call my wife. She'll be worried."

He moved to the phone and while the operator was getting the number, he watched the private detective herd Myrna and Danny Shea, at gunpoint, out of the room. He said to Monty: "What about the mickey she gave you?"

"I was prepared for that," Monty said, grinning. "I only pretended to down the drink. I really got rid of it."

Just then Parker's call came through. He said: "Hello, Anne? I... no, no I'm all right. Got a sore mouth, that's all. I... what?... No, I'll tell you about it when I—"

He broke off, listening to her. She was saying: "Stop worrying, Jud, darling. I've tried to reach you everywhere. I've got news for you. I went down to see that man, Reinhart, about the—you know—the check. The guy who was so nasty. Well, I took Tommy with me. All Tommy had to do was to smile at him once and he was ready to talk with me in a decent way. He's not going to prosecute, Jud. . . ."

"That into whatsoever house you shall enter; it shall be for the good of the sick to the utmost of your power, your holding yourself far aloof from wrong, from corruption, from the tempting of others to vice." Each aspirant for the degree of Doctor of Medicine has binded himself solemnly to these words. The drama and emotion of this oath lies behind Carl Clausen's story of a lady doctor who must not only meet the challenge of her daily practice but is caught in the fire of a gang war and in the conflict of heart versus honor.

# THE MISFIT BULLET

# by CARL CLAUSEN

ARBARA STARRETT, M.D., glanced at her wrist watch and saw that it was after midnight. It had been a hard day. She was tired, but happy. The wiseacres to the contrary, she was making a go of it. A year ago she had hung her medical shingle on a shoestring in this tawdry street. She had loved every minute of it, and she was out of the red. Not very far out, but definitely out.

She looked about the tiny consultation room ruefully. She was too tired to put it in order, and her small practice didn't yet warrant a cleaning woman, so she decided to let it go until morning.

Pausing before the mirror, she examined what she had so often deplored. Light-brown hair with glints of red in it. Blue—almost incredibly blue eyes. A mouth that was dis-

couragingly reminiscent of that fictional epithet—Cupid's Bow—and a skin which a soap manufacturer would have given years of his life to claim as a result of his product.

She was about to switch the lights off when the bell rang. Somebody's baby had colic again, she decided with a sigh, as she went to answer it.

In the ill-lighted hall stood a man. He was well-dressed, too well-dressed, in fact, for this neighborhood, and his soft fedora was pulled forward until she could see only the lower part of his face, which was dark. Since this section of New York City was a Latin one there was nothing remarkable about a dark face. What was disturbing was the way he looked at her, back over his shoulder as if he were afraid of being seen in her hall.

"Dr. Starrett in?" he asked.

"I'm Dr. Starrett," she replied.

His expression changed from being merely sinister to one of almost satanic incredulity.

"What is it you want?" she demanded. She was growing weary of discounting her youthful looks to prospective patients.

"A guy got hurt," he said, looking over her shoulder at the small but completely equipped room. "Guess you'll have to do. He's outside in the car. I'll bring him in."

"What sort of an injury?" she asked. "If it's serious—if it's a fracture, I'll call a hospital."

"I'll bring him in," the man repeated shortly, and walked down the steps to a black sedan parked at the curb. Barbara went to the window and looked out. Two men were bringing a third up the steps between them. A fourth remained at the wheel of the car.

She opened the door and the two men carried their injured companion to the operating table and placed him there at her direction. She saw that the man's shirt was soaked with blood.

"Why, he's been shot!" she exclaimed.

The spokesman nodded. The second man was even darker and nastier looking than he.

"A little argument down the street," he said. "Fix him up."

She examined the wound. Probed with expert fingers. The bullet had penetrated the man's left shoulder without apparently striking a bone. It wasn't a particularly dangerous

wound, if he had had medical attention sooner.

"How long ago did this happen?" she demanded. "Why didn't you take him to a doctor at once?"

The man with the very dark face said: "Lady, we cruised around looking for one—"

The other silenced him with a glare. "Get busy!" he snapped at Barbara.

She drew her breath in sharply. "I'll do what I can," she replied. "But it's a hospital case. He's lost a lot of blood."

The spokesman shook his head. His black eyes were opaque and expressionless.

"No hospital!" he growled.

"All right," said Barbara hurriedly. "I'm not used to being spoken to in that tone," she added, as she slipped her operating gown over her head.

Her rebuke produced merely an unwinking stare.

She administered a restorative, gave the injured man a local anesthetic. It was not a difficult dressing. The bullet had passed through cleanly. While she was irrigating the wound, her patient opened his eyes and looked up at her.

"Hello!" he said weakly.

She managed a smile in return.

"Hello," she replied.

His eyes were dark hazel, friendly, his hair dark brown—a little curly. His features were good, and in spite of his pallor there was a healthy, outdoors look about him. Little to suggest the product of the slums.

"Where's your harp?" he asked.

"My what?" she replied, then added seriously. "You'll need a transfusion. That's why you fainted. It means hospitalization."

"Swell!" he said.

"I'm a doctor—not a nurse," she replied severely.

"Sweller!" he replied.

"Never mind!" the spokesman cut in. "Patch him up and cut the gab."

"You could be civil!" she told the fellow without raising her eyes. "Your manners are offensive."

"Hospitals are out!" he snapped back at her.

"That settles that!" the injured man sighed. "A pint of yours would have done the trick, Doctor. Redheads have what it takes."

She bit her lip. When she had finished bandaging him she went to the desk for a pencil and pad.

"Name and address, please?" she asked of the spokesman. The injured man regarded her quizzically, as the other peeled a hundred-dollar bill from a roll and carelessly tossed it on the desk.

"I have to report this," she told him.

"Not if you know what's good for you," the fellow replied.

"But it's the law!"

The man made a noise in his throat—peeled a second hundred-dollar bill from the roll and tossed it beside the first.

"Forget it!" he advised.

"The charge," she replied coldly, "is twenty dollars."

"Okay. Buy yourself a cigar with the change."

"If I don't report it," she said, "I'll lose my license."

"If you do, you won't need a license."

"But this man is in a serious condition. If he should—if anything should happen to him and it became known that I dressed the wound without sending him to the hospital for a transfusion, I could be arrested for manslaughter."

"Nobody's going to know if you keep your own mouth shut. We're not looking for publicity!" the spokesman snapped. He nodded to his companion. "Come on. Let's get out of here. Dave."

"You can't drive him around in that shape!" she protested. "The jolting of the car might start another hemorrhage."

The injured man regarded her seriously.

"Never mind me, little sawbones," he said. "Forget this, all except my name, which is Bill. I'll come around some day for a transfusion."

He was following her with his hazel eyes as she carried her instruments to the sterilizer. Friendly though his tone was, she flushed hotly at the appellation. She resented bitterly having to defend her youth to every Tom, Dick and Harry—even to men like these.

"She'll forget!" the spokesman said. He and his companion helped the injured man off the operating table and walked him out of the door to the waiting sedan. As it roared away, she realized that they had kept the engine of their car running all the time.

SHE SAW it turn the corner on two wheels, then stood looking about the disordered room indecisively. She went to the telephone and lifted the receiver off the cradle, and found that the line was dead. The cord was loose which meant that the third man had torn it from its connection while she was busy with the wounded man.

Putting her coat on, she went to the corner drugstore pay-station and reported the disconnected telephone, and was told that since she was a physician, a trouble-shooter would be right over.

Returning, she put the two hundred-dollar bills in the drawer of the desk and went to work straightening up the room. As she changed the soiled oilcloth of the operating table, something hard rolled off it and fell to the floor. She picked it up. It was a small metal object. A bullet! A bullet, slightly flattened at the point. A little dry blood adhered to it. She stood looking at it, perplexedly, then dropped it into the desk drawer with the two banknotes, locked the drawer, and put a clean oilcloth on the operating table.

The trouble-shooter from the telephone company arrived. He examined the end of the disconnected wire.

"What happened, Doctor?" he asked.

"I—I moved the desk chair," she replied. "The leg caught in the cord."

The man looked from the end of the wire to the chair, then, incredulously, to the box fastened to the wall behind the desk. He shrugged and went about his task. It was but a few minutes work to repair the connection. He called central and reported. Gave the number, and central rang him back.

"Okay, Doctor," he said to Barbara, dropping the receiver back in its cradle and picking up his kit of tools.

"Thanks for being so prompt," she replied, offering him a dollar bill. He waved it aside.

"I'd lose my job, lady," he said. Switching the lights off, Barbara carried the soiled oilcloth to the clothes hamper, went to her living quarters at the rear and undressed for bed. But she couldn't go to sleep. Not reporting a wounded patient was a serious matter in New York City. The men were obviously lawbreakers of some sort—had perhaps come redhanded from the scene of a crime. Yet she found it hard to believe that the injured man was a criminal. Asking herself why was unanswerable, but, unaccountably she found herself worrying about him rather than over the dilemma she was facing.

Curious thing about the bullet. It must have been spent in penetrating the man's shoulder. Had fallen out of the wound as he lay on the operating table. Such things did happen, of course. Still, it was odd. It might have been deflected by the pistol slung in its holster under his left armpit which she had unbuckled to get at the wound.

The thought of this murderous weapon decided her. She might be aiding and abetting a gang of criminals in getting away. For all she knew some officer was lying dead in a gutter in some mean street.

Sitting up, she switched on her bed light and reached for the telephone extension on the stand and dialed police headquarters and reported. The man at the other end took down her statement, sleepily, asked a question or two, then said:

"All right, Dr. Starrett. Good night."

As she dropped the receiver back in its cradle, she realized that such reports were probably common occurrence to the desk sergeant. There had been no need of hurry, after all. She could have waited until morning, but she felt better having done her duty as a physician and a citizen, no matter what danger might accrue to herself later.

And yet somehow, as she tried to go to sleep, she could not dismiss the recollection of the friendly, hazel eyes of the injured man.

### CHAPTER 2

## Night Call

THE MORNING papers carried the headlines of a gangster feud on the front page. Barbara read the following over her coffee:

#### RIVAL MOBS SHOOT IT OUT

Little Italy dodged bullets last night at midnight in a raid in Hester Street by the Catlin mob of Jersey City, rivals of the Morley "organization" for control of the Manhattan drug traffic. The Manhattaners appear to have got the worst of it, with two members dead in the lobby of the Castellamare Hotel in Hester Street.

One of the New Jersey invaders was badly wounded, but he and his companions got away in their car and sped off before the police arrived.

The raid was the culmination of a feud of long standing for domination in the nefarious traffic in heroin, it is alleged.

A black sedan with blood-stained upholstery and a punctured gas-tank was found this morning by the police, abandoned in West Street near the corner of Thirty-second. A check of the license plates showed that it had been stolen for the occasion from a prominent resident of the fashionable Oranges, New Jersey. It is thought that this was the car used by the Catlin mob, since one of their members was badly wounded. The man was seen slumped back in the rear seat as the car sped around the corner, out of sight.

Barbara folded the paper. So he was a criminal, after all. One of the worst. She, herself, knew only too well the toll of drugs in life, health and human happiness. Hardly a day passed without bringing to her door some supplicant for relief from the terrible craving—derelicts with every cent gone for drugs, begging for a few tiny crystals to still the craving in their racked bodies. In closing the door in their faces, she knew that humanely speaking she was violating her oath, but the law was the law. and that, too, she had sworn to uphold.

She was putting the breakfast things away when her bell rang. She knew at once that her caller was an officer of the law. He was tall, thin and grave of mien. He handed her his card. Lieutenant Laid McLee, Homicide Squad, she read.

"I'd like to speak to Dr. Starrett."

"You are, Lieutenant."

"Oh! Well—h'm." The officer ran his hand through his thick black hair. He regarded her sidewise, looked at his hands, which were thin and bony with long, sensitive fingers; at his feet, encased in shoes of no more than C width; then let his deeply-set dark eyes return to his right hand, which he thrust out like a marine reaching for a spar.

Barbara gave him her own with a smile.

"Don't say it, Lieutenant." He blinked owlishly as he released her hand and watched it drop to her side, while she added: "I've been expecting you."

"I see. You saw the morning papers?"

She nodded.

McLee draped himself in a chair and crossed his long legs with a movement that was almost serpentine.

"Can you give me a description of the man, Doctor?" He consulted his notes. "He was shot in the left shoulder, you reported to the sergeant?"

"That's right. There were three men . . . four counting the driver of the car. The other two brought him in. The driver stayed at the wheel with the engine running."

She gave him the description of the other two first.

"Catlin and Dave Petrouski," the lieutenant said as he jotted it down in his notebook.

"The wounded man was—different," she continued, averting her face. "He wasn't a Latin, I mean," she corrected hurriedly, then went on describing

him and had the curious feeling that she was betraying a trust. 'He—be didn't look like a criminal," she inished lamely. "His first name was Bill, at least he said so."

McLee's thin lips were stretched. "The most murderous killer I ever caught up with," he said, "could have doubled for Sir Galahad—in looks. And Sing Sing is full of yeggs named Bill."

She got up and went to the de•k, unlocked the drawer and handed him the two hundred-dollar bills.

"They left these in payment for my services," she said, glancing awey.

McLee turned the bills over in his hand. Carried them to the light, examined them under his magnifying glass.

"They may be hot," he said, "although they'd hardly have given them to you if they were, and they're not queer. D'you mind if I take them to headquarters for checking? I'll give you a receipt for them."

"You needn't, Lieutenant. I shan't want them. I don't like that kind of money."

He looked at her long and hard.

"I see. I get you. You've got nerve for a girl, Doctor."

"What has my sex to do with it?" she demanded with flaming cheeks.

"No—nothing, Doctor! Anyway, you got nerve." He flipped the banknotes and folded them. "What shall I do with them if they're not hot? I don't smoke a pipe."

"The wife of that patrolman who was shot down in the hold-up the other day might be able to use them."

"I'll see that she gets them if they're okay."

"And keep my name out of it, please."

"If you insist, Doctor. But it might do you good to see Mrs. Calahan's face when I hand it to her. She's got three youngsters."

"I prefer it my way, Lieutenant."
She opened her palm and held the bullet out to him. He stared at it.

"You dug that from the wound?" he asked.

She shook her head and told him the circumstances of finding it. He took the small pellet between his long index finger and thumb. Subjected it to a minute scrutiny under the magnifying glass.

"Fired from a thirty-eight caliber automatic," he said. He looked at Barbara hard. "You say the blood was dry when you picked it up? Sure about that?"

She nodded.

"Just as you see it now, Lieutenant."

"And it hadn't struck a bone?"

"It passed through the fleshy part without touching a bone anywhere."

"Then it must have struck an obstruction after it passed through him. The nose is slightly flattened."

"That's what it looks like," Barbara admitted.

"Then how do you account for it being on your operating table, Doctor?"

"I don't account for it, Lieutenant."
He regarded her a moment contemplatively.

"Looks like it was left there on

purpose for you to find and pass on to us, doesn't it?"

Barbara stared back at him.

"I hadn't thought of that," she exclaimed.

McLee wrapped the pellet in a piece of tissue paper and put it in his vest pocket.

"I'll look into it at headquarters," he said. "And since they threatened you, I'm keeping it quiet-the whole thing, you understand. I'll see the desk sergeant to whom you reported last night, and have him pull it off the record. There are leaks at headquarters and I'm taking no chances." He paused. "There is, of course, the chance that they expected you to report it-since the bullet was left here. In that case . . ." he stopped speaking and fingered the piece of metal in his vest pocket. "No, that's no good! They wouldn't have disconnected the telephone." Smiling, he held out his hand. "Goodby, Doctor. Thanks on behalf of the department and Mrs. Calahan. I'll keep you posted."

"I prefer to forget it, Lieutenant," she replied.

ARBARA GROPED her way down the ill-lighted stairs of a walk-up tenement building, after making a call late that evening, and stepped into the street crowded with push-carts. A man tapped her on the shoulder.

She glanced up. It was one of the men of the night before. The swarthy one. He took her arm and led her toward a car parked nearby. When she started to protest, she saw that his left hand was buried to the hairy wrist in the pocket of his coat, which bulged menacingly.

"What do you want?" she demanded, drawing back in fear.

"You," he said, as the driver of the car opened the door.

She looked about wildly. The man called Dave Petrouski added in a low voice: "This is not a snatch, lady—unless you make trouble. The guy you fixed up last night is slipping. We want you to take a look at him."

"I told you he needed a transfusion," she retorted.

"All right, come along and do it."
"But I haven't the necessary instruments with me."

"Tell it to the boss. My orders are to bring you," the man insisted. He looked down at her with a crooked leer. "The guy is pretty low. He's been raving for you."

"But I have my practice—I can't stay away from my office."

"You can if the boss says so. He'll pay you more than you'll make in a month rolling pills around here. We'll see that you get back by daylight. Come on."

He pushed her into the rear of the car and flung himself down beside her.

"Get going!" he told the driver, who had kept the engine running as before.

As they turned the corner, her captor took a black cloth from his pocket.

"You can't do that to me!" she protested vehemently.

"It's for your own protection, lady.

The less you know, the longer you'll live. Don't make me knock you out."

She gave up. He put the blindfold over her eyes and tied it behind, and pulled the curtain of the car window down. Barbara remembered having looked at her watch as she stepped into the street. She tried to memorize the route by counting turns. She knew that they were driving uptown, but they had evidently foreseen her reaction. She knew by the movements of the car that the driver was turning right and left at every other street corner to confuse her, at least so it seemed.

She lost track to the extent that she wasn't sure if they were traveling up or downtown, until the noises of the city began to diminish and she felt a cool wind on her face through the front open window.

She knew that they were crossing a bridge. She guessed at Queens-borough, since they had been driving long enough to reach it. She listened for street cars. When she didn't hear any, she decided that it must be the George Washington bridge across the Hudson, and not one of the East River bridges.

After crossing it, they turned corners again for what she judged might have been twenty or twenty-five minutes, then came to a stop. The man in the seat beside her took her arm.

"Okay, lady," he said. "Watch your step."

She was walked up two flights of stairs. Her captor knocked three times on a door, and it was opened.

#### DETECTIVE FICTION

He pushed her through it and removed the blindfold.

#### CHAPTER 3

#### Forced Consultation

THE ROOM was brightly lighted, comfortably furnished. At a desk sat the spokesman of the night before, the man called Catlin. A battery of telephones was ranged about him. The windows, she saw, were tightly shuttered.

The man said: "Sit down."

She slipped into an overstuffed chair and waited.

"Nothing to be scared of, Doctor," he said, "if you—behave yourself. Your patient is not doing so well. There's five hundred dollars in it for you. Guess you can use it?" he added with what he evidently considered was a smile.

"I couldn't perform a transfusion here. You don't understand. A blood transfusion is a delicate matter. It needs special equipment."

"We'll get you anything you need. There's plenty of us here." His lips parted again in that wolfish smile. "I guess we can scare up enough blood between us," he added.

"But you may not be of the same type as he. There are four different types. The wrong type would kill him."

"H'm. Well, come take a look at him."

The man rose and preceded her through another door into a second room, the swarthy one following with her medicine case. It was a bedroom, as comfortably furnished as the other. On the bed lay her patient of the night before. The man who had called himself Bill. He appeared to be in a coma.

As she lifted his wrist for his pulse, she noted by her watch that they had been all of forty-five minutes on the way, which meant nothing at all, since they cruised about after crossing the bridge.

So intent was she on trying to orient herself that she missed the wounded man's pulse count twice. The third count made her pause and look at him hard. His pulse was practically normal. She tried again with the same result. Taking the thermometer from her kit, she forced it between his lips. When she removed it, she was astonished to read that he had less than one degree of fever.

She felt of his face. It was a little damp—a good sign—and quite cool. As her hand came to rest upon his cheek, she felt a movement, there, against her palm. Three distinct movements, in fact. She moved her palm to his left cheek. The performance was repeated. He was clucking his tongue against his cheek under her palm. His eyes remained closed, but she knew that he was trying to communicate something to her.

She was too startled and confused to try to adjust her mind to this new development, but she had presence of mind enough to say to the man Catlin:

"He's too low for a transfusion. I'll try a saline injection. Get me a glass of warm water and some salt. Common table salt will do."

Catlin nodded to Petrouski, who went out. He returned with a carton of salt. She mixed a weak solution and got her hypodermic syringe ready.

"He should rally after this injection. If he doesn't you must send him to a hospital at once."

"No hospital," Catlin snapped. She shrugged.

"I'm not inquiring into your affairs," she said, "but since you've called me in, I've a responsibility—and the right to have my advice followed. You don't seem to realize that when a physician neglects to do all within his or her power to save a human life, he or she is liable under the law."

"You'll do as you're told!" Catlin said. "That's final."

· She injected the saline solution and noted the wince on the wounded man's face as the needle entered.

"He'll need a nurse in constant attention for at least forty-eight hours," she told Catlin, trying to make her voice sound natural.

"Okay. You're it. A thousand dollars if you pull him through."

"It isn't a question of money. I've patients who cannot be neglected. I must get back if he rallies. I'll send a nurse."

Catlin's lips broke in a sneer.

"You don't leave here until he's out of danger—or dead," he said. "Your meals will be brought in. Behave yourself and we'll get along. Try anything and there'll be two funerals

around here instead of maybe one."

"Do you realize that I'll be missed?" she demanded. "That they will be looking for me if I don't keep my appointments?"

"That'll be attended to," Catlin replied. "Come into the next room."

She followed him into the office. He sat down at a typewriter, stuck a sheet of paper in the machine and wrote, then pulled the sheet out and handed her his fountain pen.

"Sign that," he ordered.

She read the following: Dr. Star-rett will be absent until Thursday.

"I'm sending a man over to tack this on your door," he told her. "That'll cover you and us."

"And if I refuse to sign it?" she asked.

"You won't live to see Thursday," he replied without the slightest trace of rancor.

She shrugged and signed. As she laid the pen on the desk, Petrouski came out of the bedroom.

"He's coming around," he said, "Can you imagine! Salt—just common salt like you put on a sandwich!"

HE BRUSHED him aside and went into the bedroom. Her patient had opened his eyes. She smiled inwardly in spite of her fear. He had hung up a record for rallying from a saline injection. A medical congress would have been interested.

He said weakly, a little too weakly to be convincing: "Well, if it ain't Little Sawbones! Do I get my transfusion?"

"You've had a saline injection,"

she told him, averting her face. "You are to keep quite. I don't want another hemorrhage."

"Who does?" he murmured.

She motioned the two men out of the room and followed them.

"If you want this man to get well, my orders must be followed. He's not to talk, understand? I don't want you two running in and out of the room. I'm going to give him a sedative and put him to sleep."

"All right," said Catlin. "One of us will be here in the office if you need anything." He paused. "All the windows in this flat are bricked up. The only way to get out of here is through this office. I'm telling you, so you won't try anything foolish. Play along with us and you'll find a good game of ball. Get tough and things won't be . . . pleasant."

She went back into the bedroom without a word and closed the door. The injured man followed her with his eyes as she busied herself with her medicine case.

"So I don't get any transfusion?" he said in a low voice.

Without looking up, she replied in an even lower voice: "Why did you have me brought here?"

"You're good for what ails me."

"There's nothing wrong with you, now, that rest and sleep won't restore. There should be, but there isn't—and you know it."

"Disgustingly healthy?" he asked. "Iron constitution and so forth?"

"You haven't answered me. Taking a physician away from his patients is a serious matter." "Her patients!" he corrected. "I'm one of them. I like to have you around where I can watch you. Did nobody ever tell you that you are worth looking at?"

"I'm serious!" she retorted.

"And when you are, your eyes have little flecks of green in them. Then, there's your hair. Every time you move your head I see four distinct shades of gold."

"You played sick just to get me here," she flamed back at him under her breath. "Had me kidnapped."

"You wouldn't have come of your own free will—or would you?"

"Because my practice is in a certain neighborhood is no sign that I'd care to consort with criminals!"

"That's telling me!"

"You came straight to me from a murder—from a horrible crime. You're beastly!" she flung out at him in accusing whisper. "Even if those two men you and your companions killed in the lobby of the hotel were no better than you, it's still murder to shoot them down without a chance to defend themselves—a cowardly and heartless murder."

"They got me," he pointed out.
"They'd have got all of us, sooner or later, if we hadn't got them."

"Charming philosophy!" she retorted. "That makes it all right, I suppose."

"It makes it more pleasant for us," he replied. He lowered his voice until it was a barely audible whisper. "Did you report to the police?" he asked, watching her face.

She decided not to be trapped.

"Why did you leave the bullet on the operating table?" she demanded.

He was looking at the closed office door.

"If I were you I'd forget I found it. My friends, out there, mightn't like it."

"What do you mean? Why did you put it there?" she insisted.

"Did you or did you not report it?" he parried.

"I-I didn't," she lied.

"I see. I thought you had. I'm sorry, then, that I had you brought here."

She looked at him in amazement. "I don't understand. You wanted me to report it?"

"Skip it!" he replied.

"I won't!" she retorted.

"All right. Suppose you had a friend who'd saved your life once, at the risk of his own," he said. "Suppose this friend had been ruthlessly and cowardly murdered . . . what would you do?"

"I-I don't know."

"Yes, you do. You'd try to get the murderer. This friend of mine was a good guy. I swore to get the fellow who burned him. I got him last night."

"I see. One of the two men killed in the lobby of the Castellamare. You're trying to justify a murder?" she said scathingly.

"I'm trying to justify nothing. He was not one of those two men, but I got him—at least I thought I did. Never mind how." He looked at her and sighed. "I had you brought here because I thought you were square

according to your own code, because I thought you had reported it."

"Not very convincing," she retorted bitterly. "You'll have to do better."

"You're the only person who can identify Catlin and Dave Petrouski-"

"And yourself," she interjected.

"And myself," he conceded. "I was afraid you'd report it. That's why I had you brought here—for your own protection. What do you think would happen to you if you had or if they thought you had?"

"I don't know," she replied faintly.

"We won't go into the details," he said, "since you haven't reported it, I'll play up—stage a convincing comeback—a miraculous rally. I'm good at those things, don't you think?"

"Not very," she retorted.

"Well, anyway, they'll take you back home as soon as they know I'm out of danger."

"You must be very important to them," she said.

"Alive, I am. Dead, I'm gunpowder. They'd have to dump me somewhere. In the parlance of my friend, Mr. Catlin, a stiff in the bush is worth two in the attic."

She remained silent with her face averted.

"You're asking a good deal to expect me to believe that you had me brought here to protect me, don't you think?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied simply. "Well, I got off on the wrong foot. Thanks for the buggy-ride."

"I—I did report it," she faltered. He looked at her contemplatively for a long time before he replied, then he said: "Under my pillow is my German Luger. It's unloaded. I fired all the shots last night, but they don't know it. If the worst comes to the worst you can bluff your way out with it, but don't use it except in an extremity. They might call your bluff."

"I'm staying," she replied faintly.

#### CHAPTER 4

#### A Pistol Finds an Owner

his desk at Graham, from the laboratory. Graham had a notation which he laid on the desk. "It's the report of that slug, Lieutenant. I matched the enlargement with every photo we have on file from shootings over a period of five years. No go."

McLee glanced at the notation. He ran his hand through his wiry, dark hair.

"There's something phony about this set-up. Dr. Starrett patches up one of the Catlin mob and they leave a slug behind. Looks like they were trying to frame someone." He frowned. "All right, Graham, that'll be all. Put the slug in the safe and lock it up. I'm holding you personally responsible for it."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

When the men had gone, McLee got his hat off the rack and went down to his car. He drove leisurely through the tenement district and found a parking space a block from Dr. Starrett's office, and walked the rest of the way.

In the hall he was confronted with the note tacked on the doctor's door, stating that she would be absent until Thursday. The house was an old residence of the better class, turned into apartments. He sought out the superintendent, and questioned him.

The man said: "I saw the note there this morning. Dr. Starrett said nothing to me about going away. It must have been unexpected. There were two patients here a while ago. They claimed to have had appointments for this morning."

"Have you a key to her office?" McLee asked, showing his badge.

"Sure."

He went down the hall and opened the door for the lieutenant.

"That'll be all," McLee said. "Keep quiet about my being here. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

As the man shuffled down the hall, McLee closed the door and stood looking about the small consulting room, with his hands behind his back as if to restrain himself forcibly from touching anything before he had taken a good look.

He went into the living quarters and found everything in order except for the supper dishes, still on the small table in the dining nook with the remains of a meal. In the closet of the bedroom he found nothing amiss. Dr. Starrett's dresses and coats hung in an orderly row on hangers. There was no sign of a hurried departure. The lid of the clothes hamper stood open. He peered into it and saw the oilcloth with bloodstains on

it. He drew it out and stood looking at it thoughtfully, then he folded it up and put it under his arm.

Returning to the office, he pawed through the drawers of the desk. In the bottom drawer there was a sheaf of typed letters, ready to mail, each tucked neatly under the flap of its envelope, and signed in Dr. Starrett's slanting hand.

He studied them for a minute, then carried one of them to the door, opened it and compared the signature with the one on the typed note pinned there. The signature was genuine enough, but even the most cursory glance was sufficient to tell him that the note on the door had not been typed on Dr. Starrett's portable. To be absolutely certain, he inserted a sheet of paper and typed a few lines.

He left hurriedly with the oilcloth under his arm.

straight to the laboratory with the oilcloth. "Try this for finger-prints, Mason," he told the man in charge. "Photograph and develop any you find, at once. Have the prints to me in half an hour."

"Shall I call Graham on the stains?"

"No, never mind. We know they're bloodstains. Step on it."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

McLee went back to his office and reached for the telephone.

"Get me the Medical Association, Henrietta," he told the switchboard girl.

"New York Medical Association!"

the reply came back almost at once.

He identified himself.

"The secretary, please."

"Secretary Gordon speaking, Lieutenant McLee."

"I'm calling about Dr. Barbara Starrett," he said, giving her address. "Do you know if she's connected with any hospital?"

"I'll see. Just a moment."

There was a short wait.

"Dr. Starrett operates at the Gorham Hospital, Lieutenant," Secretary Gordon informed him. "Anything wrong? Shall I call them for you?"

"Thanks, no. Nothing wrong. I'll ring them."

He broke the connection and told Henrietta to give him the Gorham Hospital. He was informed, here, that Dr. Starrett had arranged for an appendectomy that afternoon at three o'clock, and that she hadn't called to cancel the operating room, nor informed the patient that she wouldn't be able to perform the operation.

In other words, that Dr. Starrett had not expected to be gone, and that she was probably being held somewhere against her will, and was not even permitted to communicate by telephone with anyone.

Considering what had happened, this seemed the only plausible explanation to McLee.

Mason came in with photographs of the fingerprints he had found on the oilcloth. There were two sets. Those of a man and a woman. The prints were excellent. Clear and distinct.

"Well?" McLee asked.

Mason shook his head negatively. "I checked them, Lieutenant," he said. "Neither are on file with us."

McLee studied them in silence, then said to Mason: "Put the man's prints on the telephoto for FBI at Washington. Ask them to check and to wire me the result immediately. Never mind the woman's prints. I know whose they are."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

The reply was back in less than half an hour. The Bureau of Federal Investigation at Washington sent the reply in code. McLee got out his code book and translated the message, word for word, slowly and laboriously. Not only was the message in code, but the code was scrambled. Washington was taking no chances on this one. As McLee rearranged the words, his dark eyes narrowed to slits. He sat staring at the result, unable to believe his eyes.

Jerking the telephone receiver from its cradle, he barked into it:

"Tell Sergeant Rice to come to my office right away, Henrietta."

"Okay, Lieutenant!"

Sergeant Rice tipped the scales at two hundred and forty-odd. He looked like the average fat man, which he was not. He was an eighth of a ton of avenging Nemesis on the hoof. His happy hunting grounds were places where angels feared to tread, which took in a lot of territory adjacent to both the East and the North rivers.

He came barging through the door without knocking.

"You wanted me, Lieutenant?"

"Yes. Take Logan, Schultz and Conroy and anybody else who is not on detail. Go to the Castellamare in Hester Street and bring in all the members of the Morley mob for questioning. Particularly Ed Morley. Don't come back without Ed. Take it easy. No rough stuff, understand. I want them in the perpendicular. Those are orders!"

The sergeant smiled. "Sure, Lieutenant! I get you."

"You're not to take their guns away from them. Give them a line. Make 'em think it's just a friendly little idea of the chief's."

Sergeant Rice grinned broadly.

"I'll kiss 'em for you, Lieutenant, if you say the word."

"Get going!" McLee snapped. "I'll give you twenty minutes to get back here."

"I'll have them here in fifteen. They're holding a wake over the two yeggs that were rubbed out last night."

three remaining members of the Morley organization sauntered into the lieutenant's office exactly fourteen and a half minutes later, herded by Officers Logan, Schultz and Conroy, with Rice himself bringing up the rear.

McLee looked them over. "How many times," he asked, "do I have to tell you not to use my precinct as a shooting gallery, Morley?"

Mr. Morley's smile was reminiscent of a Cheshire cat lamping a stuffed calico dog. Like the cat, his ears were slightly tufted. His complexion was that of a lump of putty left lying too long in the sun, and his eyes were of so pale a blue that they gave the effect of being almost lidless.

"Lieutenant, we wasn't doin' nothing—just sittin' around the lobby playing checkers when this hearse pulls up and begins to spill lead all over the place."

"Sure it wasn't ping-pong you were playing?" McLee asked.

"Okay, Lieutenant. Ping-pong it was."

McLee regarded him compassionately. "And I thought you were smart, Ed."

"What d'you mean smart? They didn't give us no warning."

"Did you expect Catlin to send you a post-card?"

Morley grinned.

"So it was him? Well, well. Smart work, Lieutenant."

"You didn't know whose hearse it was?" McLee asked softly.

"Sure," said Morley. "It belonged to a guy in Orange, New Jersey."

"Yeah," said McLee. "Let me see your gats."

"We didn't burn nobody. Lieutenant!" Morley protested.

"That's right, so you won't mind showing me your guns."

"We got permits."

"I know. One of the Seven Wonders is how guys like you get 'em. Gimme."

The three men went for their armpits with a sychronism that was almost beautiful, and laid three murderous automatic pistols of recent and

popular make on the desk before the lieutenant.

McLee picked each one up in turn, sniffed it, squinted down each barrel, then pushed all three to the far side of the desk.

"Wot's the idea?" Morley demanded.

"Idea is," said McLee, "that you're being held as material witnesses."

"But we didn't see nobody—only the back of the hearse driving off!" Morley protested.

"Have it your own way!" McLee retorted. "Book them on disturbing the peace, Sergeant."

"Disturbin' the what!" Morley howled.

"All right, shooting holes in the air, then. Chief's orders."

"I want to talk to my mouth piece!" Morley stormed. "You gotter arraign me and give me bail. You can't hold me on no phony charge."

McLee glanced at the door. He shrugged.

"Walk out. Help yourself. There are only five of us holding guns on you. We like shooting gorillas in the back, your own favorite way."

Morley drew a deep breath. "I'll get you for this!" he shouted. "I'll get you!"

Sergeant Rice looked beseechingly at his superior. "May I, Lieutenant?" he asked, looking at his large, red fists.

McLee gave him a warning look. "Lock 'em up!" he snapped.

"You can't do this to me!" Morley screamed. He was in mortal terror—not of the police—but of what would

happen to him in a dark cell, deprived of drugs. He was led off with his two companions, cursing and kicking.

McLee handed the three pistols to Sergeant Rice.

"Take them to Graham of the ballistics department and have him check if the slug I gave him yesterday came from one of them. Check the gun numbers with our records, and report the result to me. Tell Graham to hustle. I can't hold those yeggs more than a few hours, and this is important."

"Okay, Lieutenant." The sergeant went out.

McLee went to a hurried lunch around the corner. He found Sergeant Rice waiting for him in the office when he returned. Rice had the report.

"The slug came from Morley's gat, Lieutenant," said Rice. "Here's Graham's report. The numbers of the guns check."

McLee sat looking at the notation in silence, his lean face inscrutable. Presently he said:

"Get Jersey City on the wire and find out where the Catlin mob's hangout is."

Rice shot his request along to the switchboard girl. She had the Jersey City department on the line in a minute. Rice identified himself, and relayed the lieutenant's request for the gang's address.

"Seven-seventeen Atterbury Place, Hoboken," he told McLee as he hung up.

"All right. Get Logan, Schultz and

Conroy and let's go," said the lieutenant.

#### CHAPTER 5

#### Prescription Fulfilled

HEN DAVE PETROUSKI, the swarthy one, came in to remove the breakfast tray, Barbara said to him: "Tell Mr. Catlin I want to see him, please."

"Okay, sister. He'll be back after a while."

"If I were your sister, I'd do something about it!" she snapped.

The wounded man chuckled.

"That's telling you, Dave!"

"Yeah. You ain't as sick as you make out. When you've been in this racket as long as I have, you'll know better than play around with redheads."

"Observing chap," Bill remarked to Barbara.

"I don't like your pleasantries any better than his," she retorted.

He followed her about the room with his friendly, hazel eyes.

"I'm not going to let you leave," he said.

"But I've got to. I've an appendectomy at the Graham Hospital this afternoon. If I don't show up, they'll start an investigation."

"I'm banking on it that they will," he replied. "You can't leave."

"Do you realize that a human life is at stake?"

He nodded. "Yours," he replied. "That's why you can't leave. They'll get someone else to operate."

"You had me kidnapped!" she said under her breath.

"It was the only way," he replied wearily.

"Nonsense. You'll never make me believe that you had me brought here to protect me. It's ridiculous! I'm sick of this farce. You got me into it. You've got to get me out! You've got to back me up with this man Catlin—tell him that you're all right, now. I've got to get to the hospital."

"I guess it does sound ridiculous," he admitted. "I've been lying awake all night trying to figure out some way to beat them."

"Them? Are you telling me that you're not a member of their gang?"

"I'm telling you nothing—for your own good. I'm merely trying to get over to you that I think you're a swell person. I've tried all night to get it over to you. If you weren't so stubborn . . ."

"I—I think you're horrible! You have me brought here to force your attentions on me, under false pretenses."

"You're dead wrong, Barbara!" he replied in a low voice.

"Don't dare call me Barbara!" she cried. "I won't have it! I was just getting on my feet after months and months of struggling and then you do this to me. Haven't you any decency?"

He was silent for several minutes, then he said: "There's an old saying—it's something about all being fair in love and war."

She whirled upon him. "You dare talk to me about love-you, a crim-

inal!" she cried. "I felt sorry for you at first. I've nothing but loathing for you, now."

She stopped speaking as the door opened. Catlin was standing in the open door, regarding her stonily.

"I've got to get back to the office," she told him. "I've an operation at the Gorham Hospital at three this afternoon."

Catlin said nothing for a full minute, then he stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him. He crossed the floor with a catlike bound and caught her arm.

"You reported it to the cops!" he snapped. "They pulled in Morley," he added over his shoulder to Bill.

The wounded man rose on his elbow.

"Lay off her, sap. Give the cops credit for a little sense. They're putting the heat on Morley to find out who burned his yeggs. He knows better than to squeal."

Catlin let go the girl's arm and thrust his dark face close to hers.

"If I thought . . ." he snarled.

"I've been trying to talk sense into her head all night," said Bill. "Don't go and spoil it. She's a doctor, isn't she? Use your head. A doctor can prescribe the stuff we sell, can't she? We need somebody like that after we move in on Morley. She's in Dutch already for not reporting patching me up."

Barbara stared aghast at the man on the bed. The man she had felt sorry for. Her expression turned to one of utter loathing. Catlin stood glaring at her, eyes narrowed. "If I thought you were on the up and up—" he said.

"Leave her to me," said Bill. "Telephone the Gorham Hospital in Manhattan from a public pay-station so they can't trace the call. Tell them she won't be able to perform the operation—to get another doctor. Tell them that she is on an emergency case, anything you can think of."

"Okay," said Catlin, "but watch out if you've blabbed," he added out of the corner of his mouth to Barbara, as he flung himself from the room.

THEY LISTENED until they heard him run down the stairs. Barbara gave Bill a terrified look. He held up a warning hand. "No time for explanations," he said. "We've got to work fast while Catlin is phoning. Tell Petrouski to come in here. Keep your head and do as I tell you."

"Who-who are you?" she demanded. "You know I reported it."

"Please!" he said hurriedly. "I don't rely on the unloaded gun with both of them in the room. They might call my bluff. Call Dave."

"All right," she faltered.

Petrouski came sauntering in at her call.

"What you want?" he demanded, then stopped short, staring into the bore of Bill's Luger. His hairy hands rose slowly level with his ears.

"You'll find a gun in the holster under his left armpit, Barbara," Bill said. "Get it."

"Why you—you double-crosser!" Petrouski exploded.

"The holster is empty," said Barbara.

"Yeah, my gun is on the desk in the office," Petrouski sneered. "Try and get it. That's the boss coming up the stairs."

"Shut up, yegg. Sit down in that chair. Sit, I said!" Bill ordered.

They heard Catlin inserting his key in the outer door. "Quick, Barbara. Your hypodermic. Give him a shot of morphine—a shot that'll knock him cold," said Bill. His empty gun was trained on Petrouski. "One peep out of you and you get it."

Barbara ran to her medicine case. With trembling hands she mixed a solution of morphine and drew it into the syringe, jabbed the needle into the back of the man's hairy neck and drove the plunger home. He gasped with the pain of it, his opaque eyes bulging from their sockets in terror. A blubbering whimper escaped his heavy lips. It brought Catlin on the run.

He stopped on the threshold as if he'd been shot. Stared at Petrouski in the chair rocking his head in his hands.

"Freeze, yegg!" Bill snapped.

Catlin's right hand went for his gun, but stopped in midair, as he saw the Luger.

"Frisk him, Barbara," said Bill.

Catlin's hands fell to his side. His startled gaze flitted from the muzzle of the Luger to the hypodermic syringe which Barbara was refilling. Petrouski's face told him what had happened—what was about to happen to himself.

As the girl moved toward him, Catlin threw his arms about her, using her as shield against Bill's empty gun. The two struggled for possession of Catlin's weapon in the holster.

Bill tried to get up, but the stab of pain in his shoulder all but blinded him. With supreme effort he pulled himself to his feet and lunged out at Catlin's head with the butt of the Luger, but missed. The man and the girl fell—threshed about on the floor for possession of Catlin's automatic. Through vision blinded with pain, Bill saw Barbara jab the needle of the hypodermic syringe into the gangster's throat and drive the plunger home.

He heard Catlin bellow with rage and pain and reach for his gun holster. Bill threw himself upon him and brought the Luger down on his skull.

The next thing he knew he was being assisted to the bed by Barbara. Catlin was on the floor, and the girl had his pistol in her right hand. With her left she was rearranging her hair.

Petrouski was teetering in his chair, cursing feebly, but insistently, cursing the universe, the stars in their courses, the day he was born. He missed nothing of importance until he subsided, slumped forward out of the chair and slid to the floor, where he lay clawing the rug briefly, then passed out.

Catlin was stirring a little against the wall. He opened his eyes and stared groggily up at the two of them.

Bill took his automatic pistol from Barbara's hand.

"Take it easy, Catlin. You're go-

ing by-by. One move out of you and you get it. That'll be the cops pounding on the door, but you'll be in no condition to welcome them." He nodded to Barbara. "Go open the door, Babs, before Sergeant Rice butts it in."

cLEE CAME barging into the room at the head of the Homicide Squad, fortified by several members of the Jersey City force. He stared from the two motionless forms on the floor, to Bill sitting on the edge of the bed with the empty Luger in his hand.

"You might have given us local boys a chance for a change, Storm," he remarked acidly, as he poked Petrouski with his boot.

"Fat chance," said Bill. "I emptied the gun at Morley and his mob night before last. Shot circles around them. My orders were to bring Morley in alive. These two yeggs are yours with my compliments—my compliments and Dr. Starrett's. She shot them a hideful of morphine. They'll not be able to sing until tomorrow some time, and if you can't make a drug rap stick, there's still this kidnapping. They transported the doctor across the Hudson to New Jersey. That makes it Federal."

"Oh!" said Barbara. "It this New Jersey?" She was looking at Bill. "So you're a G-man, Bill Storm. I should have known it."

McLee looked from one to the other.

"They give me a pain in the neck, too, lady," he said. "All right, Jersey City. Take your hopheads away. They're all yours. I want a word with this Hell-on-Wheels in private."

Then they were gone, McLee said: "When I checked your fingerprints on the oilcloth in Dr. Starrett's office with Washington, I knew why you'd left the slug behind, smart guy, so I got busy and gathered in the Morley mob. Your hunch happened to be right. The slug came from Morley's gun, the same as the slug that burned Pete Norcross." He paused. "I don't know what it is you guys down there have that my boys don't. You are up here to get a killer and you break up two of our worst mobs on the side."

"With medical assistance," said Bill. "It'd have done you good to see Doc Starrett and Catlin on the mat. Swell knee-action, Doctor!"

"Shall I slap him down for you, lady?" McLee asked.

Barbara shook her head.

"I'm having him taken to the Gorham Hospital—for a transfusion."

When McLee had gone into the next room to dial for the ambulance, FBI Operative William Storm said: "Do you ever prescribe kisses for your patients, Dr. Starrett?"

"Under very special conditions," she said. "But first—an explanation."

"This Morley mob burned my buddy, Pete Norcross," he said. "I was sent out to get Ed Morley. I played with the Catlin gang for six months on probation, before I got a break. To test me, Catlin took me along to help him mop up the Morley organization. There was no choice. I had to go along." He paused.

"You've got to believe me that I didn't kill either of those two men in the lobby of the Castellamare. I emptied my gun-had to do it-but I shot wild. I wouldn't kill even a yegg without giving him a chance to surrender. If I did they'd take my badge away from me. Morley winged me. I saw it coming, but my orders were to bring him in alive, so I fired wild on purpose. Morley's slug went through my shoulder and practically spent, slammed against the metal top of the car. It was one of those breaks we pray for and hardly ever get. It must have dropped to the seat of the car. I found it and pocketed it.

"I knew that if it matched the slug we took from old Pete Norcross, I had Morley headed for the chair, but I had to get rid of it—had to get it to the right parties. If it was found in my pocket by Catlin, his mob would have got wise to me. When I came to, I put the slug under the pillow of your operating table while you were looking the other way. It was my only chance."

"A pretty long one," said Barbara.
"You had a lot of faith in a perfect stranger."

"Redheads," he said, "are one thing or the other—either square or crooked as snakes."

"That could be said about brunettes or blondes."

"Okay, sawbones. Give us that kiss or a hemorrhage reaching for it."

"The patient," she murmured, "must be humored, I suppose."

The treatment didn't seem to do him any harm.

We asked John Bender for a brief biographical sketch. He replied: "Originally I wanted to be an artist but about ten years ago I found it a lot easier to sell portraits in print than portraits in paint. I've stuck to the word medium ever since. Besides meeting a far more interesting gallery of sinister folk, I find that typewriter and paper take up far less room than easels, canvases, paint, turpentine, varnish, uncleaned brushes, etc. Smells a lot better, too." We feel that readers of "Untimely Visitor," will be grateful for Author-Artist Bender's professional preference.

# UNTIMELY VISITOR

by JOHN BENDER

WICE, WHILE he sat there waiting in the richly-appointed cabin, the phone rang, but neither time was it Lona calling.

The first inquiry came from the Naysons, the rich, young Hollywood couple down at the other end of the court: could the major make it for cocktails? Which he could not, of course, considering the possibility of Lona's arrival or call. He didn't dare chance going over for the drink, however much he could have used a bracer or two right then.

The second time the telephone summoned him out of the wing chair by the window, he listened to the chilly voice of the resident manager: would the major be good enough to stop over at the office cabin sometime during the following morning the matter of the rent. Probably slipped the major's mind, what?

"Quite," the major said, "quite," more worried now than bored with the wasted evening.

He went back to the wing chair and smoked two cigarettes and, for keeping him waiting, cursed Lona Mainwaring in his recently adopted accent. He stumbled slightly on some of the word formations, particularly when the dropped g of current English fashion interfered with the more prevalent Anglo-Saxon terms he employed. But on the whole it was a satisfactory performance for a man who had been no closer to the land of his purported birth than his imagination took him.

Why hadn't she called, at least? Usually, she was punctual. Like most women who engage in infidelity, the major knew, she had learned she damned well better be if she expected to enjoy the privileges of one life and the favors of another.

But more important to the major, Lona Mainwaring was wealthy. And he had counted on the money.

It was not much, he thought, and this annoyed him further. For a woman of Lona's means, his month's rent of three hundred dollars was nothing. She had told him last week -quite airily, he recalled-not to worry about it, and he had proceeded not to, after a suitable, admirably managed suggestion that he would repay the-ah-loan, you know, directly his next bank draft reached him. He did not, of course, intimate that he had not the least idea of which draft or what bank. Instead. he had dismissed finances from his mind and from Lona's with another admirably managed but by no means reserved suggestion . . .

The major rose, crushed a cigarette in the tray and paced the luxuriously carpeted cabin. He was a tall man, not thin but finely made, and his attraction to women—of which he was not the least bit unaware—lay in the smoothly silken movements of his well-tended body, the excellent head and shoulder carriage. He could well have been the former English officer he claimed.

Perhaps he had been too careful, too glib in his technique. Perhaps she thought he did not really need the money, though she had advanced him enough. No, he had dropped the hint too often. Lona was not stupid. She was a bored and lovely young matron, but she was not stupid.

It was impossible for him to think that her interest in him had ceased. In that respect, he was not stupid.

Her husband? Had that unfortunate lost interest in his moneymaking long enough to assume the stature of a husband and exert a closer scrutiny on Lona's time and interest? The major hardly thought so. He and Lona had been more than discreet. Their first meeting in the cocktail lounge in town, where Lona waited while George Mainwaring busied himself at a board meeting of his bank, had been the only public association. From that first time. Lona had come here, to the cabin court which she had herself suggested the major take, and both would swear that not a soul knew of their clandestine meetings.

Damn, the major thought, why doesn't she call?

He poked at the logs burning in the fireplace, consoling himself with the thought that she was on her way over here even now, that she had decided to come after all. He imagined the brushing, finger-tip tap on the door, his quickly opening up and her sweeping entrance, the gown a silver flame caressing her lovely body, her dark eyes radiant with excitement. Beneath the mink cloak, her shoulders would be bare, her throat a velvet-smooth column for that exquisite head; and her lips would caress his

name briefly before he found them with his own . . .

He felt warmer, for which he thanked not the fire but his own imagination, and for a little while the glow persisted. But, finally, the room remaining still and empty, his annoyance reimposed itself. He stood above the phone, coiling and uncoiling the wire about his fine hands.

Abruptly he decided; he dialed and waited.

"Mainwaring residence," a woman said.

His keen ear detected the unnatural voice. "Mrs. Mainwaring, please," he told the maid.

"I'm sorry, sir, but she is not receiving any calls. Whom shall I say called?"

"Never mind, thank you."

So she was home!

Something was wrong. He felt it with the instinctiveness that had kept him alive professionally for these many years in a career where intuition counted for more than daring. Carefully he put down the phone, his face tight, his head canted to one side. He considered Lona Mainwaring for some moments. She had been a more than pleasant interlude. Fire, cruelty, selfish strength-a girl to stir a man's blood. A companion he might wish to meet under other circumstances. But the circumstances were not that flexible. They were what he had planned them to be, and his critical mind told him that the sooner he got on with this business the better.

With just the faintest trace of

regret, he said aloud, "Good-by, my dear. Good-by."

he mounted the long flight of stone steps that led to the stately, baronial estate on the city's edge. Going through the formal garden, past the pool, the major tapped the pinseal wallet that bulged his jacket slightly and hoped it did not mar the appearance of an otherwise impeccable cut. He did not carry letters; the collection of papers in his wallet were scrawled notes mostly, and of sufficient legibility to prove their authorship.

Lona Mainwaring, he had observed, was not stupid, and it had taken quite a variety of ingenious suggestions on the major's part to get her to write them. Several notes to tradespeople—directions to leave milk or eggs or butter, instructions to have the major's shirts starched so, his coat sleeves pressed without creases. Lona had suspected nothing when he had asked her to write these notes for him, at one time or another, and probably did not even now suspect their exceptional suggestiveness.

As a blackmailer the major had no affection for letters, with their sometimes incoherent text—though he had one charmingly naive gift note which he had not solicited in the least; it had come with the gold ring Lona had given him and which he wore now. The type of notes he carried, he had learned, effectively suggested not a mere dalliance to a suddenly enlightened husband but a more thor-

ough relationship. A tender love-nest in which the errant lady had concerned herself with the most minute details . . .

He had no qualms about revealing Lona's other life, nor about the price which would buy his evidence and silence. Five thousand seemed a fair enough sum, to keep the notes out of the hands of several unscrupulous gossip columnists who could do a masterful job of persuasion with this kind of evidence.

Yes, the major thought, pushing the doorbell, five thousand would not bother George Mainwaring too greatly.

"Yes," said the man who opened the door.

The major blinked. "Mr. Mainwaring?" he asked with some surprise. He had expected the maid, or possibly a footman.

"I've dismissed the servants," George Mainwaring said, sensing the hesitancy. He was a tall man in a faded smoking jacket, and old, much older than the major had imagined. The vitality of the man had been sapped beyond belief; his face was gray, lined and weary. He looked almost ill. No wonder Lona had gambled in other fields!

"I've come to see you about your wife."

"Yes, of course." The door swung wide, admitting him. "Come in, sir."

They went through the long hall, past the winding staircase to a main living room, where the older man indicated a chair. From a massive, carved sideboard he produced a de-

canter of brandy, measured drinks for them both, offered the glass.

"Now," Mainwaring said, his face showing the effect of the liquor. "Now, sir!" He nodded at an open door off to one side which led apparently to a library or den. "Lona is in the other room. Shall I—"

'There's no need to call her." The major smiled. "My—ah—business is with you. Perhaps I should acquaint you with myself," he began, warming to his introductory speech. "I am Major—" He broke off at the look in the other's eyes, the sudden leaping life in them.

"The major!" Mainwaring said. He raised his voice. "Lona, Lona, darling! The major's here! He's come to see you!"

Clutching the major's sleeve he said, "This is a surprise, sir! A most welcome surprise! Come, we must join Lona, by all means!"

Not quite persuaded by this sudden welcome, the major nonetheless allowed himself to be led into the smaller room. He looked for Lona, but did not see her—not at first, at any rate. Not until after a startled moment, when he looked down—

"My Lord!"

She was lying on the rug, her hands claw-like, already constricted, an ugly stain below her chest . . .

"A surprise indeed, sir!" Mainwaring croaked. "I thought you were the police, in answer to my call. But you're not, are you? You're the major. Her major!"

And he brought up the gun. "Goodbye, sir!"

Ever since the first story-teller held his listeners enthralled by some ancient campfire, storms and man-made violence have gone together. Few narrators, however, have pictured more vividly the devastating effects of the elements than Robert Arthur has in his description of a hurricane on the Connecticut coast. A skillful setter of moods, he knows how to use the grim atmosphere of a storm to enhance the power of a murder tale. We believe you won't soon forget the dramatic outcome of this story of a man who sought his inheritance in a hurricane.

# ILL WIND

# by ROBERT ARTHUR

THE BAROMETER had been dropping all night. Gray, sullen weather with rain falling in cupfuls, and a Sound that heaved and surged restlessly had marked the day before. During the night the rain had steadied into a drizzle, and with the coming of dawn the Sound had begun to rise.

Joel Brackett, having lived all his life there within fifty yards of those waters that were creeping up on him, slowly and stealthily like a great beast approaching its prey, knew that something big was coming.

He went out shortly after noon with the old spyglass to scan the Sound from the shelter of Breakwater Rock. Ordinarily a dozen feet of cold gray granite, Breakwater Rock was now just a thumb of stone with graygreen water boiling about its base.

A wind had come with daybreak. It pushed at Joel's tall, thin frame with a steady persistence, like the palm of a determined ghost pressed against his chest. He leaned at an angle to breast it until he reached shelter. There, with the broad bulk of the rock to fend off its insistent power, he used the old twenty-power glass to scan the Sound south to the Long Island shore, then east, then west.

There was no shipping in sight. The storm warnings were up from Maine to Hatteras, and already the hurricane pennants south of the Connecticut coast were ripping themselves to pieces in the teeth of the storm

whose violence they had just foretold. But everything so far had just been

a rehearsal.

Now Joel Brackett saw the real rain coming, like a silver curtain shuttling down on a tragedy. It swept across the Sound from Long Island on the wings of the hurricane, as if Death himself were unfolding a gray sable cloak over the low Connecticut shore, and beneath the violence of the wind and the rain together the Sound lay flattened.

The drama of destruction that was to come had had a sufficient overture. The show itself was beginning.

Joel hurried back to his low-lying house, built of the same granite that composed the island itself. Standing in a slight hollow, fringed by pines, it was secure against any storm that could come. But, the thought came to him, maybe Cousin George's ancient timber residence at the other end of the island might not be.

Safely inside his bachelor establishment again, Joel turned his glass on the neighboring Thimble Islands, the picturesque little group of rocky islets ranging in size from a few square yards to a dozen acres that stand just off the Connecticut coast at Stony Creck, not far from New Haven.

Joel's own island—his half island, rather, for the western half belonged to his cousin George, with whom he had not exchanged a word in nine years and three months now—was the outermost of the lot. So Joel could, with his glass, view most of the others from his window, as well

as the gray shore of the mainland.

On Governor's Island he saw a cottage going to pieces. A corner of the roof pulled loose and whisked away in a flight of shingles. A wall followed. Then, like a card house collapsing, the whole thing went.

"She's a buster!" Joel muttered. "She's a buster! Mighty lucky it's September and all them summer people gone home. Otherwise they'd be blowed right out among the oysters."

Joel sucked in his breath and turned the glass to the shore, to the old hotel that Cousin George had bought and renovated profitably for the summer visitor trade. It was on an exposed point, and the wind was gleefully pushing at its hundred-year-old sides.

Joel could see the windows give. Then, as the gale got inside, the west end ripped out, and half of the old three-story structure crashed in upon itself.

Then a wave licked up over the breakwater and sent spume flying along the porch of the hotel itself, and Joel Brackett's eyes sparkled.

"Glory be!" he muttered. "I wonder. Now I wonder."

Hastily he moved to another window and readjusted the focus of the old marine glass. Now he was scanning a more distant section of beach—a sandy shore, reclaimed from marshland, where the angry water was already boiling around a score of newly built summer cottages.

Like a wall of moving force, a fivefoot wave came in from the sound and rushed across the beach, and the twenty new cottages gave before it, spinning and tumbling like dolls' houses, crunching and grinding each other into matchwood. When the wave had passed, even the sandy beach had gone.

"Hallelujah!" Joel Brackett exclaimed. "There goes a hundredthousand dollars of Cousin George's money!"

And then the rain came. The curtain fell, cutting off his vision. He became only an isolated atom in the great chaos.

With the rain came the real wind. A sixty-mile gale, Joel guessed. Then seventy. And still increasing!

In his ears was the high shrill whine of the hurricane, a terrifying noise that even one who has never heard it before cannot mistake. And in his long lank frame was a trembling excitement. It was years since a wind like this had smote the Connecticut coast, like the legions of the Lord smiting the evildoer. And this one was the daddy of them all.

The rain lashed at the windows. The sea roared and bellowed and tried to climb upon the island. It surged upward, each surge bringing it higher, until it began to spill over. And then Joel Brackett heard his Cousin George's house begin to go to pieces.

more exposed than Joel's place; a wooden structure, solidly timbered and bolted and mortised. But now it had reached the end of its time.

From his window Joel saw the

ancient slate of George's roof take flight, like a flock of startled blackbirds. Then, when the wind got its greedy fingers inside the unroofed house, it went to work in earnest.

It pried at the walls. It sucked at the doors. It shook the whole structure down to its foundations, so that it loosened gradually, a nail pulling out here, a beam working out there, a wall pushing from its foundation in yet another place.

"Hallelujah!" Joel grinned. "There goes another ten thousand of George's money. Old George is sure pasty in the face this minute. He's mighty near wiped out, and the will is due to be settled next June. It's an ill wind, a mighty ill wind, that doesn't blow somebody good."

Gloatingly he watched the house go, bit by bit, waiting for the final collapse. As he watched and waited, he turned on the radio to hear frenzied accounts of damage elsewhere.

Voices hoarse with excitement came through the loudspeaker, cutting across the hurricane's roar. Twelve were dead in Providence. . . . There was water in the streets of New London, and vessels had been washed up onto the main highway. A score dead ... Telephone wires were down. Trees lay across every main highway to Boston and New York. . . . . A small yacht had been washed up on a railway trestle. . . . An entire summer colony on Long Island had been washed away by the waves. . . . A man in New London, seeing all his property swept away in the terrible havoc of the storm, had hanged himself in his attic from despair and terror. . . .

Joel snapped off the radio. He was interested only in damage that cost George money. Because if George lost, he, Joel, would gain. Under the terms of their uncle's will, he would gain plenty.

The will was that of the third Brackett brother, the rich one who had never married. He had been the cynical one, and he had liked neither of his grasping New England brothers and neither of their sons: Joel skinny and tight-fisted and hypocritically pious, and George, plump and pasty-faced, timid, and lazy.

A strange man, Medoc Brackett, and he had left his money strangely, five-hundred-thousand dollars of it. To Joel and George, his only living relatives, had gone a hundred thousand dollars each, outright. The rest was left in trust for ten years, and was to go then to the one who had increased his original legacy the most in that time.

It was his purpose, said Medoc's will, to shake Joel out of his tight-fisted caution and George out of his timid laziness, making them alter for the better in their efforts to add to the money left them.

But more likely, folks who knew him whispered, he was having a dark and hellish joke with these two he had disliked. He'd wanted to ruin them both forever, making them mean and grasping and filled with hate for each other in their fear of being cheated out of so much money. He'd planned to stand by in spirit and shake with ghostly laughter as cautious Joel longed to cut George's throat and didn't dare; and timid George prayed to be rid of Joel, and couldn't be.

But if that was really his purpose, he'd only half succeeded. Joel had been content to put his legacy into Government bonds, meanwhile waiting with hate in his heart for George to make a fool of himself and lose his whole stake.

But George hadn't. Lose a lot of it he had, at first, but lately, through sheer hard work, he had been making good. He had bought the summer hotel, started a summer cottage development, and interested a summer theater in starting up, to bring visitors to the region. And he had been making money. Lots of it. He had doubled his stake, and when June of this year came, he would be sure to get the rest of Uncle Medoc's estate.

For that Joel hated him. Hated him grimly, bitterly, with all the fierceness of his twisted nature. A day seldom passed that didn't find him wishing for George to die, willing him to get sick, or have an accident, or something that would remove him from the field.

Now he didn't have to die. Now the storm had swept away his efforts. A hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars damage had been done to Cousin George before Joel's very eyes. That was enough to sink him.

Joel slapped his thigh exultantly, then stopped short. George might die in the storm. Then, as his only relative, Joel would inherit what he had left, plus Uncle Medoc's estate. But that thought was quickly squelched. Even as he watched, the side door of George Brackett's tottering house slammed open and the pudgy figure of George himself popped out as if shot from a howitzer.

The wind caught him and bowled him over instantly, dousing him with flying spray whipped off the top of the Sound. But the little man got his arms around a trunk of a tree and pulled himself into the shelter of a four-foot stone wall that ran from his house across the island to Joel's. The lee of the wall gave him protection from the wind, and like a frightened animal he scrambled along on hands and knees, past his own stone boat storage shed, which still stood, and down the slope toward Joel's back door.

A fault in the rock let him crawl from the wall to the door, and a moment later he was hammering frantically for admission.

He was almost sorry something hadn't happened to George—somethat couldn't possibly be blamed on Joel. But that wasn't necessary. George couldn't do him out of that waiting three-hundred-thousand dollars now.

When he opened the door, George fell forward on his face on the kitchen floor and lay there, panting frightenedly, his friendly blue eyes almost popping out of his face.

The door sucked shut with a slam that shook the wall. Joel looked down on his cousin and spoke the first words that had passed between them, in the enmity Uncle Medoc's will had caused, in almost a decade.

"Well," he said, grinning so that his yellow teeth showed, "I reckon you won't be living on this island with me much longer, George. Unless you live in a tent."

George was too frightened for animosity now.

"Oh, my Lord!" he groaned. "The hotel is gone. The cottages are gone. I could see them go. All my work gone. All my investment washed away. Who'd ever dream it, Joel? Who'd ever dream of a storm like this?"

"Dunno," Joel said maliciously, "but we got it. Radio says the wind is hitting a hundred miles an hour at times. That's enough to blow you right up off the ground and into the bay, George."

George wiped the rain and salt spray from his face. "Yes," he gasped. "Yes, I guess you're right. Thank heaven I've got insurance, though. I won't lose much by this."

Joel stared at him.

Insurance! George wouldn't lose much. Then in June he'd have increased his assets the most anyway. He'd be awarded the three hundred thousand left from Uncle Medoc's estate!

Joel's eyes were terrible. A glance through the window told him that even as they'd been talking, George's house had gone. Where it had been was just a crumpled mass of lumber, like driftwood piled high on the beach. Why hadn't George gone with it? Why hadn't he died?

Like that it came to him. Like that the resolution to do murder, and the knowledge of how he would do it. For as if a voice were whispering in his ear, as if a devil in the storm were saying them to him, the words he had heard ten minutes before on the radio came back to him.

A man in New London, seeing all his property swept away in the terrible havoc of the storm, had hanged himself in his attic in despair and terror.

A man in New London had hanged himself.

If the storm could drive one man to kill himself in fear, it could drive another. It could drive a chickenheaded, rabbity little man like George Brackett to suicide, certainly.

George was going to hang himself in his own boatshed.

Like that it came to Joel Brackett. As if the will to murder had been hiding all these years in his shriveled heart, and now in the storm, with everything made safe and easy, had shown itself.

George was going to commit suicide by hanging himself. No one would ever point a finger of suspicion at his cousin. There were other ways he could have done the thing, but this one was sure. Besides, hadn't another man in New London done it?

Already Joel knew how he would arrange it. But it would have to be now, before the storm grew stronger.

"George!" he yelled in his cousin's ear, for the howl of the wind and the

groaning of the trees outside made conversation difficult. "George, you stay here. I'm going out to look things over. Going to see if it'd be safe to take a boat to the main land."

George didn't even glance up. The excuse didn't matter. He was too stunned to think. Joel didn't throw him a backward glance as he hurried into the kitchen, forced open the back door, and let himself outside.

Using the same protection George had, the stone wall, he gained the boatshed in five minutes of cautious scrambling.

The boatshed was built in a little hollow that led down to the shore on the landward side. Iron rails ran down to the beach and into the water from inside, and on these a cart ran for launching or beaching boats. The walls of the shed were stone, save for the big wooden door on the protected side, through which the boats were drawn.

At the windward end of the boatshed was a small door, but the hurricane beat on it with such force that Joel would have been hurled against it and crushed had he risen and tried to reach it. Instead, keeping on hands and knees, he crawled along the walls of the shed below the main force of the wind until he gained the sheltered end, where he dared stand upright.

Even here, though the wind did not reach him, the vacuum of its passage plucked at him and almost pulled him headlong into the bay. But he recovered himself, and a moment later had let himself inside the stone shed through the small door set into the large boat doors on the lee side.

The interior was empty, save for the cart on which the boats were cradled for launching or beaching, some old oars, and some lengths of anchor rope. And that was what Joel was looking for. Rope.

Joel heard the wind batter against the small door at the other end of the shed. It was chilly and dark in here, and the scream of the gale was frightening. But the door held; the stone shed was stout and would not give to the wind, and he fixed his mind on what he had to do.

First he would string up a suitable noose in a rope, and get it adjusted to the right height. He would take his time, and make no slips such as he had read about in books—like making a fancy knot George wouldn't know how to tie. He'd get everything just right. Then he'd crawl back to the house, tell George something about the house not being safe any longer, and get him to come back to the shed.

After that—well, there might be a little struggle. But George was small and paunchy, and Joel was lean and sinewy. There wouldn't be much of a struggle.

old but sound length of anchor rope. He fastened one end to a ringbolt in the wall beside the small door at the high end of the boatshed and threw the other end over a rafter ten feet from the rock floor.

Then in the free end he made a noose, a simple slip noose. When he had finished he found his noose was a little high for a small man like George, but he could easily adjust the length at the ringbolt. He would, he figured, make it a bit too long. Then it would be easy to grab George from behind, force the fat little fool's head through the noose, draw it tight around his neck, and haul him up to just the right height to look as if he had stepped off the old chair in the corner. He was going to lay that on its side under George's dangling body.

For a moment Joel was sorry he hadn't brought George with him and done the thing now, saving himself a trip between shed and house. But it was better as he had planned it. It gave him a chance to test the rope and the noose, make sure there wasn't going to be any slip.

To test the rope, he swung from it by his hands. It held. To test the noose, he cold-bloodedly put it around his own neck and drew it moderately tight. The rope was just long enough to be almost taut as he stood there flatfootedly on the safe, solid rock.

"So this is how it feels to have a rope around your neck," Joel muttered aloud. "It sort of rasps. But George won't mind. Not for long, anyway."

Everything was ready; everything was neat and trim. Now he'd go get George and finish off the little ninny once and for all, putting an end to all this business about who would get Uncle Medoc's money. People liked George and detested him, did they? Well, not any more they wouldn't. Not after this storm.

"Yes, sir," Joel Brackett murmured,

"it's an ill wind that don't blow somebody—"

As if answering him, the wind outside rose to a scream higher than anything it had hit before. Then, with a snap like a pistol shot, the lock of the closed door in the end of the boatshed nearest him broke, and the door flung wildly back on its hinges.

And then the wind that had been outside, seeking admittance, rushed in.

With a whoop and a yell it rolled in, like a solid river of force. Tunneled between the rock walls of the boatshed, it slammed against the big wooden doors at the other end and tore them out with a scream. Gleefully it sent them out into the bay.

Coming in at one end of the shed, it swept out the other, and took every loose thing. The hurricane was blowing a hundred miles an hour, and the interior of the shed was like the inside of a wind tunnel.

When the door smashed open and the first breath of wind hit him, Joel Brackett hurriedly snatched at the noose he had been about to take from around his neck.

"Dag nab!" he swore. "Dag—"
The words ceased. They had been choked off by the rope. The invisible force of the hurricane had hit him like

a Gargantuan fist, jerking his feet out from under him, snapping the noose tight around his neck. . . .

It was a Coast Guard lieutenant who found him, some time after the storm had quieted. George, safe and sound in the stout stone house, told him the story of Joel's disappearance, and they found Joel there in the boatshed, hanging from the rafter with his feet on rock and his knees bent.

"I'll be damned," the Coast Guardsman said. "I never saw a man hanged before with his feet fast on the ground!"

Then, being a local man and knowing of the conditions of old Medoc Brackett's will, he added: "He killed himself, I guess, out of sheer terror, though I don't know just how. A man in New London did the same thing when the storm started. But however he did it, it works out well for you, doesn't it? You're his heir, as only living relative, and what he has put away in Government bonds will make you a nice jackpot, I guess."

He paused, and then added as though he could not help it: "Well, as they say, it's an ill wind that doesn't blow somebody some good."

But Joel Brackett, dangling there, couldn't hear him.

# LEARN AND LET LIVE

By Harold Helfer

For speeding on a motorcycle, a man was sentenced to a term in a St. Louis hospital. The judge thought it would be a good object lesson for him to spend five days as a fracture ward attendant. John Blake tells us: "For perennial duffers like myself the game of golf remains more of a mystery than any of the whodunits compressed between book covers. The number of times I go out with bag and ball does not seem to produce any directly proportional success. Rather the reverse is true: the more I play, the worse I fare. Munching on my sour grapes, I conclude that if I can't shoot in the low 80's on the real course, I can at least make my shots in fiction pay off." As witness the ballistic content of . . .

# SANDTRAP

# by JOHN BLAKE

he was a big man and he moved awfully slow. Like all cops do. They sit on their chairs all week, and on Saturdays they come out and play golf, and complain about what tough jobs they got. And they use more clubs than a pro. They don't give a damn what we caddies have to lug around for them.

It was only the fourteenth hole, and already it was going on seven o'clock. I was sore because I knew Joe would be sore. My brother Joe generally got to the club around seven on Saturdays, so he could pick me up and ride me home. He didn't like to sit around, waiting. Said it was a waste of time. And he'd wasted plenty of time. Four years in the state pen had made him queer about time.

Reardon asked me for a driver, and his nose into Joe's business every copyright 1942 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Green's Fee-In Lead!"

I gave it to him. He moved his big beefy shoulders around some, and teed off. It wasn't a bad shot, but I could have done a hell of a lot better.

Pop Farrell, who was playing the round with him, took off his cap and rubbed his shiny bald head. "Pretty good, Jim. It looks like a good lie from here. You should be in in four."

Then he teed off with one that almost split the pin.

We started walking. Reardon handed me back his club. I followed him toward his ball. He hadn't done much talking, except to Pop Farrell. I guess he was uncomfortable with me around. Because maybe he figured I'd slug him in the fat head with a club if I got the chance. He was the cop who had sent Joe up to prison, four years back. And, these days, he stuck his nose into Joe's business every under the title: "Green's Fee—In Lead!"

chance he got. Said it was to keep Joe straight on the probation business.

When we got to his ball, Reardon looked at me. "How would you play this one, Jerry?" he said to me grinning.

I didn't try to hide my feelings. "Mr. Farrell says we caddies are not supposed to try to advise the players," I said.

Reardon lost some of his smile. "Look, Jerry," he said, "do you always have to follow me around like a dark cloud? Why can't you forget that little bit of trouble? It's all done and over with. Why can't we be friends?"

"Go to hell," I said under my breath. But I think he heard me. He shrugged and took a mashie from the bag. I walked away and stood still, like Pop Farrell tells us to do when a man is about to address his shot.

It was a nice pitch to the green he made. A honey of a shot. I was grinning when he turned to me. He grinned too.

"Pop Farrell tells me you're pretty good with the clubs for a youngster. Why not play around with me sometime, Jerry?"

"Cut it, copper," I said. "I pick my company."

"Okay, Jerry," he said. "Okay."
He didn't say anything more to me
the rest of the way around. When I
gave him his clubs at the locker room,
he handed me a buck. I didn't say
thanks. It was cheap for being his
caddy.

It was eight o'clock and already

the band was playing in the dining-room-dancehall inside the club. I walked along the terrace, smelling the sweet clean grass. I was darn glad to be rid of Reardon's heavy bag, and darn glad that this was Saturday. Tonight Pop Farrell, who owned the combination sports club and night club, paid me my ten dollar salary.

I looked across the parking space to see if I could spot Joe, but he wasn't around. The only people on the lawns were the rich kids, in tuxedos and evening gowns, walking and talking, or smoking. Pop Farrell did a good business with his club, and more than once I'd heard him say these kids spent real dough.

WENT INTO the office. It was empty, and I guessed Pop was still down in the locker rooms, washing up. I looked out the window toward the front lawn, trying to see Joe, but he wasn't there either. So I strolled around the big office, looking at the guns hanging on the wall. Pop Farrell had a big collection of them, all kinds, and a story to go with every one of them. On rainy days when I wasn't out on the course. I'd come into the office here and Pop would tell me stories about golfers, or about his gun collection. There were guns from every place in the world, and they all were in working condition. No matter how old they were, Pop could always fix them up.

Outside in the hall, I heard voices. One of them sounded like Joe's, so I opened the door. My brother was standing there, looking up at Jim Reardon's beefy face. Joe was mad, I could see that right off. He was almost yelling.

"Why the hell can't you leave me alone! I'd still have my job if it wasn't for you sticking your damn nose into my business. I'll bet it was you who told my boss to let me go."

"You're wrong Joe," Reardon said. "I went down to see Jensen the other day because he said you were going to be let out. I tried to talk him into keeping you, but he said there just wasn't any work. Be sensible, Joe."

"I am being sensible," Joe roared.
"I'm getting out of this damn burg.
You've been on my neck for years,
and you've got everybody lined up
against me. I can't get a job—"

"But you can get liquor, can't you, Joe?" Reardon said. "I could take you in for that. Who sold it to you?"

Joe looked at him, silent for a moment. "Nobody," he said.

Reardon looked down the empty hallway. "Why don't you go home and get some sleep, Joe? Tomorrow I'll see what I can do for you."

"Never mind," Joe said. "I'll look out for myself."

He saw me then and called, "Jerry! Where the hell have you been? Go on out to the car." Joe was plenty worried, I could see. There was sweat on his face.

"I gotta get paid yet," I said. I watched Reardon head into the dining room, after he looked back once at my brother Joe.

"I'll get your pay," Joe said. "I got to see Farrell."

"Waiting to see me, Joe?" Pop Far-

rell came in from the front. "What was all the commotion here, boys?"

"I'll tell you all about it," Joe said to him. He looked at Farrell funny like; then he turned to me again. "Scram down to the car, kid."

I didn't like being ordered around. I was almost fourteen, and I could think for myself. "Don't blow your top, Joe. Take it easy."

He grabbed my arm and shoved me toward the door. "Git!"

I got. Joe was plenty mad, and I didn't feel like getting a clout in the skull. I went outside, got my one golf club—a mashie niblick—from the locker room, then went looking for my brother's second-hand jalopy.

Every few feet along the terrace, I stopped to take a few practice swings. I'd have to put in more time on my stroking if I wanted to be a good golfer, like Pop Farrell said I would be. Someday I'd be the best damn golfer in the world. Jerry Maxon, the youngest winner of the National Open. I wondered if they would let me in the Open at my age. I decided I'd ask Pop Farrell about it the next day.

I found our bus—you couldn't miss it among the nice-looking heaps outside the club. The roof was down and I put it up. It looked like rain and I didn't want to get wet going home. It took about five minutes to fix the top in place. After that I got fidgety. Joe should have been coming.

I waited almost ten minutes more before he came out. He was walking fast, and he had his hand in his pocket. He kept looking back, as if he expected someone to come after him.

Then all of a sudden I heard someone yelling. I couldn't make out what it was, but Joe sort of jumped. He started running. Then Reardon came out of the club.

He raised his arm and yelled something at Joe. I thought Reardon was only pointing—until I saw the gun in his hand.

I don't know how I knew, but I knew. I yelled, "Joe! Look out!" and I scrambled out of the car and started running. I wasn't anywhere near him when I heard Reardon yell, "Stop, Joe!"

harder. Then I heard a couple of shots, and Joe sort of bucked in the air. His legs crumpled under him; he pitched to the ground, hard. He rolled a little bit on the grass. Then he didn't move.

I ran like I never ran before until I got to Joe. He was lying all curled up on the grass, and the back of his head . . . There was an awful lot of blood. I kept shaking him, but he didn't answer me. I saw money in his hand—a lot of it, big bills. When I shook him some more, some of it scattered and fell in the blood.

I don't know what happened right after that. I mean, I know, but it's all confused in my head, like a bad dream. I jumped at Reardon, screaming that I was going to kill him. I still had the golf club in my hand, and I laid into his hulk.

I hit him a couple of times in his big gut, then swung one at his beefy

face. He was only one size smaller than a mountain, and he didn't have much trouble grabbing the club and taking it away from me. He said he'd clout me with the gun if I didn't cut it out.

I cut it out. I sat down beside Joe, crying like a baby. I didn't give a damn if all the people saw me crying. Joe was dead—the only brother, the only people I'd had since Mom died last year. Joe had been good to me, in his way—made sure I went to school and got the education he hadn't got, got me the job at the club as a caddy. It was going to be tough without him.

When they covered him with the canvas, I cried some more.

Finally Reardon said I should go with him. I didn't know where that was, and I didn't want to go. But Pop Farrell said I ought to, so I went. We rode in Pop's car; he drove Reardon and me and a cop to the police station. All the way down there, Reardon kept looking, funny like, out the window. I could have sworn he was talking to himself.

At the station we all went into a big room in back. There cops right away started asking me questions about Joe: about where he spent his nights, who his friends were.

I didn't want to do any talking. I didn't feel like it.

Reardon said to one of the cops, "It's simple enough. Joe Maxon decided that going straight was too tough. He thought he could heist some easy dough from Pop Farrell here."

Pop looked at me, then shook his

head slowly. "It's hard to believe of Joe, but that's how it was. He talked with me for a little while, then he drew a gun and demanded I empty the safe."

"Pop called me, just after Joe left," Reardon said. "I called for Joe to stop, and he didn't."

"Big brave cop," I said. "You had to shoot him in the back. You couldn't run after him. You had to shoot—"

"Shut up, Jerry," one of the cops said to me.

Reardon shrugged his big shoulders, looked at Pop Farrell, then went over and got a drink from the water cooler. I kept my eyes on my shoes. I wondered if they'd let me go home, only now I didn't have a home. Joe paid for the furnished room where we lived. Now that Joe was gone. . . .

"Think the youngster's clean?"

It was Harris, the police captain. I went to school with Roger Harris, his son. We were pals, I thought. But here was his old man, calling me and Joe crooks.

"I didn't do anything," I said. "And Joe wasn't no crook."

Pop Farrell said, "I doubt if the boy knows anything. He's always been all right."

"We should question him," Captain Harris said.

"I think we ought to let him go," Reardon said.

I spat at him. "Keep your favors to yourself, copper."

"Now, Jerry," Pop Farrell said.

Reardon came over to me. He seemed awfully tired; his big face was

slack. He leaned on the table next to me.

"You've got to believe me, kid," he said. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to—I mean, I aimed over his head, Jerry, the way we always do. But somehow—" He took the gun out of his pocket, looked at it. "This isn't my gun, Jerry. Farrell gave me this Luger and I wasn't used to it. It's like a golf club, Jerry. You got to get used to a gun."

"Shut up!" I yelled at him. "You killed him! You killed him! You dirty rat! You—"

I buried my head in my arms. I couldn't help crying, but I wasn't going to let him see me do it. Pop Farrell put his arm around me, trying to cheer me up, but it was no good.

Finally, I looked up. Reardon was across the room again, at the water cooler. And then I saw it on the table. The gun!

Nobody was watching me close, except Reardon, and when I grabbed for the gun, he yelled: "Watch him! Get him!"

He started across the room. I aimed the gun at his gut because once I'd heard Joe say that's where it hurts the most. I pulled the trigger more than once, I think. I don't know for sure.

One of the cops clouted me on the head and things went spinning. . . .

HEN I came to I was on my back on the floor. At first I thought I'd be in a cell, or maybe ready for the electric chair. But the first voice I heard was Reardon's.

I opened my eyes and sat up. Reardon and Pop Farrell were over in the far corner of the room, near the water cooler. The big detective was standing over Pop.

"Come on, Farrell," Reardon said. "Give it to me straight or I'll wipe the floor with you again!"

"No!" Pop screamed. "You can't do that. Let me go!"

Reardon knocked him out of the chair. He picked him up and started slapping him across the room. "Why did you kill him?"

Farrell mumbled something. He sat down on the floor. "All right," he said. "All right. I'll tell. I'll talk."

"Give," Reardon told him.

Pop Farrell started talking very slowly. "It started four years ago. I met Joe Maxon in prison. We got to be friends of a sort, and I tried to get him to break out with me. He wouldn't do it; said he was going straight. I broke out with someone else. My name was Kennedy then. I came here, changed my name, and opened the club.

"I had no idea Joe came from here—it was pure accident that he bumped into me one day last year. He didn't let on that he remembered me even, but when he asked me to give his kid brother a job, I knew I had to, or else.

"And that's what it was today—some more blackmail, this time for five grand. He said he wanted to be sure his kid brother had the things he needed in life."

"Go on," Reardon told him.

Farrell nodded. "Joe wanted the money this afternoon. I told him I'd have it tonight. I knew he had a gun on him, so after he left my office with the dough, I figured he wouldn't want you to search him—the gun would send him back to the pen. So he ran."

"And you framed me for his murder," Reardon said, "by handing me a gun loaded with blanks. You figured I'd fire over his head, but you didn't want me to see my slugs chipping through the trees or anything. While I was shooting blanks, you calmly used a silenced gun from the club."

When they took Farrell away, Captain Harris glared at me.

"We should hold that damn brat for attempted murder!"

Reardon came over to me, holding out a cup of water. "Here, drink this," he said. He turned back to the captain. "Farrell might have got away with this, if it hadn't been for Jerry. Farrell had the murder gun in his pocket; he figured he'd get a chance to switch the guns before we sent it to Ballistics. It's a damn good thing that Jerry used the gun I had used before Farrell switched them. When those slugs didn't hit me, I got suspicious."

Reardon grinned down at me. "You're a lucky shot, Jerry—but when we play golf tomorrow, don't be too lucky." He stuck out his big paw and gripped mine in it. "And just so there'll be plenty of golf in the future, what do you say to coming over to live with me and the wife?"

I didn't say anything until I stopped crying.

As thrilling and daring as the days in which it took place is Cornell Woolrich's tale of crime in the underworld of the "Gay Nineties." The versatile pen wielded by Woolrich has evolved a drama with all the flavor recalled to mind by thoughts of the "tarara-boom-de-ay" days. We believe that you will delve with delight into his story which tells of a Czar of corruption who dared to re-write the law books.

# THE TWO DEATHS OF BARNEY SLABAUGH

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

ouis, the butler at "The Mansion," slapped the peephole in the front door shut again as though he'd just seen a ghost, hurried through the crowd of champagne-guzzlers, and stopped in front of Emerald Eddie Danberry, who was the only man in the place drinking orange-juice.

It was a whale of a party even for the Gay Nineties when they knew how to throw them, and even for "The Mansion," that swank "private residence" of Eddie's, where every night was party night, but you had to be known to get in just the same. A five-piece band, hired for the occasion, was pounding out "Tararaboom-de-ay!" Ladies were throwing confetti or waltzing around holding up their trains with one hand. Champagne corks hit the ceiling and dropped back at the rate of one every

five minutes, which was doing pretty well even at five dollars a quart. Emerald Eddie was celebrating his "birthday" again, as he did every time there was something up.

"What's matter, got a bug in your shoe?" he asked, looking up.

Louis' teeth wouldn't behave. "The D. A.'s outside, with another guy and a lady!"

"All right. This ain't the first time," snarled Eddie. "Everything's under control. Just hold him out there a sec. It ain't a raid, or Police Commissioner Kraus would have tipped me off ahead on the phone, like before."

He got up, went into his "private office," and closed the door. He went to a speaking-tube set in the wall, that latest "modern improvement" in all houses of the day, boomed

through it "Hello up there!" to the second floor.

An answering voice scratched back. "We got company!" warned Eddie coolly. "Fold up the tables and put the wheels away. Start them all waltzing. Call back when you're set."

In less than a minute, an unseen voice rasped back: "All clear!"

"Let him in," said Eddie to the doorman.

He was draped negligently in the open doorway of his office when young Barry McCloy and his two guests entered. "Well, well, well!" he boomed jovially. "This's a treat! Just in time for my party! Hope you'll forgive being kept waiting like that?"

"As long as it gave you time enough to flag the floor above to do a quick-change!" Barry McCloy was in his twenties, had an explosive shock of red hair, and a disconcerting habit of calling a spade a spade. He was that town's greatest freak in years—an honest D.A. Eddie had sent him \$10,000 in an envelope, and it had come back. Then he'd sent twenty thousand and that had come back too. But as long as the other recipients, from the Commissioner down, didn't send theirs back, what had Eddie to worry about?

"I'm showing two friends of mine the town," McCloy said. "Thought we'd look in here. You don't mind, do you?"

Eddie grinned, showing the emerald-capped molar which had gotten him his name. "Nothing to hinge at here—just a little private party."

"Even on the second floor?" said McCloy.

Eddie appeared not to hear. "Champagne for Mr. McCloy and his friends, Louis."

to play make-believe. "Thanks, no micky finns for us. These people are from Frisco. They have the Barbary Coast out their way; that's a kindergarten to what I could show them not very far from here."

"Don't know what you mean," Eddie drawled suavely. "This man has it in for me," he explained playfully to McCloy's guests. "He's very hard to get along with."

"Harder even than twenty-thousand," said McCloy meaningly.

Eddie flushed darkly, gripped the cuffs at his own wrists set with emerald studs, as if to keep himself in hand. "You'll excuse me," he said in a suppressed voice. "Just make yourselves at home." Then with a venomous glance at McCloy, "Anything you don't see, don't ask for, though—because it isn't here!" He turned and left them.

"Would they dare to lay hands on you?" asked the woman with Mc-Cloy, when their "host" had gone.

He laughed shortly. "This is the most notorious gambling-hell in the entire country. Nobody knows how many deaths there are in it a month. They have a small fund set aside called 'The Safety Valve,' for getting bankrupts to hotel-rooms so they won't blow their lids on the premises. The carriage they send them away in

is called the Hearse, hired by the week. If the busts beat them to it, and do it here anyway, then they dump them in the river or out in the park. It goes down as an 'accident.' I can't get at them for it through all the grafting cops and police-lieutenants they have eating out of their hands!"

The butler opened the front door again, this time without any hesitancy, and a stunted little guy wearing his glasses on a shoestring came in.

"That," said McCloy bitterly, "is his legal representative, Horace Lipscomb, smart and crooked as they come."

The little lawyer looked at him askance as he sidled by.

"Shall we go?" McCloy suggested, "We've seen as much as they'll let us see. But," he went on savagely as they moved toward the door, "I took this job with one idea in mind. I'm going to clean up this town and make it a fit place to live in—and I'm going to get Emerald Eddie Danberry if it costs me my life!"

Emerald Eddie spotted Louis holding McCloy's coat for him, came over and took charge of it personally. "Leaving so soon?" he said deprecatingly. The man and woman had gone ahead out into the vestibule. "You and I ought to get along a little better than we do, McCloy," he said in a lower voice.

McCloy stopped short at that; something made him thrust his hand into the side-pocket of the coat he had just put on. He felt an envelope, brought it out, opened it. Emerald Eddie was carefully studying the lights of the chandelier over him.

McCloy spit suddenly; not into the silver-plated cuspidor standing in the corner, but into the fan of twenty-five thousand-dollar-bills he was holding in his hand! Then he slapped Eddie viciously across the mouth with them; let go of them and they fluttered all over Eddie like yellow leaves.

"Wrong party!" he said, and went out rubbing his hand down his side as if he'd just dirtied it up....

#### CHAPTER 2

#### Statute of Limitations

DDIE WAS still white from rage at the public insult when he joined Lippy in his office, where the lawver was waiting for him. It took a glassful of his favorite orange-juice before he could get his voice back. When he had calmed down sufficiently, he locked the rejected bribe away in a drawer and chalked up one more future score to be settled with Barry McCloy. But that could wait. It had to in fact. There was other, more pressing business to be attended to first. That Slabaugh business was due to come off tonight. Tonight was the night he was having Barney Slabaugh put out of the way.

The feud between them, although it had never come out into the open, had long antedated his difficulties with McCloy. And it griped him far more, for the very reason that they were birds of a feather. They had both been taking their profits out of the same wide-open town they lived in. Emerald Eddie had felt for a long time past that there wasn't room enough in the same town for the two of them; now, with McCloy in and crowding him to the wall, he was sure of it, and he was going to do something about it! Warnings had had no effect on Slabaugh other than to make him laugh. If he wouldn't quit while he was still living, then Eddie'd see to it that he quit dead! It was no longer a case of greediness with him now, but of absolute necessity. Slabaugh's activities in the same field were cutting down his profits alarmingly, now that the pickings were growing slimmer as McCloy slowly but surely closed the lid down. The little there were left, Eddie wanted for himself, and he was going to make sure of getting them-in the only way he knew how!

What rankled chiefly was the knowledge that he'd been the first one to stake his claim. Worse still, Slabaugh had originally been one of his own drummers, working for him at one of his earlier dives. He'd left him and started in "business" on his own. The opening wedge had been in the Tenderloin.

Then almost before Eddie knew what had happened, the whole Tenderloin was Slabaugh's realm and he found himself confined to the more toney part of town. Well, there was more money to be picked up there, so he hadn't minded so much—at first. Now McCloy had cleaned up the Tenderloin pretty thoroughly,

and Slabaugh was beginning to invade his own preserves. He'd warned him to lay off, and the mocking answer had come back: "Live and let live! Room enough for both."

There wasn't; Eddie's monthly intake already showed that. And that was why he had to get rid of Slabaugh before he went after McCloy. If he got rid of McCloy first, he'd only be handing the whole town to Slabaugh on a silver platter.

Lippy, his lawyer, looked up expectantly. "Well," he said, "I got your message, and here I am."

"Good, stick around!" said Eddie,
"In just about a quarter of an hour
from now Barney Slabaugh departs
from among the living."

Lippy got up abruptly. He stood worriedly, hitching his coat-tails up and down behind his back.

"You don't act very happy about it," Emerald snapped.

"I'm not. I strongly advised you against it from the beginning. I see you're going ahead anyway."

Emerald brought his fist down on the table with a bang. "You betcha bottom dollar I am! I've already given the orders, whether you like it or not. Too late to back out now. That's why I'm giving this bust here tonight." He clicked his watchcase viciously open, shut again. "In about ten minutes, now. Had one of my hostesses upstairs give him the runaround; she's been calling him up anonymously for a week now. He's waiting for her at that flashy new hotel just opened, the Adelphi, hired a private dining-room on the second

floor, quarts of bubbly and all the fixings; she made him promise to be there alone.

"Brand-new idea, never been tried in his town before. I understand in Paree they call it a blind date. Well, instead of a veiled lady, he gets pistolshots for his supper! And I'm here at the exact same moment, in full view of dozens of people, making a speech from the top of a chair. Isn't that a bear?"

"It's verminous," said Lippy frankly. "He may go there, but he'll never go alone."

"He may go there? I called the Adelphi a few minutes ago myself; he is there already and all by his lonesome-how d'ya like that?" He consulted his timepiece once more. "They'll be on their way over in five minutes, now. They've hired the dining-room right next to the one he's in. Afterwards they can get down the fire-escape, from there to an alley alongside the hotel without anyone stopping them. I've bought them their tickets to Buffalo already, and then they can lose themselves in Canada for awhile. The coroner's inquest will hand down an 'at the hands of persons unknown' verdict; may cost a little but I think I can get my friend Commissioner Draus to be satisfied."

"You're forgetting young McCloy, aren't you?"

"That guy! I just tried to get to him, and it seems he ain't interested in money."

"Exactly! And you're just putting your neck between his two hands if you go through with this! You go ahead and have Slabaugh killed tonight. I don't care if you're hanging upside-down from the chandeliers here at the time, and watch how quick he jumps for you! I'm standing here telling you to your face, if you tamper with murder while McCloy is D. A., I not only can't guarantee you won't be brought to trial for it, but I can't even guarantee to keep you from being sent up for life before he's through with you! And you never heard me talk that way before, have you, Emerald?"

Emerald apparently hadn't; he got a little white.

chrysanthemum in the carpetpattern. "We're licked from the start. I'm not much of a gambler. I only like to tackle a sure thing. But it's up to you; it's your life, not mine. He might even get a death-sentence, if he can get enough evidence out of all this hired help you've been taking on wholesale. They do it in a new way now; shock you to death in a chair—"

By now Emerald was at the wall-phone, cranking like mad to get the operator on. "Maybe I can head them off!" he said hollowly. "You've given me such cold feet I couldn't go through with it now!

"Hello, this is Danberry. Tell O'Shea and the other fellow to come to the phone—quick! What?" That one word told the whole story.

He hung up, turned a stricken face to his legal representative. "My

watch was five minutes slow," he groaned. "They've left already!"

"You've certainly got yourself into a mess, Em—" Lippy broke off suddenly. "Sh! Wait a minute, somebody's at the door!"

A low, insistent rapping made itself heard above the din coming from outside. Emerald, at the moment, was incapable of both speech or action.

Lippy went over and opened the door cautiously, said, "It's one of your bankers from upstairs."

One of the croupiers came in, perspiring, his jaunty boiled shirt rumpled and with a fleck of red across it. "Manning sent me down, boss! He wants to know what to do."

Emerald snapped out of it, roared: "Get out of here! Don't bother me. I got enough troubles already."

"But, boss, we're up against it up there! Somebody just spread himself all over one of the top-floor rooms, before we could get him into the Hearse and get rid of him; blew his head off. He's an outa town guy from Tacoma, some kind of a buyer. Must 'a' used his firm's money to hit the wheels, and when it was all gone—"

"Good!" snapped Emerald. "What more d'ya want? Let 'em think he absconded! Wrap a towel around his head and drop him in the river. Why come to me about it?"

Lippy said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute! Will you two both keep quiet. I'm getting something good!"

"Say, who's giving orders around here . . ." Emerald started to object,

then something in the other's face made him shut up.

Lippy grabbed the croupier by one skinny shoulder. "Did you say his head was blown off?"

"Well, not exactly his head, but the whole front of his face. He must have used a young cannon."

"Any of the crowd hear it happen?"

"No, we didn't ourselves. Manning happened to go up there, and found him."

"Tell Manning to close up for the night, get rid of everybody! Don't dump him; keep him here, d'ya hear? Tell him Emerald and me'll be right up inside five or ten minutes."

He pushed the croupier out, shut the door. "I've got something that ought to be worth its weight in emeralds to you! Get over there and get busy on that phone! Get the Adelphi Hotel and get Barney Slabaugh on the wire. Quick, while he's still alive!"

Emerald stared popeyed at his legal representative. "Me talk to him, when they're already on their way over?"

"Never mind that!" Lippy began doing two things at once; scribbling on the back of an envelope while he tossed breathless scraps of explanation, that were no explanation at all, at his slower-witted overlord. "I'm getting you out of the fix you got yourself into! Man, in this room here with you tonight, I've just gotten the brightest idea of the Nineteenth Century—as bright as those lights in the ceiling, as marvelous as that phone on the wall." On the back of

#### THE TWO DEATHS OF BARNEY SLABAUGH

the envelope he was scrawling meanwhile: "I've just come into some information which would make me into a murderer if I didn't pass it on to you..."

"Got him yet?" he snapped. "Tell them it's a life-or-death matter! Start in by telling him to lock his door—"

"I hope you know what you're doing, Lippy! . . . Adelphi? Get me Mr. Slabaugh, he's in one of the second-floor private dining-rooms. Tell him it's a matter of life or death!"

"Do I! Here, read these off to him as I pass them to you. I can't coach you out loud; he's liable to overhear. Make it sound natural, now!" He thrust the first envelope into Emerald's hand, started on a second leaning up against the wall.

"Hello, Slabaugh? This is Ed Danberry. Lock your door before you go ahead talking to me; your life's in danger." He hoisted the first envelope to eye-level. "No, I'm not kidding. Sure you've locked it?" He squinted at the hurried hen-tracks. "I've just come into some information which would make me into a murderer if I didn't pass it on to you. A woman came here to the Mansion tonight, got pickled on champagne, bragged she was the sweetheart of one of the biggest politicians in town. I can't mention his name over the wire. He's out to get you. He's used her as a decoy, in order to have you assassinated!

"Two thugs are on their way over there right now. I wouldn't try to leave the way you came in, if I were you. I'd go down the fire-escape and get away from there as quickly as possible. I'll give you this man's name if you'll stop in here at the Mansion. I can't trust it to the telephone. In that way you'll know where the danger lies . . ."

E STOPPED abruptly, then resumed: "See, I told you! Better get down the fire-escape quick, before they break it down! Come on over here and I'll give you the rest of the story."

He hung up, faced Lippy. "They were trying to get in the door right while he was talking to me! Well, I've doublecrossed myself, spared the guy I've sworn to kill. Now what's this all about? It better be good!"

"Good?" gloated the lawyer. "It's perfect, a gem! Sit down a minute and find out what a smart man you've got working for you. You're going to kill Slabaugh, and Barry McCloy isn't going to be able to touch you for it!"

Emerald squinted skeptically at him. "Why not?"

"Our law here is based on the old English Common Law. Ever hear of the statute of limitations?"

"Statue of limitations? Say, what're you talking about, anyway?"

He shook Emerald lightly by the shoulders. "Don't you understand? That bankrupt upstairs with his face blown off. He plays Slabaugh. We let McCloy show his claws, pounce on you. It goes down on the records. Then, and not until then, Slabaugh shows up—alive!"

Emerald acted slightly dazed. "What's to prevent him showing up

too soon and spilling the beans?" "Well, you have a good solid basement here at the Mansion, haven't you? When Slabaugh does show up, naturally you're automatically released. But you've already been tried once for the murder of Barney Slabaugh-let them try to get around that! I tell you, you'll be able to haul Slabaugh up to McCloy's front door after that, ring his bell, and when he looks out, shoot Slabaugh down right at his feet and he won't be able to hold you any longer than it takes me to say 'statute of limitations'! Do you follow me, or have I gone too fast for you?" he added with a touch of sar-

"Follow you?" yelled Emerald delightedly. "I'm so far ahead of you I'm out of sight! It's a lulu! It's a bear! Lippy, you deal it the way you've shuffled it, and half the town's yours!" He sobered a little. "How long will I have to stay in jail between the time they find 'Slabaugh' and the time this spiked trial opens? That's the only feature of it I'm not so goshawful smitten with."

casm.

"It won't be long; couple weeks at the most," Lippy promised him. "Shouldn't be much of a hardship with all the drag you have around this town. Just act as though you're at home and throw a party every night."

Emerald pushed a service-button on the wall. "What would I do without you?" he grinned at his lawyer. A waiter rapped, stuck his head in. "Orange juice," boomed Eddie jovially, "and lots of it! We're celebrating in here, my friend!"

"Come on, we've got a lot to do and very little time to do it in," the lawyer urged impatiently.

"Sure, but first a toast." As soon as it came, Emerald filled a glass with the ruddy liquid. "Here's to lightning, that's gonna strike twice, even if they say it never did before!"

## CHAPTER 3

#### The Price of Information

as the rapping continued outside his door. "Mr. McCloy!" His house-keeper's voice sounded through the panel, softly insistent. He dug the sleep out of his eyes, ran a hand through his explosive shock of red hair, groped for a light-switch. Four A.M., the clock on the dresser said.

"What's matter, house on fire?" he rumbled in a blurred voice.

She said, "There's a man here insisted I wake you up. He says he got to talk to you right now. Morning won't do."

"I'll break his neck!" McCloy grunted groggily. "Who is he? What's he want?" He struggled out of bed, revealing a long, white nightshirt. It was the manly thing to wear. What were causing snickers were those newfangled dudish things called pajamas some of the cake-eaters in London were going in for.

He struggled into a bathrobe, got the door open. "Such an hour!" the housekeeper chuckled. "I told him to go away; I'd call a policeman. I even told him I'd throw water on him, but he wouldn't stop ringing the bell! He wouldn't give me his name; just said he had some information for you that couldn't wait. I finally had to let him in the front parlor."

McCloy preceded her down the stairs, stepped through the two sliding doors that enclosed the parlor. The fact that the man sitting there was a stranger to him, and that his bloodshot eyes revealed he had been drinking more or less recently, didn't improve McCloy's temper any.

"Who the blazes do you think you are, breaking in here at this hour, President Cleveland?" was his greeting. "Couldn't you come to my office in the daytime?"

"Naw!" the man blurted out stubbornly. "Because by that time he'd be dead—" He ran the back of his hand across his mouth quickly, as though to cover up the slip.

"Who'd be dead?" said McCloy harshly. "You'd better begin by telling me who you are, hadn't you?"

"Naw, that's the one thing I better not do. It don't matter who I am." He eyed McCloy shrewdly. "I've got some information for you that ought to be worth plenty."

McCloy pushed the folding doors together. "Well, come on, let's have it."

"I said it ought to be worth something."

McCloy gave him a hard look. "I don't pay bribes for my information. I have other ways of getting it. I don't like spies. Either tell me what you've come here to, or get the hell out!"

"This is one piece of info you've got no other way of getting but through me. I'm one of Eddie Danberry's men. At least I was until he let the flying wedge gimme the bum's rush in front of everybody, just so him and his lady-friends could be entertained."

"So you're turning traitor on him for cash?" McCloy didn't hide his dislike.

"I'm risking my life, ain't I, even by coming here? That oughta be worth something."

McCloy nodded contemptuously. "Sure. Want a quotation? Fifty cents."

The renegade flushed darkly, got up. "All right, all right, Mr. D. A.," he sneered. He moved slowly toward the doors, with a crafty look over his shoulder, as if hoping McCloy would break down and stop him. If so, he was disappointed.

"Watch out for the horse-cars," the latter said by way of farewell. "There's nothing about your friend Emerald Eddie that you can tell me that I don't know already. Just knowing is one thing, being able to get at him through all the crooked grafters on my own side of the fence, is another!"

"Well, here's your chance, and you're too stingy to take it! Here's the one thing that all the police-lieutenants and commissioners on his payroll'll be afraid to sidetrack." He parted the door ever so slightly, but didn't make a move to step through them. "Murder! Right tonight, right now while we're wasting time here shilly-shallying."

cCLOY TOOK a quick stride forward, knocked his thumbs off the doorgrooves, slapped them together again with a crack, stabbed his own thumb at the sofa. The stool misunderstood, went back and sat down with a triumphant smirk.

"His lawyer showed up, and I went right back in again without anyone noticing. I saw them get together in one of them little private cubbyholes, so I went into the one adjoining. Them things have very thin partitions, and with my ear against the wall. I heard plenty . ." He left the sentence artistically uncompleted. "How would you like to be cut in on what I heard?"

"Let's!" agreed McCloy viciously. He went over to the man, clamped one powerful hand down on his shoulder in a grip of iron, balled the other, and crashed it into the side of his jaw. The impact resounded all over the quiet room, almost like the bursting of a bag full of water. A second one had followed before the luckless wouldbe informant even had time to get a yell out. He writhed there on the sofa in McCloy's grasp, stunned. "Wait!" he groaned. "What're you doing?"

"Just persuading you to talk," panted McCloy. "This is the kind of bribery I'm best at." He pulled back a sledgehammer fist a third time, held it poised. "Now, who was it you overheard him say he was going to have killed?" he purred.

"You can't do this!"

Instantly, McCloy had, though, with a swing that nearly knocked the

squealer's head off his shoulder. He couldn't get the words out quick enough after that. "Barney Slabaugh."

McCloy dropped his fist, but continued to hold him upright against the back of the sofa with one arm; he would have toppled over otherwise. "Now go ahead from there," he urged grimly. "I'm afraid if I hit you any more, you won't be able to."

The sadly-mistaken emissary of treachery jabbered breathlessly, between groans: "He told this lawyerguy, Lippy, 'Tonight's the night I'm having Barney Slabaugh killed.' He told him he had some dame make an appointment with Slabaugh at the Adelphi Hotel, and how two guys were on their way over there to shoot him. They were going to sneak out down the fire-escape afterward and they already have their tickets to Buffalo."

McCloy took a step backward; the informer promptly fell over sideways on the sofa, from the cumulative effect of the three blows, as soon as the restraining hand was removed. McCloy said, "Go ahead, don't stop. You can talk from that position just as well!" He found the cleft in the panels, parted them, called: "Mrs. Clayton!" without turning his head.

She wasn't very far away. She was a perfect lady. Her ear showed in the gap, with the silver hair held back from it to give it every chance.

"Get me my trousers, shoes, and throw them in here," he requested.

The battered one struggled up again, tenderly exploring his jawbone.

"He said that was why he was giving the blow-out tonight. He said right at the exact moment Slabaugh was getting his, he would be standing up on a chair making a speech in full view of everybody, and nobody could prove he had a thing to do with it."

Clothes fell into the room, article by article, like manna from heaven, while Mrs. Clayton modestly remained invisible.

"And then?" snapped McCloy, struggling into a pair of pants over his nightshirt.

The informer hesitated sullenly. "That was all. Some guy came in with a message and interrupted them."

cCLOY GOT rid of the twin doors for the last time, with an enthusiastic heave. The light flooded out into the hallway, revealing the housekeeper's fidgeting figure. "Your objections to having a telephone put in here have probably cost a man his life tonight!" he threw at her.

"I've heard they're dangerous," she said obstinately. "I've heard they can shock you to death, especially when there's lightning in the air."

"Well, there's lightning in the air tonight, and somebody's going to get shocked to death for it, but not the way you mean!" He went running down the stoop and vanished into the gloom of the gas-lit street. "Halloran!" they heard him shouting through funneled hands. "Halloran!" and footsteps came running up from the corner. "Hurry up, I want you to come with me! Pick up whoever else you can on the way! And commandeer

something on wheels ..." The voices and the pounding feet melted away on the quiet night-air.

"Yeah, run, Big Shot," hissed the stool, who had come on the stoop to watch. "And when you get there, what've you got? I showed you the door, but I've still got the key! And for being such a piker and so handy with your mitts, I think I'll hang onto it. Emerald might be willing to pay me a little something himself." He turned to the woman behind him, gravely tipped his bowler. "Good morning, ma'am. I'll be on my way now."

"Oh, no you won't!" she said promptly, getting a grip on his sleeve. "I know enough about how these things work to know that he'll be wanting you where he can put his hands on you when he comes back."

"He's put his hands on me plenty for one night!" he told her roughly. "Sorry, grandma!" And cupping the heel of his hand to her chin, he sent her sprawling back into the hallway, slammed the door on her, and went down the steps.

He turned the corner, which the cop Halloran had rounded at such speed a few moments before, and stopped quite involuntarily. There was a gaspost a few yards away, but also a tree in full leaf which blotted most of it out. He didn't have time to think about McCloy's housekeeper, but if he had he probably would have regretted not giving into her just now.

"Hello, Squinty," Emerald's gunman O'Shea said quietly, "watcha doing coming out of the District Attorney's house so early in the morning?"

The informer took a step backward, away from the blade that suddenly shot out of the other's hand at waist-level. The second man, behind him, edged him forward again. "But as long as you are out, may as well stay here now. Halloran told us you were in there, but we thought he was taking us for a buggy-ride." He gave a soundless laugh.

"What'd you do, lose your way, get in there by mistake?" O'Shea purred.

The stool kept trying to look down at the blade, couldn't see it. Their bodies were standing too close together. A whisper came from him. "I thought you were over at the Ad—"

"Emerald changed his mind, called us off." Eyebrows went up sardonically on his grim face. "Now, how'd you suppose he knew about that?" he said in mock surprise across their captive's shoulder.

"Little bird must have told him."
"We're not going to Buffalo, either,"
said O'Shea. "No, you are!"

"Do it right here," the voice in back of the victim said a little weariedly, "Halloran's all right."

The man between them suddenly crumpled like a concertina, without a sound; they were standing there facing each other with only space in between. The wooden knife-hasp clicked against the sidewalk just once as Squinty threshed over on it onto his back, lay still.

"He ought to be," O'Shea resumed, as they stood waiting side by side for a late trolley two block away. "He was telling me just now his account's up in four figures already."

"Hell, don't begrudge it to him; he's got a wife and two kids," his companion yawned tolerantly. "I hope we don't have to wait all night for a car to come along."

## CHAPTER 4

#### Graft Unlimited

the Alelphi loomed faintly gray against the night-sky, twelve stories high and newest wonder of the town. It was pitted with black holes in parallel rows, like a hunk of Swiss cheese. It was dead to the world. The carriage, instead of turning the corner and drawing up at the main entrance, pulled up abreast of the narrow service-alley that separated the hostelry from the squat neighboring buildings on the side-street.

Its lamps were out, but otherwise it was quite a sleek-looking vehicle, with a top-hatted driver up on the box and a lap-robe stretched across the back seat at chin-level. Emerald's head stuck up at one end of it, Lippy's at the other. There was quite a space between them, which bulged below the cover but was blank above. Deep within the tunnel-like alley, two lighted windows gleamed out side by side against the blank walls opposite.

"They ready?" asked the lawyer, squinting in that direction.

The coachman gave a muffled whistle, and an answering one immediately came from the passageway but no visible form appeared in the shadows.

"Good," said Emerald; "now let's get the cop out of the way first. I probably know him, anyway."

The coachman stood up, looked around, whistled again, this time shrilly and motioned with his arm. A mushroom-helmeted patrolman came at a jog-trot, stood beside the carriage with his back to the alley, almost drooling with ingratiation.

"Hello, Anderson," said Emerald chummily. "I wonder if you'd know where to change a thing like this, at this hour of the night?" His outside hand abruptly came up from under the lap-robe with a twenty-dollar goldback bunched in it.

"Sure," said the cop, "sure! I'll get it changed for you, Mr. Danberry, right around the corner at Mike Pheenan's bar. Won't take a minute. How d'you want it?" He was so anxious to please, he was already retreating backward with it while he spoke.

"I don't want it at all," smiled Emerald. "I just asked you out of curiosity. You're the kind of officer this town ought to have more of, obliging, alert. You buy yourself a drink out of it, and the rest is yours—and no hurry about it, either. This hotel won't blow away."

The carriage stood there motionless until he was out of sight. Then O'Shea and his pal suddenly materialized out of the shadowy alley, the lap-robe was unhooked and swept aside, and the cab was seen to have three occupants. Emerald and Lippy jumped down on opposite sides, and the third party, resembling a drunk, was borne into the

alley between O'Shea and the other man. His head was hidden under a towel. For once, the Hearse had lived up to its name literally as well as metaphorically.

The four living and one dead vanished into the passageway, the coachman looked carefully all around him, flicked his whip, and rolled as far as the corner. There he got down, lit his lamps, climbed up again, and drove off.

Emerald went up the fire-escape first, stepped through the open second-floor window, and found himself in a room that it was almost a shame to bring a corpse into. The table was set for two, long-stemmed roses on it, and a pair of champagne bottles were sticking out of an ice-pail. Emerald went straight to the door, to make sure it was still locked on the inside.

"Slabaugh," meanwhile, had already been hoisted across the sill by his two pall-bearers. "Where do you want him, boss?" asked O'Shea, shooting his cuffs.

"Let Lippy do the window-dressing; he's good at that," was the answer.

a little; he had shorter legs than any of the others. "On the floor, anyplace at all; it don't matter," he said impatiently. "Now, you two cheese it; we don't need you any more. Climb back into your own room next door, and go out the front way from there."

"Leave one of your guns here with me; I haven't got any," Emerald said. "Go out and nab that punk Squinty before he does any talking. One of the girls told me he came back after they threw him out."

"Here, wait!" Lippy called after them. "Take this with you, get rid of it." He undid the towel, flung it out after them.

"Think that's all right?" Emerald asked, staring down at what lay revealed on the floor. His face got a little paler as he stood looking, but he didn't blink or turn his head.

"The nose and mouth are pretty well shot, and that's what counts mostly. That shoe-polish idea of mine takes care of the hair. I don't think McCloy knows Slabaugh by sight. Anyway, it's not a case of their trying to identify him; he's already identified before they even get here, so they'll probably just give him a light onceover. Slabaugh's clothes fit him pretty good, don't you think?"

"Say, don't leave him too long in that damp basement just in his underwear; I don't want anything to happen to him to keep him from showing up on time," Emerald said anxiously. "If it does, it's my finish!" He gnawed at one of his nails. "Let's get it over with; I'm as nervous as a wizard!"

"All right. Chase around and come in the front. Look sore when you ask for him downstairs. I'll answer from up here . . . don't let anyone come up with you, now, whatever you do!"

In about three minutes a telephone over on the sideboard rang. Lippy took out a pocket handkerchief, spread it over the mouthpiece, and then answered.

"Mr. Slabaugh," the reception clerk

said, "there's a party down here to see you, name of Eddie Danberry. I told him you didn't want to be disturbed, but he insisted."

"I wanna see him, too!" said Lippy menacingly. "Send him up here!"

The door opened abruptly without any knock, and Emerald came back in alone, closed it behind him. They exchanged a wink, one of those rare winks without any humor or kindness in it.

"All right, now gimme time to get out of here!" Lippy whispered. "Remember, fire out the window. Don't admit, but don't deny!" He threw one stumpy little leg hectically across the sill. "Meet you at police headquarters in about half an hour."

Emerald took out the gun, examined it with a practiced eye, counted ten slowly. Then he aimed at the empty window-embrasure, fired three times at spaced intervals. The crashes made the delicate chinaware on the loaded table sing out; smoke blossomed out gauzily around him. He pitched the gun heavily onto the table, went over to the phone. "Better come up here," he said into it laconically.

Then he sat down in a large, comfortable chair, took out a fresh Havana, clipped it, and lit it. He was making rings when the door sailed open the first time.

That door, from that point on, became more of a traffic-artery than the window ledge had been before. Half the hotel staff, going up the ranks from bellhop to manager; Anderson the cop, breath pungent, and dis-

mayed at having to take a hand in the thing. He phoned in his report, while Emerald's upper lip curled: "Barney Slabaugh's just been shot to death here at the Adelphi Hotel. Emerald Eddie Danberry's sitting here in this room." Meaning, "For Pete's sake, take this thing off my hands; I'm just the cop on the beat!" His face was bedewed as he turned away from the phone.

Emerald took pity on him, caught his eye, gestured to a dish of after-dinner mints on the table. "Your breath," he whispered. Anderson scooped up a palmful of the things, popped them in his mouth. Emerald beckoned him over with a flip of the head. The cop bent close to him.

Emerald said something that should have gone down in history. "Pull yourself together," he encouraged tersely. "Don't let that twenty worry you!"

Barry McCloy was standing in the doorway with Halloran and a plainclothesman—somebody that for once Emerald didn't recognize. One of his own appointees, probably, the gambler decided contemptuously. The ashline of his cigar was nearing the red-and-gold band; he flicked it off; it sprinkled partly across the dead man.

"Well, Danberry," McCloy said, "so I got here too late, did I?"

"I wouldn't say that," was the drawling answer, "the supper hasn't been served yet. Have an olive?"

McCloy turned. "Close that door!" The two cops and the detective re-

mained in the room. He went over to the table, picked up the gun, which had already been handled by Anderson and the night clerk. The fingerprinting system, of course, was not in use. "This yours?"

"Couldn't say," shrugged Emerald, not even looking.

"It's Slabaugh, all right," said the plainclothesman, squatting on his heels. "Here's his wallet, full of memoranda—couple of letters—some of his own calling cards—a receipt from this place for engaging this room in advance—initials engraved on his belt buckle . . ." He straightened up, tapped the obects together on the table-top.

McCloy passed the gun to him. "All right, you!" he said, turning to Anderson. "What's your contribution?"

The cop stammered, "I was outside patrolling my beat, and the hotel porter came running out, told me a man had just been shot up here. When I got up here, it was just like it is now!" He got white; sugar mints, raw alcohol, and nervous tension give heartburn. Emerald seemed to be trying hard not to laugh right in the poor devil's face.

McCloy said, "And you were here, I suppose, helping him get a cinder out of his eye when I showed up in the doorway just now?" He turned to Halloran. "Accompany this man back to his precinct headquarters, have him turn in his shield, and see that his captain puts him under arrest for being intoxicated while on duty!"

The cop glared, seemed ready to burst into a tirade. He caught Em-

erald's eye; the latter solemnly batted one eyelid at him. He turned on his heel and followed his brother-officer out in smoldering silence.

"That, just then," McCloy told him bitterly, "is as great a crime as this." He pointed over at the floor. "More far-reaching in its implications, if anything! You're as guilty of the one as I'll prove you of the other. You've spread corruption in this town's lawenforcement agencies like a plague, Danberry! You haven't had me bamboozled any. I know they're all rotten. I haven't been able to get you for it until now, but now I've got you, and, fellow, I've got you good! This is one thing you won't be able to graft your way out of!"

Emerald addressed the ceiling ruefully. "You can tell this is an election-year, all the bum oratory you've got to listen to!"

"Make the arrest, Joe," McCloy clipped at the detective. "I'll take the responsibility. The hell with all their coroners and commissioners and dirty red tape!"

"You're under arrest for the murder of Barney Slabaugh," the dick rattled off almost joyfully. "Anythingyou-say-will-be-used-against-you."

"Swell," sneered Emerald. "Use this: we're going to have lovely weather, if it don't rain." He glanced down at the handcuffs. "Is that absolutely necessary?"

"No, but it's the sweetest music I ever heard!" McCloy grunted as they clicked. "Take him out. I'm coming with you personally."

The detective put his hand on the

door. It opened and Commissioner Kraus was standing there, his men grouped about him.

"Straight ahead, Joe," said McCloy quietly, and to Kraus, as he followed the two of them out, "The arrest has already been made."

The official looked anything but tickled. "Aren't you being a little hasty?"

"Aren't you being a little lukewarm?" McCloy said, stepping around and past him. They all turned and stared helplessly down the corridor after him. . . .

# CHAPTER 5

#### Masquerade Time

JOE KEPT swinging his head from side to side like a pendulum, following McCloy morosely with his eyes while the latter paced back and forth like a caged bear. "You're not going to let it stop you, are you?" he asked.

McCloy whirled on him as though he contemplated an immediate physical attack. "I can't stop, and I don't see how I can go ahead either, without jeopardizing everything I've set out to accomplish!" he yelled. "They want me to go ahead! Damn it all, he and that lawyer of his have something up their sleeves. What is it, what can it be, that's what I want to know! We thought it was just bravado the night we took him into custody; it's not just bravado. It can't possibly be, any more! Every move I make, they have an air as though

#### THE TWO DEATHS OF BARNEY SLABAUGH

I'm playing straight into their hands—and what gets my goat is, I can't help feeling that way about it myself!"

"It's got me," admitted the detective. "It's upside-down! It's crazy. Y'oughta see his cell over at the jail! They moved in furniture, Mr. McCloy. A van backed up to the place and unloaded a bedroom set!" He ground the flat of his hand in above one eye. "Have I gone crazy, or what?"

"I know, I heard all about that. His meals sent in from a caterer, his own barber visiting him regularly once a day, and all the rest of it. That isn't important; I'd stake him to his home-comforts myself, if I could be sure of sending him to the chair! It's this!" He whacked a sheaf of typewritten papers. "It won't stand up! Not because it's weak, but because it's topheavy! There's too much of it, and I have an idea the whole thing's going to come toppling down around my ears like a pack of cards!"

Joe nodded glumly. "Three shots heard in the lobby below, three empty chambers in the gun and I pick up four bullets, three outside the window and one still inside his head. How could they all come out of that same gun, unless he partly reloaded halfway through the job?"

"Slabaugh had obviously been dead some time, the coroner mentions rigor in his report, and yet according to the night-clerk's testimony, Danberry only showed up ten minutes before we got there ourselves. We were right on his heels. He gave a party that night that was obviously intended to provide him with an alibi, then he threw it overboard, came down here, and we found him sitting right in the room with him like a cigarstore Indian and twice as calm."

McClov buried his hand in his red-hot hair. "Joe," he groaned, "I let you make that pinch too quickly! There's a joker in the whole thing someplace. I'm in for it. What's driving me crazy is I don't know which direction it's coming from! They're both leaning over backwards to avoid offering any defense. Giving me all the rope I want and letting me hang myself! Not a denial has passed Danberry's lips since he's been under arrest, have you noticed that? And his lawyer, whose cleverness I'd be the last one to underestimate, is practically foaming at the mouth begging that he be brought to trial without a moment's delay. Isn't interested in preparing a defnse. As far as I can make out, isn't even going to offer one."

"Maybe Danberry's trying to cover somebody else up."

"I've thought of that, but I know him too well; it wouldn't be in character. The only one he'd ever cover up is himself. But in this case, from what? What's worse than murder?"

"Two murders," grinned the detective wryly.

cCLOY GAVE him a tense, startled look for a moment; then slowly relaxed again. "You almost gave me

something just then when you said that, but it slipped away again and I'm too tired to go after it. I've been skipping sleep at nights, trying to get a half-nelson on this. There was a second murder, as you know. Squinty Prentiss, the squealer, was stabbed to death around the corner from here the same night Slabaugh was done in. It was obviously done by Emerald's orders, and just as obviously not done by Emerald personally. Matter of fact, when he first spilled his information. I could have sworn it was a frame-up. Then when Halloran found him dead, that of course canceled out. I still have a peculiar feeling that he only half did the job, left something out. He wanted money, and I manhandled him, and he may have held out on me as a result. I had this Halloran on the carpet in my office today for several hours, questioning him about it. How much money you got in the world, Joe?"

"Six-hundred-twenty-six dollars seventy-nine cents in the bank," said the mathematically precise Joe, "and a four-bit-piece in my pocket."

"And you're a first-grade detective."

"Thanks to you."

"It ought to interest you, then, to know that this ordinary stick-swinger has six-thousand and some odd dollars socked away. Of course, he's going to follow Anderson down the sunset trail. But when I got home here, Mrs. Clayton told me something that interested me even more.

"This Squinty bit the dust in front of a Mrs. Rosenzweig's house, friend of hers. Mrs. R. was aroused when Halloran got back, found him, and sum moned an ambulance. She watched from the window. He was dead by then. Anyway, Mrs. R. was deeply touched at how thoughtful Officer Halloran was of her sidewalk. He got down on his haunches, took out his own handkerchief, and scoured it for her... while the dead man was still lying there."

He glanced at the clock on the mantel. "He's on duty outside now. Have you ever seen a cop get the third degree? Watch, you're going to see it now."

"Watch hell!" said Joe softly. "I'm helping you lay it on."

"Of course, we both know ahead of time what it is we're trying to get out of him, we just want to hear him say it, that's all; like in any third degree."

"Sure we know," said Joe, and left the room.

Halloran said, "Good evening, Mr. McCloy, was there something you wanted of me?"

"Sit down, Halloran," McCloy said.
"I just wanted to borrow your nightstick a minute. Give it right back to you."

The cop detached it, passed it over with a puzzled look.

"Oh, by the way, what was that message again that this Squinty scrawled on the sidewalk beside him with his own blood, before he kicked the bucket?"

The cop started to shake his head. "There was no message. He had a knife through him. How could—"

"Hook him," said McCloy wearily to Joe.

The latter slipped his right arm about the cop's neck, from behind the chair he was sitting in, clamping him down.

"Keep your own head out of the way, Joe," McCloy suggested. And to the half-strangled cop, "Here's your stick back, like I promised."

"Get some water," he said a moment later.

Halloran groaned, showed the whites of his eyes as though he'd gone blind. "It was 'Slabo alive man,'" he panted, tongue lolling out.

"Let his head down," McCloy said. "Take off his badge, while you're at it."

"We just wasted time," said Joe disappointedly.

"No, think it through. Man means Mansion. He didn't live long enough to finish it."

Joe frowned.

"It still don't add up to any sense."

McCloy snapped, "It won't by just sitting here conjugating it. I'm going over there!"

"Good! I'll beat it out and rig up a little party."

"Alone," said McCloy. "I learned my lesson last Fall. All you gotta do is ask Kraus for a detail, and I walk in on a society quadrille, like last time."

"What's the matter with me, have I got measles?"

"Who said you weren't coming? But you're going to wait outside, as a one-man reserve." He glanced at the clock. "Ten-thirty. I know a

guy that's a ham-actor at the Jefferson Theater. I want to stop off there at his dressing-room on our way up, before his show closes. I'm going to need some of this nose-putty, and something that'll make my hair white, and a monkey-suit, and enough money to lose gracefully . . ."

"And plenty of nerve," said Joe dubiously. "Which is one thing you don't need to call on any actor-friends for."

# CHAPTER 6

#### Hide and Seek

HE UNIFORMED butler at the Mansion looked out through the peephole in the front door before making any move to unfasten it. The touch of a switch had flooded the vestibule with light.

"Mr. Hamilton Cavendish," said the jaunty figure. "Sponsored by Mr. Thorpe, of the Jefferson Theater." He leaned on his cane at a slight angle. Hamilton Cavendish happened to be the name of the character who nightly untied the heroine from the railroad-tracks in the show.

The butler said, "Just a minute," and went to get Manning, Emerald's manager. "Friend of that actor—one who dropped so much." Manning went to take a look for himself.

"Mr. Thorpe isn't with you?" he said doubtfully.

"He's coming up later," the manabout-town drawled. "They were all kept after curtain-time."

"Open up," Manning murmured.

Instead of admitting the caller at once, however, he went out to the vestibule, scanned the street up and down from there. There wasn't a soul in sight; the areaways of the houses opposite were pools of impenetrable black.

He turned back, satisfied. "Step right in, Mr. Cavendish. Louis'll take your things, and show you where the refreshments are."

The hardware went up on the door again, and the distinguished-looking guest parted with his gloves, folding hat, and white-lined opera-cape. He followed the butler up wide marble stairs to the second floor, let himself be handed a glass of champagne and a couple of anchovies from a buffet, and was then shown into a large salon, huge crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and filled with people knotted about numerous tables. some seated and holding cards, others standing watching blurred roulette wheels. There were one or two women, but most were men. No one turned to look at him. The butler silently folded the doors closed after him, and remained outside.

McCloy finished the anchovies, and passed close to a tank of tropical fish. As he moved on, the fish suddenly all became quite agitated, and his glass was empty.

"Place your bets," a tired voice said. McCloy elbowed his way through to the edge of the nearest table, without being rough about it, put down a small wafer of twenties on 17, black.

"The bank is closed," the voice

droned. The wheel clicked, the twenties were spaded away.

The rounder, if anyone was watching him—and no one seemed to be—was a good loser but an even better drinker. He went outside to the buffet far more often than any of the other players, and each time stayed longer. Some of the fish were lying at the bottom of the tank, dazed by now—and as they gave up the ghost they floated to the surface one by one. But people had better things to do than watch fish.

Finally he didn't come back any more. He trudged up to the third floor, yawning, as if to take a little snooze before he went ahead playing. There were several bedrooms, a powdering-room for the infrequent woman guest . . . none of them occupied at the moment. After he'd been in all of them, he came out on the landing again.

The stairs went on up a flight farther, to an attic or garret of some kind, its closed door leaning over at an angle to meet them. He listened for a minute, then started up toward it. The china knob turned uselessly, the thing was locked. He hadn't really expected it to open at his touch. He hauled up one trouser-leg to the knee, revealing his friend Thorpe's patent-leather pumps, a stretch of muscular, hairy calf, and a small metal instrument tucked under his garter. He slipped it in between the door and the jamb, maneuvered it up and down, and something clicked.

Just as he took it out again, footsteps started coming up from below. He glanced over and down the stairs; three of them, a young army! Manning, the butler, and a broad-shouldered individual with a flat nose who was probably the house-bouncer. He leaped silently down to the third floor again, dove in the nearest open door, and scuttled under the bed. Something told him it wouldn't have been enough just to stretch out on top of it and feign sleep.

They went in two rooms away, came out again; went in next-door, came out again. He pulled his legs up flat under his stomach, took his gun out and held it flat on the floor under his chin. Their six hoofs showed up in the doorway and stayed there.

"Well, he must 'a' skipped out," said the bouncer, "he ain't up here anyplace!"

"Five thousand dollars' worth of stage-money unloaded at Table Three, and the croupier only noticed it now! Each wad was sandwiched in between a couple of real bills. What I'd give to get my hands on that guy!" This from Manning. "What's the matter with you, anyway; why didn't you watch the door?" And then the sound of a sock that rocked the butler's pins down to the floor.

"But the chains is still on the inside, Mister Manning! How could he leave?"

"Ahr, you probably put 'em back up, to cover yourself!"

They went trouping down again. "How about up there, in the store-room?" the bouncer's voice came floating back.

"Ahr, that place is locked, I got

the key right in my own pocket! Don't worry!"

trying to figure things out. It looked like he was at a deadend, he told himself. Slabaugh obviously wasn't up above in the storegoom, or they wouldn't have been so indifferent about it. Where else could he be? Wasn't it likely that, even if he had been held prisoner here, he had been spirited away some place else since?

The cop Halloran might have tipped them off what he'd done. Or the informer himself might have been delirious, not known what he was saying. Or he might have meant something else entirely, and McClay had misinterpreted. There were any number of cheerless angles to the thing. The whole affair was a maze.

"Well, I'm here now," he thought.
"Might as well get what I can out of it—signal Joe from the window, and pinch Manning for running a gambling-joint. At least I've got the goods on them on that score at last!"

He scrambled up, went over to the window, peered out from behind the curtain. There hadn't been any signal prearranged; Joe was to use his own judgment if he heard shots, that was all. McCloy shot the bolt down, it was a vertical window, and got ready to open it. The room was lighted behind him, a wave of the arm would be enough. It gave a muffled, almosthuman moan as he drew the two halves apart. Something about it startled him; the association of act and sound wasn't right. Balky win-

dows squeak or grate, but don't moan. He took his hands off, looked up and down the line of division and the moan was repeated! He stepped back, away from the devilish thing.

Then he saw the hot-air register in the wall right beside it, leading down to the furnace in the basement. Its metal slats were standing open. He jumped over, closed the room door, then went back and put his ear to it. A third mean percolated dimly upward through the broad pipes. He put his mouth to it, funneled it, boomed down "Slabaugh? Slabaugh?" Then switched his ear back.

The answering moan broke up into words. "For the love of Pete, get me out of here!"

"Coming! Keep quiet!" he rumbled back.

Outside on the stairs when he started down, he saw what had covered up the noise he had made. The front hall on the ground-floor was buzzing with departing guests; the house was closing up. They were louder now that they were leaving, than they had been all night. The doors to the gaming room were standing wide open, and the lights were still on, but the only ones left in there were the croupiers, stacking chips and covering their wheels. Still, he couldn't hope to get past without . . .

"Hey, look at this!" one of them called out excitedly. "All the fish are dead! Somebody's been unloading Mumms into the tank!"

The three of them bent over it; he slipped past the door and went on

down while their backs were turned.

Down below, Manning's voice was speeding the last guest. "Don't be a stranger, now; maybe you'll have better luck next time. You want to make up those losses, you know! Cab-fare? Why, certainly!" The door banged, the chains went up.

The manager's voice exploded immediately afterward. "We're stuck with five-thousand tonight, all on account of that crooked actor-fellow, unless we can pass it off on the suckers tomorrow night! And how we gonna unload it on 'em, when we never let 'em win that much? Can you imagine anyone that low?"

McCloy, lurking just above the turn of the stairs, took time off to grin.

Manning went into a front room, evidently his office. "Tell 'em to hurry up down here, I want to go over the books. You fed him yet? Well, throw something in to him, Emerald don't want him to die on our hands! Here's the key, and watch yourself opening that door!"

McCloy flattened himself against the tilt of the stairs. The butler trudged by toward the back of the hall with a plate of left-over sandwiches. He went down a flight below to the kitchen, crossed it, and fitted a key into a ponderous-looking cellardoor. McCloy did a lockstep behind him.

The houseman turned white all at once, dropped the plate with a *clop!* "Go on, keep opening!" McCloy hissed across his shoulder, gun nudging the hollow of his back. The door

opened. "In you go! Don't hang back."

The place was windowless, pitchblack, you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. "Slabaugh!" Mc-Cloy whispered urgently. "Can you make it, or are you tied?"

## CHAPTER 7

#### Legal Form

up the steps from below into the radius of light cast by the door, unshaven, eyes blinking uselessly, in underwear and a pair of cast-off trousers. McCloy caught him by the shoulder and swept him on past and out. Then he gave the shivering Louis a hefty push in the other direction and locked the door on him.

Slabaugh was groveling over the spilled sandwiches, gnawing at them. "Come on, gotta get you out of here!" McCloy said. "Can you see yet? Follow me!"

They were all in the front office with Manning—the bouncer and the croupiers as well. "I'll hold 'em in the doorway," McCloy breathed across his shoulder. "You get the chains down and get out. I've got a friend waiting out there."

The answer was a hundred-twenty-five pounds or so of dead-weight leaning against him, then sloughing off to the floor. "You would pick a time like this to pass out!" McCloy scooped his free arm under him, managed to get him up off the floor draped over it, and lurched heavily

forward with his inanimate burden.

"What's taking Louis so long?" a voice said. "I want a night-cap—" The bouncer suddenly rounded the open doorway, and he and McCloy were staring at one another not a yard apart.

"Here it is!" McCloy grunted, and fired.

McCloy shifted lopsidedly into the radius of the doorway, gun-hand weaving, and holding Slabaugh away from it. "Now stay just like you are!" he warned. "Winnings and all. It's too pretty a picture to spoil!" The shot had carried; he could hear Joe pounding away on the other side of the door.

But Manning was behind a massive, waist-high desk, and had his hands to himself thirty seconds too long. He dropped behind it and a puff of blue talcum sprouted where his face had been, as though he were Mephistopheles doing a disappearing-act. "Don't let him get out that door, whoever he is!" he yelped. "Don't you see who he's got with him?"

McCloy felt a jar, almost as if the shot had hit him, but if it had, he didn't have time to drop. The smokeblossom kept unfolding, each time with a new pistol of living orange flame forking across the desk-top.

McCloy, backing away in a line with the open doorway, felt the street-door stop him across the shoulders. He didn't have enough hands to spare one for the chains. His first shot hit a column of silver dollars on the desk, cut it in two with a musical note, and it went scaling down to the

floor—do, re, mi, fa, sol. . . . He waited for the next orange flash, shot right into it. It made the best target, the only one, through the layers of thickening haze. Shooting at a shot!

Manning's forehead jolted up above the desk, with three eyes under it, two white ones closing and a red one opening in-between them. It went down again, and the smoke-blossom quit blooming, faded away.

The lock flew apart and out of the door, behind McCloy. "Easy, easy!" he said across the gap, "this is me!"

He let Slabaugh down on his own, groped behind him for the chains, pulled them off without taking his gun off the ineffectual croupiers, who were all behind their chairs now, palms out.

Joe came in, holding his gun and his shoulder both, and wincing. "For Pete's sake, was that a door or the side of Fort Sumter?"

Was looking out windows, milling around on the street. A gun-battle was a novelty to the Nineties. An alert newspaper-photographer showed up in the vestibule, old-fashioned tripod-camera and all. Meanwhile two cops had come in from their beat.

"Duck your head," ordered Mc-Cloy jubilantly, "till I kiss you!" He stabbed his gun in at the croupiers once more. "Stay just as you are, chins up so he can get your maps." To one of the cops he said: "Get behind Manning, hold him up in his chair. Stack up those dollars like they were." And to pix: "Shoot the works.

You're not doing this for your paper, you're doing it for the District Attorney's office!"

Flashlight-powder flared bluely.

"Now chase up to the second floor," was the next order, "strip the covers off the wheels, plant these guys behind'em, and take some more! If this don't stand up in court, nothing ever will! You two officers book 'em and hold 'em for me. And there's a chap in the cellar. C'mon, Joe, we're going places!"

The emboldened bulb-squeezer wanted to know: "Who's this guy, Mr. McCloy; any objection to giving me his name?" pointing to Slabaugh.

"Not at all," said McCloy. "Drop in at my office tomorrow."

They got him into a carriage and drove off.

"He's coming to," said Joe. He suddenly snatched his hand away, as though Slabaugh had bitten it. The lines of the palm showed sticky red. "Hey, he's been shot! He's dying, that's what's the matter with him!"

"I felt the jar of it!" McCloy said, and then with an unbelieving look on his face: "Emerald's own men have sent their boss to his death! Who says there is no justice? But even so, I've gotta try to pull him through, can't just let him die, even if it would cinch the thing. I'm no criminal! I'm taking him to my place, Joe; jump off and get a doctor, and rush him over there like you had wings!

"And wait a minute, this is the most important thing of all! Y'know Judge Stanley? Y'know where he lives? Stop in there and bring him

with you, if you've gotta drag him by main force! With one of the legal forms they use in court when they want to . . ." He leaned over and whispered it.

The detective flashed him a single eloquent look, one of the same kind of looks Emerald Eddie had flashed his lawyer that night at the Mansion, and dropped off into the darkness.

Slabaugh was in McCloy's bed and Mrs. Clayton was feeding him whiskey with a tablespoon, when Joe and the Judge got there. They had even beat the doctor over.

"Got the form with you?" McCloy asked.

"Just a hand-written petition on a sheet of paper will do. The court-stenographer can make out the proper form tomorrow. You'll have to appear as his proxy, if he's unable to. I'll fill it out for you." He dashed off a couple of lines, handed it to McCloy. "Just have him sign his name at the bottom, and you two sign as witnesses."

They propped Slabaugh up, stuck a pen in his hands.

"Sure he's in his right mind, not delirious?" cautioned the judge.

"I've explained to him, and he wants to do it. He's going fast—"

"Not too fast to take Danberry with me, though!" Slabaugh panted.

"Don't fail to insert the new one on there as well," said the judge. "What one are you taking?"

Slabaugh's glazing eyes roamed the room slowly, vacantly. "What's today. Wednesday?" he whispered weakly. "That's the day I'm dying.

Wednesday it is!" He scribbled, let the pen fall out of his hand. "I'm dying happy," he said to McCloy, "only see to it you send him after me. That's all!"

The judge took the sheet of paper, scanned it. "Application granted," he said, signing his own name to it. He passed it to McCloy and the detective for their signatures. "This takes effect at once. I'll have the court-clerk file it in the morning."

Mrs. Clayton returned, bringing the doctor. He bent over the figure on the bed, straightened up again. "This man's dead. Must have died just now, as I got here. I'll have to make out a report. What's his name?"

McCloy glanced at the judge, and the judge glanced at Joe, and Joe glanced at McCloy. McCloy smiled a little, a smile that boded ill for Emerald Eddie Danberry. "He died," he said, consulting the petition for a legal change of name the judge had just granted, "under the name of William Wednesday."

\* \* \*

"You have been tried and found guilty," said the judge, "of the murder of one Barney Slabaugh, in the Adelphi Hotel in this city, on the night of June 10th, 1897. Your refusal to deny this, your inability to do so, was notable earlier in the trial and unparalleled in its brazenness. The testimony of your own confederates, against whom charges of conspiracy to murder one William Wednesday, at your behest and acting

upon instructions from you, are still pending, has convinced this court and jury of your guilt beyond the shadow of a doubt.

"The attempts of counsel for the defense to prove that the identity of the first man killed was not Barney Slabaugh and that the second one, who met his death at the hands of your late employee Manning, was—has failed completely, due to the rather grim but necessary expedient on the part of the District Attorney's office of having the very clothing Slabaugh was killed in, produced in court as evidence, as well as photographs of Slabaugh taken at the morgue in that clothing.

"Your own former confederates, turning State's evidence, have identified the unnamed man kept prisoner in your gambling-house for seven days before his death as Wednesday and not Slabaugh, although to them he was anonymous at the time. The woman Betty Farmer has admitted being prevailed upon by you to decoy

the unlucky Slabaugh to his death.

"The men O'Shea and Burke have admitted being ordered by you to shoot Slabaugh to death, only to have you step into their places personally at the last moment. It has been shown that you are a menace to society and this community. Have you anything to say before sentence is passed upon you?"

The haggard, ashen-faced figure at the bar, unrecognizable any longer as the florid, bejeweled Emerald Eddie Danberry of only a week before, gritted out a most unusual request . . . fitting conclusion to a most unusual trial.

"Just give me five minutes alone in a room—alone," he begged savagely, "with my legal counsel—with that skunk sitting over there!"

"Request refused," said the judge. "I sentence you to death in the electric chair at the State Penitentiary, during the week of November 4th, and may God have mercy on your soul!"

# IT'S A WOMAN'S WORLD

By Joseph C. Stacey

After filching a fifty-dollar Treasury check made out to one Willie M. Gilkey, a Dallas, Texas, man altered his old draft card so he could use it as identification, then went into a pawnshop and tried to cash the check. The pawnbroker took one look at the check, which was marked family allowance, and one look at the altered draft card, which now read: Willie M. Gilkey, and notified the police.

What had tripped up the check thief? The fact that he was a man, while Willie M. Gilkey, in spite of the name, had to be a woman. Government family allowance checks are never issued to

men!



