

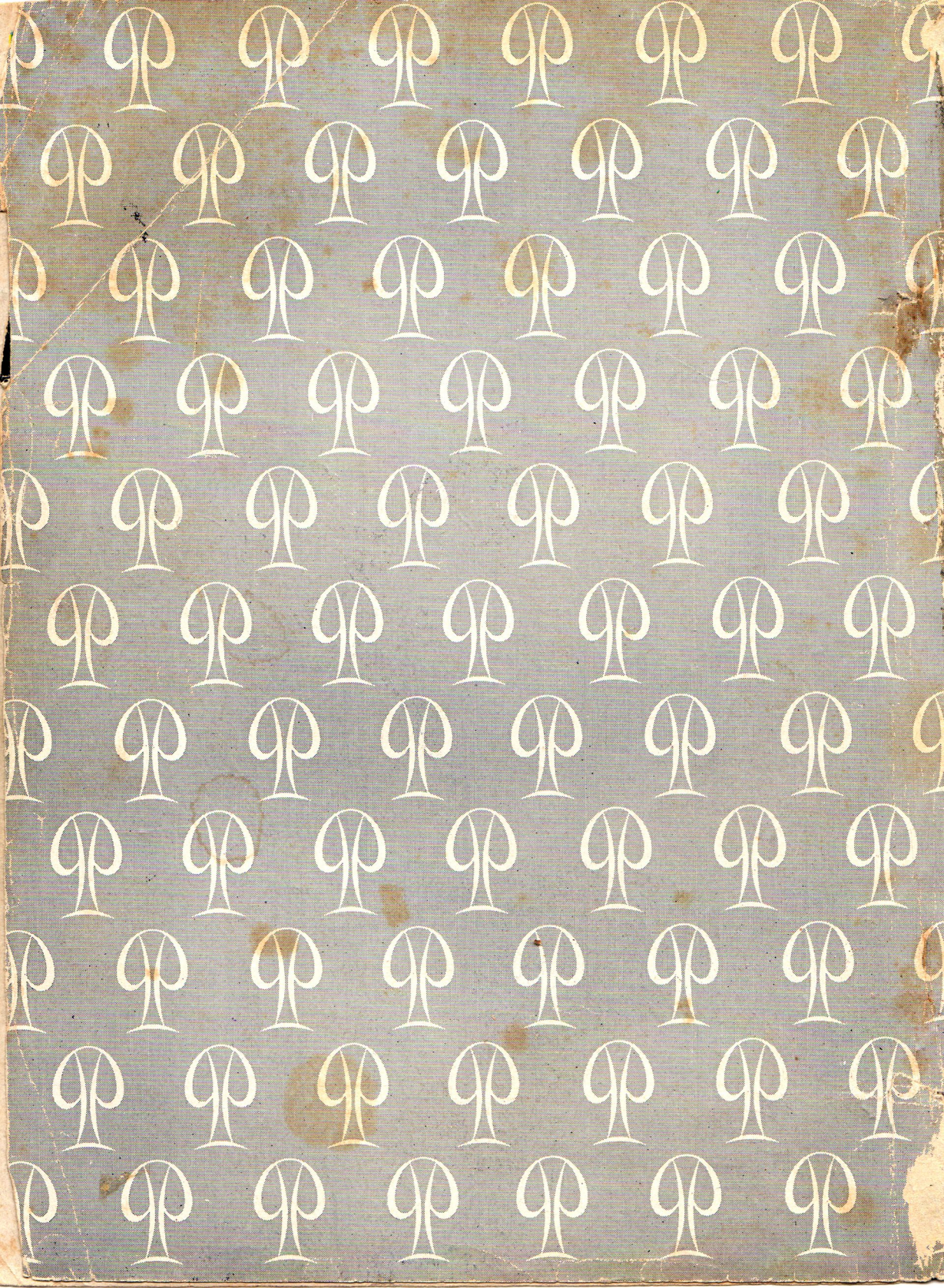
Detective *FICTION*

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Violence Inherited
by JOHN D. MacDONALD





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Once in a long, long time you come across a story that is not only memorable but almost unforgettable. Such a story is this. It has been called by Frederick C. Davis, a fine writer in his own name, "The best detective story I have ever read." We wish we could tell you more about the author. Unfortunately, all we know is that he is one of two writing brothers named Robbins who lived on the West Coast when we last heard from them. If and when they reappear on the writing scene, they will receive a warm welcome here. Meanwhile, we are proud to share with you this very rare and haunting story.

HEAR THAT MOURNFUL WIND

by DANE GREGORY

*When she is murdered, let no one
mourn.*

*This was destined when she was born:
But save your tears for the slayer who
Weeps on the very blade that slew.*

Red-inked entry in Claybaugh's
Giant Scrap Book.

WELL, I DON'T know. They held the services the second day after all this took place up on the Hill; but while that's crowding things a little for these parts, I suppose it was thought best on account of the unseasonable weather. Anyhow, the news had traveled far

enough so there was a very good attendance.

Miss Eubanks had been a pleasant woman, given to a few whims in her later years—as who is not, I always say—but highly thought of by all.

After the main service there was a long procession out to the cemetery

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and then a brief graveside service where they tell me the widowed Mrs. Crownover—she'd been Miss Eubanks' dearest friend—created a little excitement by offering to throw herself in the open vault.

I wasn't there for that part of it, however. It being a Saturday morning, I had to get back to the barber shop.

Most of the time the shop kept me pretty busy on a Saturday, and that had been especially true since Copeland Powers put away his apron to take a houseman's job over at the Club. Not that I minded, you understand. I've always been one to like lots of company and baseball talk around me; and, anyhow, it was just as Tookie used to say.

That was the wife: her folks had named her Tucker after some relation on her mother's side, but everybody called her Tookie.

"Chigger," she used to tell me in her laughing way, "a chink in the till is worth two in the plaster."

But I don't know. It may have been the strange weather or it may have been that a big funeral procession always seems to drag the quiet of death through a town. Whatever it was, I never passed a longer, slower Saturday morning.

It was not seeing Charlie at the shine-chair that got to me the worst. I put a good stiff edge on the razors and then I moved the Lucky Tiger calendar over to the south wall, but it seemed like the rest of the time there was nothing to do with my hands. Under the circumstances, I

guess it was only natural I should think quite a bit about Charlie.

Let's see, now, he'd been working for me every Saturday—oh, it must have been all of six years—till the day he got his big hands on that axe. Charlie always did like sharp things, but of course nobody thought much about it *then*. It was six years, all right, because it comes back to me now that it was that terrible hot summer right after Tookie went to Wichita, Kansas.

Well, I don't know. As I was going to say, this particular Saturday morning I felt about as sorry for him as I had when he first came bawling into town with the slats of his dad's whip across his forty-year-old shoulders.

It's not that I'm taking up for murder most foul, as Colonel Murfree likes to call it. Whether by Charlie or by Adam's off-ox, it's a crime against nature and I guess we all see eye to eye on that. But Charlie had been a great out-door man, you know; and we don't have Court Week here until late September. It gave me a shut-in feeling myself to think of spending three months in jail.

I MADE UP a little package out of some funnypaper books and then I put on my hat and coat and hung up the "Back Soon" sign. I went upstreet toward the county jail, which is four blocks south along Main in what some call the old pecan grove. That way the wind was in my face.

It seemed like the wind would never let up. Six days steady now it had been blowing in from the south;

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but not hard and not hurried and not even hot enough that a man could break out in a good clean sweat. It had the smell of dying flowers on it, and it was slow and smooth. You could open your hand against it and it would run like a woman's hand through your fingers; and in the night when it slipped along the eaves it was like a woman's voice.

Even the sheriff seemed to feel it a little, though Claybaugh is scarcely what anyone would call an edgy sort. He was working away at a crossword puzzle. His coat and vest and shirt were thrown across the back of his chair.

"Chigger," said Sheriff Claybaugh. "Eight-letter word beginning with H and ending with E and meaning 'capital offense.' Any ideas?"

I said no, then added: "I brought Charlie some funny books, Clay. *Animal Antics*. They're the only ones that don't make him cry."

"That's thoughtful. Strange about Charlie going beserk on us, ain't it? Everybody knew he was a little turned, but nobody thought he'd ever turn completely beserkwards."

"Claybaugh, that ain't funny!"

"I know it ain't, Chig." The sheriff turned his blue eyes up to me and they were soft. "I'm fond of Charlie my ownself, and I just can't hardly see him taking the wrong side of an axe to a gentle old soul like Miss Eubanks. Nope. I can't hardly see it happen."

"Well," I said, "he likes sharp things, Clay. No getting around it, Charlie always appreciated a good

cutting piece. And there's weather."

Claybaugh huffed out his cheeks. "Tell a man there's weather. She's a sirocco for fair."

"Come twice?"

"You ought to do some word puzzles your ownself. Sirocco is what they call it in the tropical places when a wind blows in from the south this way. Makes people jumpy as cats, somehow, and now and then one of 'em goes on the hunt like Charlie. It's like the same chord of music played over and over till it runs through your bones like a scream."

"Say, don't it?"

Claybaugh said, "But it don't come often here. Last bad spell was six years ago. I remember the time because that was the year somebody boiled up crow meat and ate it to pay off a mid-term election bet. And that was the year—"

He unhooked the star from his uppers and began to pick away at a little spot of egg-yellow that had hardened into the groove.

"Well, I can talk about it now," I said. "That was the year Tookie packed up her duds and left me."

Claybaugh shook his head. "Pretty little thing. Cute as a cardinal with all that red hair. But, Chig, she'd been a flirting girl from the first." He put his key-ring on the desk. "Guess I can trust you with these, boy, but you watch Charlie real close."

"Tell a man I will."

Claybaugh came clear out of his chair and slapped the roll-top like someone killing bugs. "Homicide!" he

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yelled. "*Homicide!* Damn it, Chigger, all this time it's been plain as the nose on your face!"

I edged away from him a little and ran one finger up to the nerve that sometimes draws at my lip. "Come twice?" I said.

Claybaugh dipped his pen in the bottle of red ink. He sat down and began to scratch letters across the word puzzle. "Begins with H and ends with E, don't it? You watch Charlie, boy. Never can tell what may be in a man's mind."

I WENT IN there to Charlie's cell, and Charlie said through his balled hands, "I just couldn't seem to eat 'er, sheriff. You can warm 'er up for my supper, though, can't you?"

I said, "It's me."

He took his knuckles out of his eyes and they were tender. "I said all the time you might come and see me, Mr. Deems. I told the sheriff so."

"Well, and why not, Charlie? I brought you a slight something, too."

He brightened his eyes at the funnypaper book. "Cub bear ones?"

Then he said, "Miss Eubanks thought maybe I could learn to puzzle out the short words. She said so, Mr. Deems. But they wouldn't let me go to the service—oh, no, not *them!* Wasn't usual, the sheriff said."

"Charlie," I said, "it really ain't. Claybaugh tries to be fair."

"But I didn't chop her!" said Charlie. "Not one lick, I didn't, Mr. Deems. I need some new clothes awful bad, but you just couldn't have hired me to chop Miss Eubanks."

I sat down on the edge of Charlie's bunk and loosened my collar some so I could breathe better. "Seems like you were up there on the Hill, though," I said.

"On'y because Miss Eubanks likes flowers."

"Come twice?"

Charlie said, "She was gonna put in a big rock garden there, people talked. She was gonna stump out that old crabble orchard she taken over from the bank. So I says I'll go up there and offer to chop for Miss Eubanks. I figured she'd leave me chop, Mr. Deems, because everyone knows how handy I am with—"

His face bleached now and I thought for a minute he was going to yell. "But not that way, Mr. Deems," he whispered.

"Maybe we better talk about the cub bear books."

"The wind was on the back of my neck," said Charlie. He was shaking a little and hunting a place for his hands. "It was like someone breathing on me, Mr. Deems, and it was dretful up there and I wanted to turn at the gate. But that was when I hear the scream. '*Jim sang his'n purty!*' it screamed. '*Jim sang his'n purty!*'"

"Come twice?"

He said it again.

"Charlie," I told him, "that's wild. Miss Eubanks never owned a talking crow in her life."

"Wasn't no crow that screamed it, Mr. Deems. It was pore Miss Eubanks her ownself."

"Charlie," I said, "that story would be plain poison in court. Miss Eu-

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banks had taught school all her life, and everyone knows she made a chore of her grammar."

He clenched his big face and went on talking. "I wanted to go the other way, but Miss Eubanks had been my dear friend. I run and I run towards the house, and direc'ly I got to the door it was bad, Mr. Deems. She set there with her head up against the door, and I thought right away something might be out of whack because the axe was in her. The axe was in—the axe, Mr. Deems."

"Charlie."

"And I was crying a little, I guess, and I says, 'Miss Eubanks,' I says to her, 'how come anyone would want to chop *you*?' Charlie put his mouth too close to my ear. "And then there was the Sign," he whispered.

"The Sign?" I asked.

"It was dretful," whispered Charlie. "Dead as she is, *up* jumps her arm like this, Mr. Deems; and she points Out There! She points Out There to that old crabble orchard—and then *down* goes her arm like this. It on'y made a soft little spank on the step, though."

It was the way he told it, somehow. I said, "Charlie!"

"And I took up the axe and I mogged for the trees, but the wind could mog faster than me. It was dretful when I got to the orchard. There was a shadow sixty-five miles long that run through the grass like a snake, but I could have stood that, maybe." He put his mouth to my ear again. "On'y thing I couldn't stand was the Women."

"Women?"

Charlie whispered, "It don't get in the books, I guess, but maybe the millionaires have got some *reason* for keeping it from us. When that south wind shook the leaves, I knew. It blew the moon all silver and green through the crabble trees; and the trees kep' saying: '*Oo-h-h, Charlie! Ah-h-h, Charlie! Tell the boys hel-lo-o-o Charlie, and don't do a thing I wouldn't do*.'"

He pecked at my knee with his forefinger then, but I don't suppose I jumped more than two or three feet at the outside. "You tell Colonel Murfree and maybe he'll put it in the *Democrat*," said Charlie. "Them crabble trees up on the Hill, Mr. Deems, they're dead women lifting their pore lean arms to fluff out their hair and try to look purty again."

"Charlie," I said, "not another word! A man can stand so much and no more."

"That's what I know," said Charlie. "I couldn't have gone on into them trees if I'd been bare-naked and Pop behind me with the gad. I yapped like a pup and I made for the road, and there I was swinging that dretful axe and running off at the head when the Allison's come uphill in their car." His mouth reached for his ear lobes again. "How's Mrs. Allison today? Hate to think of her being down sick."

"Now, Charlie, you don't want to be a cry-baby all the time, do you? Look, Charlie," I told him, "you haven't even opened up your funny-paper book."

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He unrolled the funnypaper books and out rolled that old Navy Colt of mine—the one I got from Cope-land Powers when he bet on the wrong sheriff.

CHAPTER 2

"We've Got to Think of the Living"

CHARLIE COOLED off his fingers on the leg of his cords. His mouth opened wide, then closed very slowly. He leaned close to me, whispered: "Gun?"

"Gun," I agreed.

"No," whispered Charlie.

I rattled the key-ring at him and said, "The Allison boys are taking their mother up north awhile—they think maybe she'll get over her break-down sooner there. Well, Charlie, they've got a nice cool cyclone-cellar where you could hole up for weeks. Would be a nice cozy place."

He turned his face to the window and *whuffed* like a dog. "But maybe you'd get in bad with—"

"I'll have a yarn for Claybaugh—don't you fret about that. Charlie, maybe you're guilty as sin, but other-hand maybe you're not. One way or the other, I wouldn't keep a cannibal shoat cooped up in weather like this. Not when the south wind is blowing."

Charlie moved his feet. "The sheriff give me a big cavalry sword oncet."

It was muggy as a swamp in that little cell, and the nape of my neck began to draw at the hairline. "Damn it," I said, "you don't think I'm telling you to shoot at him, do you? All

you've got to do is pour enough lead around the place to keep him interested in his word-puzzle. And then you mog, understand? Man comes in here offering you a chance and you stand around thinking up crazy things instead of mogging."

Charlie coaxed, "Don't lay 'er on my old sore back, Mr. Deems." He took the gun and he took the key-ring and he opened up the door and he went.

I lay down on the floor near the cub bear books and looked up at the long crack that ran across the ceiling. The bunnybooks had the root-beerish smell of Bigler's Pharmacy.

I guess ordinarily the Colt would have made a terrific *boom*, but in all that soft heat the shots had a lazy, rolling sound like a cowbell heard at dusk. I lay where I was and listened to Claybaugh's chair lean hard against the wall and something heavy turn over once to scratch at the floor like a badger. Then things were quiet.

Claybaugh came in sweating a little and dragging Charlie along by the scruff of his shirt. "Damn it, Chigger," he scolded. "I told you to watch him. Remember I warned you."

Charlie had never been much to look at, of course, but he was worse than ever with his shirt front stained red clear down to the old trunk strap he used for a belt. I came up onto my hands and knees and shook my head a little to put things back where they belonged.

"I was watching him like a hawk," I said, "but even a hawk can't see backwards. And who'd ever have

thought he knew the rabbit punch?"

Claybaugh threw Charlie onto the bunk and wiped off his fingers with the funny books. "You didn't even say you were toting a gun," he complained.

"Tell a man I was. Think I'd call on Charlie without side-arms of some kind?"

"Well," said Claybaugh, "all I wish is he hadn't made me do it. What'd the poor stiff want with a gun, anyhow? He threw every one of his shots straight at the floor."

Charlie's feet looked only a little bigger than gravestones with his toes turned up.

I shut my eyes and said, "Well, there'd have been a lot of loose talk if Charlie had broke out of jail. I hate having this happen, Clay, but I guess you handled 'er the only way you could."

"The only merciful way, after all," said Claybaugh. He blew his nose and heaved a great sigh. "Damn it, though, I'm going to give Charlie particular hell when he comes out of this! That bottle of red ink I slapped him with went all over my word-puzzle, Chigger."

Well, I'll say this for the shots: they warmed up trade a little. People usually come to my shop for the fresh news, and it made things even better that I'd been right there in the thick of the fray when Charlie put on his jail-break. By first-coke time that afternoon I had a better than fair crowd.

"Oh, Charlie's not really a bad sort," I told them. "Another sheriff

might have played 'er different, but I'm kind of glad old Claybaugh is the easy-going type. I wouldn't want anything to happen to Charlie. I'd hate to think of Charlie stopping a bullet from Clay's gun."

Cotton Maxey made the noise he makes with his lips. That's the blond Maxey boy—the one that wears the green suit and the old Settler's Day button reading: *I Love My Wife, but Oh You Kid.*

"Charlie can't help from liking sharp things," said Cotton Maxey. "They tell me his mother once jumped on his head because he forgot to dig up a fresh batch of eating-clay."

"Well," I said to the stuffed raccoon up on the set-back, "you can't hardly blame her for that. I understand she'd been planning a big charity supper for the Maxey family."

There was a sort of embarrassed silence after I said it. Neither the 'coon nor anybody else wanted to break out a smile, because Cotton packs around a barlow knife only a little less wicked than the razor I was holding. He decided to let it ride. But the look he gave me wasn't friendly at all.

WE WERE most of us somewhat on the peck, I guess. The southerly wind had blown in all day, shaking the dry catalpas along Main so that they danced like fingers on a piano. I'd closed up my shop tight against the sound; and as Les Turnbridge came in, the air in that place was scarcely a day deader than Adam.

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"She's thinning out on top, Les," I told him.

"I'm paying you to cut it, not wear it." He looked up at the 'coon in the setback as if he would like to shoot it again. "So Charlie goes faunching in there with a couple of big guns and Claybaugh slaps him with a book. Wears a gun his ownself, don't he?"

"Oh, it wasn't quite like that, Les. Anyhow, Claybaugh hates to shoot at people he knows."

I oiled up the clippers a little; they had a baby-chick sound that wore on my nerves. "It's not that I'm saying anything against Miss Eubanks," I said. "There wasn't a better woman or a finer teacher in the world. I'll leave that to Cotton Maxey, there—he must've got to know her pretty well those five or six years he spent in the Fourth B. She taught your little ones, most of you, and I guess she'd have taught mine if Tookie and I . . . Well, she was a fine woman."

"Set up with my wife once," said Les. His strawberry mark had a hot, chafed look under the clippers.

"Set up with everybody's wife. Fed hungry bellies and clothed naked Maxeys, whether they wanted to be or not. Asked nothing more of life than the right to raise a few little flowers. But like I say, she's gone now—couldn't even smell the beautiful floral offerings at her own service—while poor old Charlie sits up there healthy enough to tear the neck off a horse. And it's the living we've got to think of, boys. Remember that."

Cotton Maxey bent over to stare

at the sleepy June bug that had blown in from the street. There was a sound of breathing in the room, thick and slow like the wind. Crabby old G. D. Harvison Murrow balled his hand on Cotton's new issue of *Ginger Snaps* and peered at me out of eyes that were only a little more glassy than the stuffed raccoon's.

"You'd have to take up for Charlie! Sure, you hired him in the first place. Well, it ain't gonna do you a lick of good, Chigger! He'll get *his* next Court Week, the axe-murdering—"

"That so, G.D.?"

"Ain't it?"

I blew on the clippers. "Few months from now," I told them all, we'll look out there and see old Charlie swinging downstreet with a grin on his face from here to the Hollow. Yes, and his big old cavalry sword clunking along at his side. Well, that's all right. Charlie ain't a bad man at heart, you know."

Les Turnridge's neck twitched under the lather. "How do you mean, Chigger?"

"Why, man alive," I said, "there ain't a single one of those big-upstate-millionaire-lawyers who won't be fighting for the chance to take Charlie's case! Just for the fame of it, I mean. And then what happens? With the exception of Cotton Maxey, there, every man-jack of you would have to tell the truth on the stand."

Cotton opened up his barlow knife and began to strop it softly on the sole of his shoe.

Les Turnidge said, "What truth? Or maybe we ain't got the right to

know. We're only taxpayers! It's root-hog-or-die for the poor man, but some big-fat-upstate-millionaire-lawyer—Ouch!"

"You leaned on the blade your ownself, Les. Why, Charlie's a little *different*, that's all, and you'd have to to say so, wouldn't you? They'll send him away to a *place* for a while, and in three-four months—oh, maybe six—back comes Charlie to his grindstone and his tools. Well, hell, I like Charlie. I'd hate to think of him being cooped up for the rest of his days."

The June bug tottered over to the fallen *Ginger Snaps* and looked at a row of letters reading: *Babes in the Woodshed, by Dodo Dare*. Cotton's knife went *whickety-whack* in the quiet. G. D. Harvison Murrow bawled:

"Released as cured, you mean? You mean a bunch of big-fat-bloated-upstate-millionaire-lawyers can come down here and—"

"It's how things are done, G. D. Right or wrong, it's legal, and we've got to stand by the law. I'll always say the crowd done the wrong thing in that beast-man case up north, though it was sort of natural."

"What beast-man case?" said Les. "Ouch, damn it!"

"Criminy, don't jump around so! Well, some of the papers called it the Frenzied Frankenstein case. Seems this poor stiff had just been released from a place—been there three-four months. He thinks, '*Well. Nothing like having a license to kill, is there?*' So they were having a sort of Settler's

Day like the one we have in October, and—oh, I hate to talk about it."

THE JUNE bug had turned west and crawled along a crack in the floor. He was trying to find air, I guess. Tell it!" screamed G. D. Harvison Murrow. "Tell it, Chigger!"

"Well, it was the little girl's death that got the town worked up so bad. The other eight people were all adults, and they should have had sense enough not to get in the way of a killer armed with a scythe. But the little yellow-haired girl . . . Anyhow, they called on Mr. Killer that night and they took him out of the jail. No fuss, no ceremony. They just took him right out and hung him higher than Haman's headache on the nearest tree."

Les said, "But how did they—"

"Oh, the jailhouse was a small one—not much bigger or stronger than ours, I guess. And then it seems the sheriff was an easy-going sort of man, too. You know the kind of man that wouldn't shoot an egg-sucking dog or a ditto Maxey."

Cotton tested the edge of the knife on a match he'd had clamped between his teeth.

"You mean there was no trouble at all?" said G. D. Harvison Murrow.

"Well, I guess a couple of rich lawyers blew off a little, but the county officials winked at each other and let 'er ride. Some people thought it would have been better if they'd handled it that way when the gorillaman drew his first blood—but like I was saying in the first place, I don't

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hold with none of that. Men shouldn't take the law in their own hands, not even when it's a matter of protecting their homes and dear ones."

"I've got four little tykes of my own," yelled Lester Turnidge, "and, Chigger, I'm just sort of curious to know why! Yes, and one of 'em's a little yellow-haired girl, too! Little Sunshine, we call her, and only the other day she was saying, 'Papa,' she was saying, 'don't call me Little Sunshine any more because sometime the sunshine—sometimes the sunshine goes—'"

"Well, Les?"

"—out," whispered Les. "Why, Chigger? Why? Why?"

"Just ain't right, that's all. Shows poor spirit . . . There you are, Les. Clean as the rim of a bowl. Next pair of ears to be lowered!"

G. D. H. Murrow ground his footprints into one of those sporty-looking women they have in the magazine. "Poor spirit, says Chigger! Poor spirit! But it's fine and dandy for a whole slough of big-fat-bloated-plutocratic-multimillionaire-corporation-lawyers—yes, and upstate ones on top of that!—to come down here and lay every horror in the handbook on us! That's all right, now ain't it?"

"Easy does it, G. D. You don't want to go around talking like a sore-head."

G. D. shook his two fists at the stuffed raccoon. "Just like Claybaugh, that's *his* trouble! Red-handed Frankenstein monster goes screaming in there with a gun in each hand and that big old cavalry sword in the

other—and Claybaugh he's too timid to do any more than spank him with a word-puzzle! Afraid to buck the System! Well, he's a part of the System, that's why—and I ain't voted for him any of these past sixteen years without wondering when he'd show his hand!"

He got in the barber-chair panting a little. It was stuffy in there, you know.

I said, "You hadn't ought to talk that way about Claybaugh, boys. Clay's all right. It's just that he don't like to shoot at people he knows. Why, if a crowd of you was to go up there tonight and say, 'Claybaugh, we can't sleep a wink till we've taken care of Charlie'—well, like I say, what would happen? Why, Claybaugh he'd just only shake his head sadly and tell you: 'Guess it's your right, boys, but I hate to think of what the millionaires will say.' She's thin on top, G. D."

"Why wouldn't it be? I'm only a poor man, not one of these big-fat-baldheaded—"

"But of course," I said, "we don't live in that kind of town. And Claybaugh probably wouldn't be there, anyhow—he comes in at ten o'clock for his Sunday shave. Reminds me, I understand he may see Cotton Maxey's pa tomorrow and make him promise to use a lighter bullwhip when his crippled old mother drags the plow."

I picked up the straight-edge again. "And personally, boys," I told them all, "I'm glad to be living in the kind of town where a sheriff can safely

leave his jail. I'm glad for Charlie's sake if nothing else. I wouldn't want anything to happen to poor old Charlie. . . . Something bothering you, Cotton?"

Cotton crouched low and put the point of his barlow knife slowly through the June bug's middle. Just in time, too. Another second and the bug would have found that crack in the door.

CHAPTER 3

"Oh, Johnny, My Bonny, My Dear"

WELL, I DON'T KNOW. This is a kind of quiet little garden spot where nothing much ever happens after dark, though we do manage to scare up a bit of excitement at the fall street dances, and I guess there's little or no point in my keeping the shop open so late on a Saturday. The twilight was nice. At dusk the wind had turned off to a whisper.

Cotton Maxey came upstreet putting one yellow shoe ahead of the other with the particular care of a cat on a clothesline. He was wearing an old carnival streamer around his green hat—*Out For a Good Time*, was what it said—and even with the wind going north I could smell the green choc smell that came south.

"Chigger," said Cotton. "Don't mean to tell me you're missing the party."

I didn't say aye-yes-or-damn.

"Chigger," said Cotton. "I figured of course you had your invite, him being a special friend. I even brought

Charlie a something my ownself."

It was a fudget I guess he'd picked up on the wheel o'fortune for not more than ten or twelve dollars—a little black ball-shaped tiepin with the numeral eight on it.

"Wouldn't want him to go tacky," said Cotton. "When a man wears a tie only once in his life, seems like he'd ought to wear something *on* it."

"Cotton," I told him, "I hope some day you'll drop around and open your barlow knife close enough to me so I can make twins of my favorite barroom poet, and bring your dog. If there's a fleatrap cur sick enough to like your smell, I'll provide a cur for each poet."

The light of his cigarette blew across his eyes and they were crazy. "Oh, will you?" said Cotton. "Oh, peachy!" He crooked his wrists like an edgy girl and went on up towards the grove.

That would have been about half after nine, I'd judge. Yes, I remember it well now; I looked at the clock when I went back inside.

It was quiet and stuffy for a while after that, and there was nothing much to keep me interested but the new supply catalogue.

It was 9:55, as I recall, when I heard the first of the sounds. *Smack!* it went—*smackety-smack!*—about like that. It probably would have sounded much louder up-wind, but coming all four blocks downtown it merely had a kind of soft, flat note.

That soon shaded off into nothing at all; and it must have been anyhow five minutes before I heard this

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heavier noise, which was more like someone beating the top of a barrel.

A man yelled once above the noise, but the wind had cracked his words to pieces long before they reached the corner of Main and Seminole. Or maybe he didn't say anything in actual words; it sounded like G. D. Harvison Murrow uncorking a little rage. For the most part, however, there was only this *tunkety-tunk* effect and the various small sounds in the trees.

I sat where I was and didn't say aye-yes-or-hell, but of course it was something a man couldn't gloss over altogether. Even the 'coon in the setback appeared to be edgy. The jailhouse was bound to give in before long.

Take it all in all, I was pretty well pleased when Claybaugh came in for his shave. A man likes company around him at such times, you know. That was close on 10:10, I believe, though Claybaugh insisted the clock was four minutes slow by evening alamo time.

HE HUNG UP his coat and his vest and guns and he got in the chair. "Not too heavy on the hot towels, Chigger. Seems like it's hectic enough already with this bad harmattan going night and day."

"Come twice?"

"Tramontane, mistral, levanter or sirocco," said Claybaugh. "The wind that walks in the leaves, as the poet says."

I laid on the towels and boiled him only to a scolded baby blush. I took

off the towels and said, "You slung the bolts and came up through the skylight, I gather. Well, personally, I think you done the right thing. No use a man's going the roundabout way for trouble."

We couldn't very well pretend to ignore it, you know; that would just have embarrassed the both of us. Somewhere the boys had scared up what sounded to me like a crowd-sized ridgepole; and on that sleepy breeze it made a firm whanging noise only a little more noticeable than the late draught. *Dum-dum-dum*—like that.

"Guess you're right, Chigger," sighed Claybaugh. "Anyhow, Charlie'll soon be out of it all."

"That's how I look at it, too."

"And it seems to be a good orderly crowd," said the sheriff.

"Well," I told him, "I could see 'er coming this afternoon, Clay—there was some talk against Charlie right in here. But after all, what's a man to do?"

Claybaugh huffed out a scallop of lather. He drummed his fingers on the sides of the chair and said: "Not much of nothing, I guess. And how I look at it is this: if the jail can be torn down, county needs a new jail bad. Well, it'll be a whole lot easier to talk up a bond issue when Charlie's out of his misery at last and people start feeling low-down about the whole thing."

"That's a businesslike way to look at 'er, all right."

"Blade seems a little dull, Chigger," said Claybaugh. "I'd feel sort

of easier in my mind if Charlie had done more damage with his shooting-piece today; but there's this much about it, Chig—a hang-rope jerks practic'ly any murder case out of the road. I don't know—even the courts usually assume that the dead man was guilty as charged. Well, that's human."

They were really drumming old Charlie out of there for fair. A broken window-pane tittered high on the gust; but the only windows in the jail were well above a tall man's reach. The thing that seemed to draw on your nerves was the steady beat of that big old ridgepole fighting at the door.

It worked a little on Claybaugh, too, though Claybaugh has never been the edgy sort. He traded stares with the stuffed raccoon and began to drone through his nose while I whipped a little new into the razor. It was that tired old down-country *Johnny Allen* turn that goes in one ear and always has such a hard time finding its way out the other.

*Johnny, oh, Johnny, oh, poor Johnny Allen—
Why does he shudder and what does he fear?*

Only a voice calling over and over,

Crying: Oh, Johnny, my bonny, my dear!

Crying forever to poor Johnny Allen:

Johnny, oh, bonny, oh, dear,

My dear,

My dear.

"Clay," I told him, "that's plain morbid for a Saturday night."

"Don't blame you much," said Claybaugh. "Is kind of lonesome, ain't it? There was another song you hated bad, as I remember. That was the one Cotton Maxey used to coo

on the various pool-hall programs: '*Looky, looky, looky! Here comes Tookie! See you later, boys.*' Wup! Nicked me a little."

"That's a bad mole, Clay. It ought to come off."

"Didn't it?" said Claybaugh. He twiddled his thumbs. "Well, Tookie was a pretty little thing, Chigger. Never forget how she used to dance her way downstreet with all that bright hair burning around her throat and just the right do on her mouth to make it look like fireweed honey tastes. . . . Oh, she was pretty! But, Chig, there was more than once I wanted to reverse the order and spank her till she barked like a fox—and I guess maybe it was even worse for an edgy kind of man like you."

I tapped a spot of lotion onto Claybaugh's nick. "Tookie has her faults," I told him. "As who does not, I always say."

"Still and all, Chigger, it couldn't've been a whole lot of fun for you when Tookie came sneakfooting in with choc on her breath and her nice roz-berry lipstick worn down to the quick. I felt for you, Chigger—I really did."

I didn't say aye-yes-or-what of it. It was like that line in McGuffey's reader: The barber kept on shaving.

Claybaugh said: "Must've been particular hell, I should think, with the south wind singing that old, old song: *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now*. You remember it, don't you? Tookie used to whistle it sometimes when she played the piano. . . . And you remember the wind, don't you, Chigger? That strange wind six sum-

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mers ago—the slow dark wind that poured over the world like sorghum over a cake. . . . Oh, by the way, Chigger, where *is* Tookie?”

“Puff out your cheek a little, will you? There. Oh, she went to Wichita, Clay. Thought you knew. Understand she’s going with some big-millionaire-lawyer now.”

CHAPTER 4

“I Hate Those Old Sad Songs”

THE CROWD upstreet seemed bigger and noisier now. While I wasn’t there at the time, of course, I have an idea the boys at the Club had broken up their pan game in a great big hurry when the news scattered out on the wind.

Cope Powers has always been quite an organizer, you know—he’s president of the Hustle Up dinner group here in town—and now you could hear somebody with Cope’s voice yelling: “*Way-y* back, fellows! *Way-y* back!” Then it would be *whoom*—rest—*whoom*—over and over that way till it seemed like the slam of old Charlie’s heart against his ribs.

“Can’t be much longer now,” I said.

Claybaugh pulled in a cheek muscle under the scrape of the blade. “And I’ll never forget the night Tookie left you, Chigger. ‘Claybaugh,’ you told me, bawling like a kid, ‘my Tookie’s gone and done ’er at last.’ Didn’t surprise me a whole lot, of course.”

“Wish you wouldn’t talk so much when I’m trying to make you presentable for—for church.”

“There was something kind of odd about the house, though,” said Claybaugh. “Queer. I didn’t even notice it at the time, Chig, but later on it came back to me and plagued me now and then for years. Sort of like an old word puzzle you’ve had to put away unworked. *If Tookie was going to leave him*, I says, *why would she have bothered herself to drag that big hooked rug out from under the di-van and move it clean over to yonder side the room?*”

I gave the straight-edge a lick and a promise. “Women are strange things, ain’t they? Like Pa Deems always used to say: Never marry a woman.”

Claybaugh said: “A man’s mind keeps on playing with problems even after something dark spills over his word puzzle. I think I solved that one tonight at half-past eight by evening alamo time.”

“Did you, now, Claybaugh?”

“Yes. That was when I found myself all-a-sudden moving an old scatter-rug over to hide that great big red ink stain on my office floor. It looked so much like blood.”

The wind ran in the brown catalpas and clashed them together like rattle-bones ticking off the beat of a song. *Bonny, oh, dear, my dear*. I hate those old sad songs. Give me something lively every time.

“Must have been a bad spot on your parlor floor,” said Claybaugh. “Oh, it must have been bad—and especially so if lye and sandpaper and a porcupine brush wouldn’t scour it out of your thoughts. . . . Where is

she, Chigger? Where's Tookie cooling off her little heels, Chigger Deems?"

I said: "Wish you wouldn't talk about her like that. She knew how to laugh, Clay. She knew how to play the piano. I don't know—maybe she knew how to live."

"And it's too damn bad she had to die in order to prove it. I guess you know you're under arrest, Chigger."

"And I guess you know you're under a razor," I said.

It went *whoomety-whoom*—sort of like that. Practically any barber might have a bad accident with so much noise going on upstreet. And then, too, people around here know I'm the nervous type. Have been for years. As Colonel Murfree sometimes says, "He jests at scars who was never shaved by Chigger."

Claybaugh's hands lay big and flat and still on the arms of the chair. He turned his blue eyes up to mine and they were chiding. "Chig," said Claybaugh, "alongside you the meanest Maxey smells sweeter than baby's breath to me. You're a wicked little man, Chigger Deems."

"She's been quite a sirocco, Claybaugh."

"That's like a man blaming his weakness on the liquor he drinks to get weak on. I could excuse you Tookie, maybe—she was the kind of girl that whistles her way to a lonesome grave. But there's old Charlie, a man that thought more of you than of Bolivar Bear."

Whoom went the maul.

"And there was Miss Eubanks up on the Hill, a poor old thing trying to

fill her life with jonquils because she had a set of teeth that once scared Harvison Murrow witless in a kissing game. Never got over it, either—listen to him howl!"

I opened a button on his shirt. "I tried to reason with her, Claybaugh."

"And I never saw a more convinced corpse."

"Wish you wouldn't talk like that Clay. 'Miss Eubanks,' I says to her kindly, 'you don't want to stump our all those lovely crab-apple trees. Why there's good rich shade there,' I says to her. 'Plant you some ginseng roots between the trees and you can make yourself a mint of money when the Chinese market opens up again.'"

"And then?" said Claybaugh.

"Oh, no, not Miss Eubanks! I was posies or nothing for her. 'Ginseng isn't pretty,' she kept insisting. "*Ginseng isn't pretty!*" she screamed and I guess she was still screaming it some even when I—"

"Take note you'd fetched up her axe from the chopping-block just in case. So Tookie's under the crab-trees, is she? Thought so."

"Won't have people digging there Claybaugh."

His eyes were round and steady on mine. "Seems like you'd have done a little digging your ownself when you lost that piece of land to the bank."

"I'll tell you, Clay. I hate all this like billy hell, and maybe you'll think less unkindly of me if I—if I tell you the whole thing before I—It's Tookie's voice. It lives on and on in the crab-tree, Clay, and I know it's there because Charlie heard it too."

HEAR THAT MOURNFUL WIND

"The wind that walks in the leaves," said Claybaugh. "When a man's fear is too big for his brain, it always takes a voice outside him and haunts him."

"It wasn't fear that sent me kiting home with my spade. '*Chigger*,' says Tookie. '*No! No!*' And, Claybaugh, I knew what she meant. There was something she didn't want to spoil for me, you see."

HE WAS watching me dry off the blade, but his hands were quiet. I kept an eye on them, and I'll tell a man I did. "That don't sound a whole lot like Tookie," said Claybaugh.

"Sometimes she's still in the house with me," I said. "And don't you go looking at me like I'm crazy! I know it ain't real. There's one part memory of how she was and five parts memory of how she should've been. But, Claybaugh, it was my own tears that finally washed the stain off the parlor floor. It's away to hell-and-gone better than nothing."

The shadow of my hand stopped like a spider on his face. "And that was what she didn't want to spoil for you, Chigger?"

"That was it. She was always so proud of how she looked, you know. She wouldn't want anyone—and me least of all—to see her with her long hair tangled in the—No one can dig around up on the Hill, Clay. Not while *I* live above ground."

His eyes were only a little softer than smoke. "Damn it, Chigger, I'm almost sorry for you!" The ridgepole

went *whoomety-whoomety-whoom*. He added, "Not quite, though."

"Think I wanted to turn old bear-loving Charlie into a millionaire-corporation-lawyer? There's a kind of a thing called fear, Clay, though you wouldn't know what it's like."

He watched the blade turn slow in the light. "You're the best little teacher in the world, Chigger Deems."

"I've got to do 'er," I said. "It ain't the way I'd have had it, Clay, but we quit being old acquaintances when you started working out the wrong kind of puzzles."

"Still don't think you can do 'er, boy. Not to me."

The jailhouse let go at last. You could hear the long, thin scream of the hinges tearing down-wind like a crosscut tearing through a knot in a Judas tree. *Screee-e-e!*—like that.

"Get the cowardly axe-killer!" yelled Cotton Maxey. And even above the *tunk* of the door, his voice had a bright wet edge like the thing that leaned on my knuckles.

"The years roll on," said Claybaugh. "Don't they, Chigger?"

It burned red and white and red on his neck, the ragged old scar he'd picked up from somebody's sunken drag-line long before the dark winds blew. That had been the afternoon he scraped me off the sticky bottom of Bear Crick, where I'd just settled down for the second time and had made up my mind to raise particular hell with a tradition.

"Won't do you a lick of good to talk," I told him. "She's got to be done."

I could sweat a little now, though the wind was still heavy with unshed heat. I swung the razor and put plenty of arm behind it. I threw the blade at the stuffed raccoon and put out one of its eyes.

"Seems like a man as tight as you would get himself a safety razor, anyhow," I said. "Guess there are things even a bad coward is worse afraid of than his fear, Claybaugh. Old Man Deems was quite a hellion his ownself, but I guess he never raised that sort of Cain."

Claybaugh huffed his way out of the chair and began to fiddle around with his shirt buttons. "Hoped you'd put it like that," said Claybaugh. "Wanted to get the straight of things from your own lips, of course, but I think maybe that was the big reason why I came over for my regular close shave." He drew the back of his hand across his forehead and added: "Damn it, though, Chigger, couldn't you have said it a little sooner?"

Up in the old pecan grove there was a kind of dull, dark *boom*, and then we could hear a man's scream raise up and scatter out and die to nothing on the wind. While I wasn't there at the time, naturally, I sort of figured Les Turnidge had brought his new shotgun along.

"Sounds like we're a little too late to do anything for Charlie," I said.

Claybaugh said, "Sounds like Cotton Maxey to me, I hope. Though Copeland Powers would do 'most as well—I been dreading his talk on good fellowship at the club dinner Monday noon. I had a shotgun trap loaded with rock salt and mustard seed in Charlie's cell."

"Well," I said. "Well. But—"

"Oh, I let him out hours ago—soon after he shot three times right square at the floor and didn't even leave any bullet-holes in that. He's close by. . . . Charlie!"

Charlie came in through the north door dragging that big old cavalry sword Claybaugh had given him; and it seems he'd been standing there all this time with his elbow cocked for the throw. He was always so handy with sharp things, too.

"I'd have hated to do 'er, Mr. Deems," he bawled, "but I'd have hated worse to see you do 'er to yore own brother!"

"Well," I said. "Well."

I knew they were going to take me away; but I felt easier in my mind already, somehow. Maybe the south wind had turned off a little, or—well, it may have been such a relief to get the thing out of my veins at last. It had all been a terrible chore from the first. But I don't know, it seems like once a man gets started he just can't manage to stop. ♠ ♠ ♠

BARE PROTEST

Prisoners in the Ambala, India, jail went on a "no clothes" strike. They refused to put on any garments in protest against prison conditions they disapproved of.

Carroll John Daly is best known as the creator of the famous Race Williams—the original hardboiled private eye. Conceived in inspiration and dedicated to the proposition that mystery readers deserved a change from the usual namby-pamby, encyclopedia-minded detective, the swashbuckling Race has gamboled through the pages of many a magazine and book. Here, in his newest tale, the versatile Mr. Daly tells a very different kind of story about Lorraine . . . the sort of woman men would kill to win.

LORRAINE

by CARROLL JOHN DALY

IT BEGAN FAR back in the prison camp in Germany, I suppose, but there wouldn't be anything to tell except for the end of it, the end of Captain Harry Ramsone.

So I'll begin at the end in the little summer house nestled among the birch trees on the cliffs above Lake George. I'll begin when Lorraine's hand crept into mine and we gazed down at the dead body of her husband, Harry Ramsone. He had been shot through the forehead.

Sheriff Brown was a tall rangy man with a corrugated face and twinkling blue eyes that didn't always twinkle. They didn't then. He followed us out into the birch-streaked dusk.

Lorraine, ethereal even in her conventional white sweater and tailored slacks, was quite calm as she faced the

tragedy of the violent death of the man she had been so happily married to for five years. There was no doubt that they were happy. Every one of the summer residents in the little colony knew it. Sheriff Brown knew it too.

Lorraine said, her voice steady:

"I left my husband at the house, Sheriff, a few minutes after two. He told me to go out on the lake with Carleton Hadden here; that he had work to do, or an engagement or something, down in the summer house. Carleton and I were out on the lake until a few minutes ago. Bessie, the cook, called us from the dock."

"Work to do, or an engagement, Mrs. Ramsone?" Sheriff Brown was holding a little note book in his hand. "Try to think which. It might be very

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important. We can't find the gun, you know."

"I have tried." Her eyes closed slightly and her brow furrowed. "I don't know. I think he must have said he had work to do. He often worked in the summer house. But somehow the word engagement forces its way into my mind." Then, after a moment's hesitation, "I don't know Sheriff—I really don't know."

The sheriff said to me, "Take Mrs. Ramsone up to the house, Hadden. I'll want to talk to her later. You, too."

We didn't speak until we had stepped through the French windows and were in the large library. Then I said:

"Lorraine. Why did you say you were out on the lake with me—when you weren't?"

"Why—" She looked up at me, the blue of her eyes as deep as the lake. "Because of the questions the sheriff asked me about you and the way he asked them. It's all right, Carleton. I was alone all afternoon down on the rocks and saw no one. Harry was jealous of you, you know that. That's true, isn't it?"

"That's true enough," I had to agree, "though I gave him no reason to be."

"Nor I," she said. "I was a good wife to him, Carleton, always."

"None could have been better," I said and meant it. I had never seen a more devoted couple. "But to suspect me—that would be silly."

"Perhaps," she said, and then she nodded. "Yes, it would, of course. I

know that. But Harry had his doubts and his suspicions and his fears. I know from some of the things he said when you were coming up to visit that he communicated that jealousy to others. And once, Carleton, he asked me if I'd marry you if anything happened to him."

"What did you say?" I couldn't help but ask.

"I said yes, of course. I couldn't say anything else. That would be what Leslie wanted."

"Leslie, again."

"That's the first time I mentioned Leslie's name in the five years of my marriage to Harry. So to avoid unpleasantness for you—for us later—I told the sheriff we were together on the lake."

She walked to the hall door, stopped and turned. Her arm was stretched up and her long fingers gripped the edge of the open door. Her head was back and I could see her throat—the whiteness of it, like milk or more like cream, with a sort of richness to the skin. She was like her picture then; as if she didn't belong to this world but was only loaned to it for a little while. Her eyes were so deep that I seemed to see all the past and the future—but oddly enough none of the present. A woman who had given to Harry Ramsone everything a wife could give: beauty, wealth, love.

"You'll stay and take care of—of things, Carleton," she said. "Then a suitable time will have to elapse. And I'd suggest we take a trip abroad after our marriage before coming back to the lake here."

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"Marriage," I echoed the word. "You think—you really—?"

"Carleton," she said slowly. "You want to marry me, don't you? That is what Leslie wanted, isn't it?"

Then she was gone. Moving across the hall, mounting the stairs as if it were an escalator: seemingly just putting her fingers upon the banister and gliding up.

Lorraine. So kind, so beautiful, so hard to understand. The wife, the widow of Captain Harry Ramsone. And now he was dead, shot to death, and she acted as if he had never existed. Yet Leslie wasn't forgotten, and Leslie was dead over six years. . . .

SHERIFF BROWN came in and I told him Lorraine had gone upstairs to rest. He bobbed his head, asked me to sit down, then addressed me.

"It's an isolated spot," he began. "A tramp killing is out of the question, and even if it wasn't, I have another reason for eliminating a total stranger. The first suspect in such deaths is the wife, but that's impossible with Lorraine. You know, Hadden, she was born here in this very house. I knew her father and her mother. A fine girl. It's not just the money she's spent helping others since she came into her inheritance but the time she has given. If I told you of the nights she sat up with—" He stopped, shook his head. Then, "Of course there was Leslie Stone. They were in love since they were in the third grade. He died in the war and his two buddies came back and Lorraine married one of them."

"Not exactly his buddies," I corrected. "Leslie Stone and Harry Ramsone and I were just thrown together in a German prison camp."

"Like brothers you were," the sheriff insisted. "Leastwise I heard it that way. I heard, too, that it was Leslie's dying wish that she marry Harry Ramsone—and that was why she did it."

"I would have thought," I said, "that they were very much in love."

"Maybe they were," he agreed. "If you think she's taking it mighty calm for a suddenly bereaved widow, remember that she ain't like other women. Never shed so much as a tear when her father died, nor when she got word that Leslie passed on. But they do say in the village that she never would have married Harry Ramsone, or anyone else for that matter, if Leslie Stone hadn't wanted it that way."

"Well," I said somewhat stiffly, "that seems to me to be between Lorraine and Harry Ramsone and Leslie."

"They say," the old sheriff's blue eyes were steel gray on me now. "They say Leslie wanted it to be one of you. If anything had happened to Ramsone, it would have been—you."

"Are you accusing me of killing Ramsone?" I demanded.

"No, no." He shook his head. "Lorraine was on the lake with you when it happened. I'm simply telling you the talk in the village five years ago. You see, Lorraine isn't any ordinary woman. And Leslie, he was different too. He worshipped that girl, and she adored him." He paused then. "Don't

you see, mister, what I'm driving at? Lorraine is the sort of woman a man would kill to win. . . . But you got no cause to worry. She wouldn't have no truck with a murderer. She couldn't—not Lorraine!"

"That's nice," was the best I could get off.

"There's something else." He stuck his hand in his jacket pocket, pulled it out with the fingers clenched tightly over something hidden in his palm. "Now, I know all about Lorraine and her past, but I don't know about Harry Ramsone's past. And this murder lies hidden some place in his past. It's a murder of vengeance, of retribution."

"What gives you that idea?"

"The murderer left something behind him."

"Ah," I said, "a clue. Dropped something, eh?"

"No, he left it on purpose. Laid it across the dead throat of Harry Ramsone. It means nothing to me, but it must have meant something to Harry Ramsone, all right. I'd say he died because of it. Yes, it had significance. It was symbolic. I think the murderer showed it to Ramsone before he shot him—then placed it across his throat. Why?"

"I don't know," I said. "A warning to someone else?"

"A warning." The sheriff looked toward the ceiling. "Perhaps. I hadn't thought of it that way. I thought maybe it was to let someone know why Ramsone died. And since this is a small place and we know all about Ramsone's life since he came, the mur-

derer and this object must have come out of Ramsone's past. Well, you're the only one who knows his past, so—"

"I know little of Harry Ramsone's past."

"Maybe," nodded the sheriff. "I tell you what I want you to do. I want you to look at this object. Then go back over the past in your own mind. Everything you know about Harry Ramsone, everything he might have ever told you or you heard about him."

"I met him for the first time in the German prison camp, and I was with him and Leslie Stone in our escape afterward. We were sort of brought together over—over—"

"Over a picture," he helped me out. "Sure, I know that. Ramsone drank a bit too much at times and talked a little. No harm in it. Silly, some thought it. Romantic to others. Three helpless, hopeless men drawn together by a picture. A picture of a woman. Lorraine, Leslie's girl."

"That's right," I admitted somewhat sheepishly, but my head turned involuntarily toward the hall and the stairs that Lorraine had ascended. "Silly, but true. It made us want to live—to bring Leslie back to her."

"That's it." The sheriff held out his hand, the fingers still closed. "In that prison camp you must have talked about your past, about Ramsone's past."

"No." I shook my head. "We talked about Leslie and Lorraine, nothing else."

"Not helpful." The sheriff shook his

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head. "Take a look anyway, then think back. Take your time. I'm in no hurry."

He opened his fingers slowly. The object filled that large hand. I stared at it, fascinated, for perhaps a full minute—not understanding. Then not wanting to understand. Finally, I did understand, and the cold air ran up and down my spine and my blood chilled and I licked my dry lips. I knew—yes, I knew who had killed Harry Ramsone. And what's more, I knew why.

"All right," I heard the sheriff say. "Take your time. There's no hurry. Think, man—think!"

I WAS THINKING, all right. Back to that day in the prison camp when Leslie Stone had first shown Captain Harry Ramsone and me the picture of Lorraine, the girl he loved.

Somehow he had hung onto it; a postcard-size photo that he looked at by the hour, and maybe we did too. A girl whose hair Leslie said was blonde but looked white in the picture. She was slim and small. She had a dreamlike quality that Leslie called ethereal. At first I thought her chin was a little too determined for that, but after a while I got to believing with Leslie that she was more or less of another world.

Then Leslie got sick and thought he was dying. That was when he willed Lorraine to Captain Ramsone, writing it all on the back of the picture.

He made me swear to take care of Lorraine if neither he nor Captain Harry Ramsone returned.

A bizarre sort of business, you think, but it didn't seem so then. Nor did it afterwards when Leslie got better and still talked of the will on the back of the picture and our promise to look after Lorraine. It did seem without point too, for Lorraine lived in a beautiful home up on Lake George and had plenty of money, though her father and mother were dead. But men did strange things in those times, made strange promises.

For some months we went on looking at the girl and planning Leslie's wedding. He was even naming the children after us.

Then came the day when the camp was bombed—through accident I suppose—and in the confusion many prisoners escaped. Some were shot by the guards, or later in the woods or along the side of the mountain—for some got that far.

How many of the others escaped I don't know, but we three won through to freedom—at least temporary freedom—by that night. Leslie was wounded. It wasn't anything that couldn't be fixed up with attention, but he wasn't able to keep up with us. He begged to be left behind; and maybe I was for it, because we could see the German soldiers searching along the road and I felt he'd be picked up and taken care of. But Captain Ramsone was against it; he said the Germans would butcher him for escaping. So we carried Leslie with us.

"No, Carleton," Ramsone said to me. "There's our girl Lorraine to think of."

And to Leslie in a whisper, "I'm going to take you back to her, Leslie. She's waiting for you. If you die, I'll die with you."

Captain Ramsone was a strong man, and he carried Leslie most of the way. I couldn't help much; I was weak from longer confinement, and I had trouble just keeping up.

We had a real break about daylight, when we stumbled upon a great steel door in the side of a cliff, hidden by brush and rock. There was a huge lock in the door that must have had a giant key, but I didn't see the key anywhere. Luckily for us, however, the door was unlocked, and inside we found a shelter that must have been built with some difficulty. It was designed, no doubt, to protect material rather than men, for there were no blankets, no food, no water and certainly no vents for air. Indeed, there was nothing but the bare stone room, an oil lamp and a five-gallon can of kerosene about half full.

We didn't mind. It was a place to hide, and we knew from the steady artillery fire and the planes in the air that our boys were advancing rapidly. A few hours perhaps, a few days at the most. We had seen the hurried preparations at the prison camp to move us, and we knew the Allies would sweep rapidly across that part of the country.

With the door open about a foot, the air was sufficient. We laid Leslie down on the hard stone. Exhausted, I sank down beside him. Every now and then I'd open my eyes and blink sleepily at the flickering shadows cast

by the oil lamp along the damp walls. Harry Ramsone was sitting beside Leslie, giving him words of encouragement.

I must have slept deeply, for suddenly I was awakened by Ramsone shaking me. I opened my eyes, sat up. It seemed difficult to breathe.

"Carleton!" Ramsone went on shaking me. "Did you pull the door closed? I dozed off, and when I woke up, the door was shut." And when I looked stupidly at him, he said, impatiently, "We left it open for air—remember?"

"Sure, sure," I told him finally, "I remember. No, I didn't touch it. It must have blown closed."

"That much solid steel?" He shook his head. "Nonsense. Go over and take a look."

I went to the door and pushed my weight against it, but it didn't budge. It didn't worry me then. I thought it was my lack of strength. I went back to Harry Ramsone.

"You'll have to give me a hand," I told him. "I haven't got the push for it. How's Leslie?"

"Bad," he said. "He must have air. Don't you feel it?"

I did then. Ramsone put his own torn jacket gently under Leslie's head and climbed to his feet. It was a couple of minutes of exhausting work before we realized that the door must be bolted.

I tore the lantern from its hook in the stone ceiling, held it close to the lock of the steel door. It was locked, all right. I stood up and shook my head. The keyhole was enormous.

LORRAINE

The key must have been of gigantic size. Ramsone and I searched every place but found no key.

"We'll have to break the door down," I told Ramsone, then realized what a stupid remark it was. We'd have needed a battering ram.

"They came back," Ramsone said. "The Germans locked us in and carried the key away with them."

"Lucky for us they didn't come in and find us sleeping."

"Lucky? Don't you understand, Carleton? Don't you appreciate our position? We are here to die. No food, no water—now no air. And Leslie is very weak."

The lack of water was bad, but I knew by the next day that we wouldn't die of thirst. We'd be suffocated long before that.

Sometime the following night Leslie Stone died. I heard him scream out Lorraine's name once; then suddenly his voice was still. Ramsone said softly:

"Poor fellow, he's dead. Had to hold his hands at the end, Carleton. He was clawing at his throat."

Captain Ramsone came over to me, then. He said hoarsely:

"This is it, Carleton. Now we go—too."

My eyes closed. This was the end. This was death. . . .

It wasn't. The air was strong and crisp, and I sucked it in. Then my eyes opened and I saw the light. Daylight. It was sometime before the truth crept into my befuddled brain. The door was open. There was a man lying on his face near it.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes later, I reached the door and turned the man over. It was Captain Ramsone. He told me he had heard a noise at the door, that some Germans must have come back and unlocked it. He had staggered to the door. They must have seen him and fled. Desperate Germans they must have been, indeed, for later we were to find out that this part of the country was now entirely in the hands of our own troops. However, I found no key in the lock; no key at all.

An hour later we were picked up. Our own men found us as we staggered along a country road.

IT WAS OVER a year later that I first met Lorraine. It was just before the wedding. I saw it the moment I looked at her—the strange haunting beauty that Leslie Stone had raved about and that I had not fully appreciated in the picture.

She met me at the little railroad station and drove me down to the lodge on Lake George.

"You are all I thought you'd be, Carleton," she said in that direct way of hers that I learned to like later. "So you are the other man on the back of my picture!" Suddenly, she added, "Isn't it strange that Harry hasn't wanted me to meet you before?"

"No," I said truthfully enough, and then with a grin, "I might have laid claim to being the first on the list."

"Perhaps Harry *is* jealous," she agreed. "I rather like that. But he needn't have been. If there had been no Leslie, there might have been a

DETECTIVE FICTION

Captain Harry Ramsone anyway. He's a fine man, Carleton."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"I would have gone through with the wedding anyway," she told me. "You see, there was something too deep for people to understand between Leslie and me. It was—well, I belonged to Leslie."

"Yes," I said. "Leslie felt—he seemed to know that you would do anything he wished."

"Anything and everything," she said simply. She stretched out a hand and placed it on my wrist. "Now, tell me about it, the night he died."

I thought that rather an odd, even gruesome request so soon before her wedding, and I guess she read my thoughts. She said:

"I won't be thinking of Leslie after the wedding. Tell me now."

I told her, then. All of it. She made me repeat it over and over. Everything in detail. Then she said:

"That's all." She patted my wrist. "Harry gave you as much a part of Leslie's last hours as he had. We won't mention it again—not ever again. Leslie would want it that way."

So would Harry Ramsone, I thought. And, taking another look at Lorraine, I knew I would, too, if I were in Ramsone's shoes.

She took me through the house. It was old, stolid and very large.

"I'm glad," she smiled at me, "that the lodge has a huge attic. Harry will need that. Do you know, I don't believe he's ever thrown away a thing in his life? There are even some of his baby things."

"I know," I grinned. "He talked about that. You're lucky he doesn't catalog them and put them on display."

"I wouldn't mind," she laughed as a woman in love does over her man's minor foibles. "They are small things mostly, but they sort of mark milestones. You know, important things in his life."

"Maybe it's a compulsion," I said. "Like avoiding cracks in the sidewalk. However, it's better than drink or gambling or—" But I didn't add women; not while I was looking at Lorraine.

I think Harry Ramsone was glad to see me. And I know he felt that it was right and natural that I should be there at the wedding, at least to meet Lorraine.

I was best man. I saw them off on their honeymoon, and I held Lorraine's hands and promised, at her insistence, that I would give them a week every summer and come to the Lake George Lodge.

They were very happy the following year when I arrived at the lake. I know Lorraine was glad to see me, and I felt that Harry Ramsone was too. We had a wonderful week and I was glad that I had come.

That was the first year. If anything, they seemed to draw closer together as the years went by.

Up to my present visit to the Lake George Lodge. Up to the moment I stood with Lorraine beside the body of Harry Ramsone—the violently dead Harry Ramsone.

That was the flashback that ran

LORRAINE

through my mind as I looked down at the object in Sheriff Brown's outstretched hand. Sheriff Brown was saying:

"There it is. The key to the whole mystery, Haddon. Did you ever see it before?"

"No." I wet my lips but I could answer truthfully. "No, I never saw it before."

Sheriff Brown was right. Lorraine was the sort of a woman a man would kill to win. Yes, and for the first time I knew that a man *had* killed to win her, and that Lorraine knew it too and wanted me to know. There could be no other reason for the object held

before me now in Sheriff Brown's open palm.

Harry Ramson's obsession for keeping things that were important in his life was the cause of his death. For the great key that Sheriff Brown held in his hand could have fitted but one door—a steel door that had remained closed and that had snuffed out the life of Leslie Stone.

Lorraine, the unfathomable, the ethereal, the soul-stirring Lorraine, who now planned to become my wife because—

I shuddered. Because a dead man, a man long dead, wished it so. She was still Leslie's girl. ♠ ♠ ♠

MISCHIEF ON THE MAKE

An Elmira, N. Y., prisoner was given a one-day parole on his 30-day sentence in order that he could report for his unemployment check.

A lover of the strong stuff reached a hundredth anniversary in Passaic, N. J. It was his centennial offense as a drunk. His present: A 30-day jail term.

Concerning that thing known as a woman's intuition: A woman in Montclair, Fla., informed her husband that she felt sure there was a man in the house. Her husband searched around, found nothing. The wife told her husband she just couldn't go to sleep, feeling so sure there was an intruder. This time the husband glanced under the bed. A man came scrambling from the other side of the bed and went high tailing it out of the house.

One family in Indianapolis is a little tired of a certain guest. It's a burglar—a man who has come to dinner three times, taking nothing but the meal.

Everybody had a good time at a television party in Arlington, Va. Especially the guest who walked off with the television set.

The idea for this story came to Hank Napheys when he visited a Norwegian tanker during the war as the guest of the personable young first engineer. Not until several years after it was published did he learn its tragic sequel. Transferred from the Murmansk run to the South Pacific, the ship was sunk by a Jap surface raider. The first engineer escaped to a life boat, but before the rescue party reached them many grueling days later, he died of exposure. In an indirect way, then, this story stands as a tribute to a hero of the war: the man who was the real-life counterpart of First Engineer Jack Hardesty.

I'LL DIE

WHEN YOU DIE

by HANK NAPHEYS

FIRST ENGINEER JACK HARDESTY climbed the spidery iron ladder rising from the steaming cavern of the engine room. That troublesome starboard screw was now turning with the beauty of mechanical perfection, driving the Royal Navy tanker eastward through the black of a North Atlantic night.

Hardesty's shirt, ducks, hands and arms were covered with grease, but his gold-braided officer's cap was spotless. On reaching his cabin deck, he latched the steel engine-room door and let the quiet of the passageway wash over him. Then he went to his own cabin.

An electric fan whirled pleasantly. His gray kitten looked up from the cushions of the built-in lounge and stretched luxuriously.

"Hello, Evil Eye," said Hardesty. "Want some milk?" The kitten yawned and went back to sleep, and Hardesty, restless after his trick below, flicked off the light and stepped into the passageway.

The door of the next cabin opened, and a big, bush-haired Norwegian joined Hardesty in the dimly lighted passageway. Hardesty was the only American on the tanker. The rest of the crew were Norwegians. The big fellow beamed on Hardesty as he said:

I'LL DIE WHEN YOU DIE

"That special record I am going to play now, Jack. You like to hear it too?"

A warm, friendly grin lifted ten years from Jack Hardesty's face. The first engineer on a loaded tanker in convoy doesn't get around to doing much grinning. "I'd sure like to hear your girl sing, Ulf, but—"

"The beautiful girl I am going to marry," put in Ulf Jorensen proudly. "Like an angel she sings, that girl."

All that day, the first out of Hoboken, Ulf Jorensen, first officer of the *Norman Prince*, had talked and bragged about the beautiful American torch singer who had made a record of a song especially for him.

Hardesty said: "I'd sure like to hear her after I've had a breath of air. Just put in four hours below."

Ulf Jorensen bobbed his head understandingly. "When you come back, Jack."

"See you then, Ulf."

Hardesty moved along the narrow passageway. When he opened the deck door, the passageway light automatically blacked out. He stepped out onto the night-shrouded deck and gratefully filled his lungs with the tangy sea air.

There was not a flicker of light anywhere in this world of inky blackness, yet Hardesty knew that there were men working, smoking and eating in all the ships in the giant convoy. The *Norman Prince* was riding low in the water, its steel hull divided into mammoth oil tanks. He carefully picked his way over the huge squares of concrete that formed a bomb cushion

over the steel decks. Grasping the ladder, he climbed into the superstructure toward the starboard machine-gun nest. The air up there would be fine.

Halfway up he heard muted music coming from a ventilator. Then a girl's rich, young voice.

Hardesty backed down the ladder and moved across the cement cakes to be nearer the ventilator by the rail. Something in that young, sweet voice drew him with irresistible force. He was nearing the rail with its cable to repel magnetic mines when he heard:

"I want to sigh when you sigh . . ."

So this was Ulf's special record, mused Hardesty. Ulf's girl, whom he was going to marry. But try as he could, Jack Hardesty couldn't visualize that voice singing to Ulf Jorensen. A mighty fine fellow was Ulf, but still—

"Cry when you cry . . ."

Hardesty felt that those softly murmured words were being crooned to him alone. The thought filled him as the gentle, plaintive tones filled his ears.

*"Die when you die,
Then I'll be hap-pee. . . ."*

A terrific explosion lifted the cement squares and steel deck of the tanker, catapulted Hardesty over the rail and slammed him into the black, cold swells of the Atlantic.

As he hurtled through the thundering brilliance that enveloped the world, his first thought was that a

German U-boat had penetrated the destroyer screen and torpedoed the tanker. Then the icy water closed over his head.

Sharp chills stabbing through him drove the fog from his brain as he broke the surface. The whole night was now a vivid, bright orange. The steel hull of the *Norman Prince* lay open like a gaping wound, baring its mortally pierced heart—the twisted, flame-gutted void that was the engine room.

Hardesty, now almost numb with the icy water and explosion shock, could see other ships in the convoy. They were startled, orange-tinted things desperately scurrying from the fiery tanker. Then Hardesty saw a destroyer slash in toward the *Norman Prince* to pick up survivors.

Explosion after explosion rocked the tanker. Waves of burning oil gushed over the decks and spread on the water. Hardesty saw the fiery foam rushing toward him as the surf rushes up a sandy beach.

His last thoughts, as he went under, were of the furry little ball called Evil Eye, and of the girl who wanted to die when he died. . . .

HER NAME was Doreen Grey. Hardesty's trail to her started with the destroyer that picked him up out of a burning sea—the lone survivor of the *Norman Prince*—then led to a hospital in England; to routine answers to naval officers; to a return convoy; to the Paintbrush Club on Long Island.

The Paintbrush Club was as cozy

and intimate as a Long Island hostess' cocktail party. The only commercial touch was the "butler" presenting the bill; otherwise you would have imagined yourself in a friend's living room.

Hardesty relaxed in a deep, comfortable chair and drank scotch and water. He remembered the close scrutiny his gold braid had undergone at the entrance door, and the ensuing cordial welcome. And he recalled that First Officer Ulf Jorensen had come here with Long Island friends. A glance about the luxurious room at the other guests confirmed that the Paintbrush's clientele leaned toward the exclusive.

A piano tinkled across the room and the chatter of the guests died into an expectant silence. A girl's rich, sweet voice began the romantic rhythm of "All I Do Is Dream of You."

Hardesty leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He was a practical, hard man, but that voice had haunted him since he first heard it at the tanker's ventilator. He wanted to hear it again when he wasn't on a ship in convoy, where any girl's voice would be the voice of an angel.

Yet now that same feeling persisted—that she was singing directly to him, coming closer and closer. He shook his head to clear it of that clinging impression, and opened his eyes.

He saw her then. Doreen Grey, finishing the last notes of her song was standing not five feet from his chair.

Jack Hardesty came out of his chair with supple ease and stood looking

down at the top of her honey-blonde head. The girl gracefully acknowledged the polite applause of the other guests, then raised her eyes coolly to Hardesty.

He said carefully: "I have a message for you—about Ulf." His dark eyes flicked to a lounge. "Would you care to sit down?"

Her eyes, searching his, were still puzzled. With a little nod of her head, she gathered her flowing skirt and eased onto the lounge. Hardesty sat down beside her, placed his empty glass on the little table before them.

The butler-waiter appeared from nowhere.

Hardesty's eyes, mirroring the tragedy of hellfire seas, were not the eyes of a man on the make. He spoke quietly to the girl. "I did not intend to embarrass you, Miss Grey. I only wished to tell you about a friend of yours—First Officer Jorensen of the *Norman Prince*."

The waiter fumbled with Hardesty's glass, nearly knocking it over. He mumbled an apology.

"Oh," said Doreen Grey. "Ulf Jorensen." When she smiled, her whole face seemed to sparkle. "How is he?"

Hardesty nodded toward his glass. "Will you join me in a drink, Miss Grey?"

She shook her blonde head. "But I'll take a cigarette."

He opened his case, saying to the waiter: "Another scotch and water." Then he lighted the cigarette for the girl, fired one for himself. "Ulf Jorensen," he said simply and directly, "is dead."

Shock flashed in Doreen's eyes. She was silent for long, strained moments. Then: "It's all so terrible. All these nice young men—"

Hardesty was carefully studying her. "Ulf," he said quietly, "was under the impression that you were going to marry him."

Amazement widened the girl's eyes. She seemed at a loss for words. Finally she managed: "It's—it's really the first time I've heard of it."

The butler-waiter returned with the scotch and water.

Hardesty waited until the waiter had moved off out of earshot before he said: "Ulf died while he listened to your record."

"How did it happen?"

"We struck a mine—when you sang, 'Then I'll be happy'."

Color drained from Doreen's face; a shudder ran through her lovely body.

Hardesty laid a weather-browned, calloused hand over her slender fingers. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Miss Grey. That song of yours has meant a lot to me. I had never intended telling you this. But somehow—it's hard to explain, but your voice seemed to guide me through that sea of burning oil—"

Her cool, slender fingers laced themselves with Hardesty's, clung tightly. She said nothing, just held on as if she was glad of her part in helping a fighting man through a horror of burning oil on a night sea.

Hardesty was thinking: Maybe Ulf did misunderstand this girl's friendliness. Maybe he was just boasting.

"Here you are, Doreen!" A young man with slicked-down light hair stopped in front of the lounge. "We go on the air in thirty minutes. We haven't much time for rehearsal."

Doreen started guiltily, loosened her fingers from Hardesty's. She said: "May I present Jules Bachman, our band leader, Mr. —?"

Hardesty got to his feet. "My name is Hardesty," he introduced himself.

Bachman smiled good-naturedly, pumped his hand. Then he nervously hunched the shoulders of his white dress jacket, tugged at his maroon tie. "In just thirty minutes, Doreen."

Turning to the girl, Hardesty said: "I must be leaving now, Miss Gray. May I see you again?"

"Please do." Doreen gave him her hand briefly, then swirled off with the band leader.

HARDESTY RECLAIMED his officer's cap from the hat-check girl and stepped onto the wide porch of the Paintbrush Club. A bright moon was climbing into the heavens, showing Long Island Sound and the wide macadam road which led to the bus stop. There were only two cars in the parking lot, testifying to the patriotism of the Paintbrush's guests.

Hardesty walked slowly along the winding road. Thoughts of Doreen filled his mind. Her vibrant smile, her voice.

He was nearing the bus stop, walking slowly along the road bordered by high hedges, when a man moved from the shadows and leaped upon him.

Hardesty saw the glint of an up-

raised knife. His reaction was instinctive. Living day and night on a tanker, expecting a torpedo or a mine every minute of the hour, had sharpened his reactions.

He whirled, crouched like a coiled spring. His fingers found the knife wrist. His right hand, fingers extended, rigid as a rock, found his assailant's throat. He hugged the man to him, forced the knife behind the man's back. Then he toppled the man over backward, falling heavily upon him.

It was a swift, deadly counterattack. Not a word was spoken—not even a startled oath. The assailant's knife was piercing his own heart. In silent minutes the man was dead.

Hardesty got to his feet, stared quietly down at the butler-waiter who had brought him scotch and water in the Paintbrush Club. Then Hardesty dragged the body behind the high hedge and returned to the road. No one seemed to have witnessed the silent, violent struggle.

Hardesty took out a cigarette and steadily lighted it. He was not shaken, nor did his hands fumble. Any nervous qualms he had had about life and death had gone down into the deep with the gallant *Norman Prince* and little *Evil Eye*.

Very carefully Hardesty dusted himself off. Then he retraced his steps to the Paintbrush Club.

He even selected the same chair.

"Your order please, sir?"

This new butler-waiter had come up from behind him, so Hardesty had no chance to see what his reaction might have been.

I'LL DIE WHEN YOU DIE

Hardesty said: "I'd like the same waiter I had before."

The waiter was dusting ashes from the table-top. His head still bowed, he answered, "Mike is off duty, sir. Was there anything special, sir?"

"I'm afraid," said Hardesty, "that I didn't tip generously enough." He took two half dollars from his pocket, held them up spread apart between thumb and forefinger. "Put these in Mike's eyes."

The waiter's head jerked back. "Beg pardon, sir?"

Hardesty dropped them carelessly on the table. "Bring me a scotch—MacTarvish—and water."

When the scotch came, Hardesty carefully smelled it. MacTarvish all right. He tasted it, a drop on his tongue. It had not been poisoned. Having piled away that brand day and night in convoy, he would have known if even a stray grain of sand had gotten in the glass. He sat back with a fresh cigarette.

There was no expression on his face as he watched the broadcast taking place at the far side of the room. Doreen's voice, singing softly into the mike, was not audible to him. Nor was the personality-kid chatter of the grinning, slick-haired band leader.

After the broadcast Hardesty walked over to the bar, stood beside Doreen.

A quick warmth brightened the blue of her eyes as she saw him. "Hello."

The band leader leaned back on his stool, flicked a hand in greeting.

"Hi, sailor. Will you join us?"

"Thanks," said Hardesty. He looked steadily at the girl. "Do you know what happened to the waiter, Mike?"

"Why, no, I don't." She turned to the band leader. "Jules, where is Mike?"

Jules Bachman spoke into his up-raised glass. "Maybe he went off duty." He drank and put down the glass, glanced over at Hardesty. "Have you any complaint about Mike?"

Hardesty shook his head. "Mike did his best."

The band leader finished his drink. "Doreen, would you like to make a recording for Hardesty?"

Blonde Doreen raised her eyes to Hardesty's. "If you have a favorite song you'd like me to sing, Jules will make a special recording for you."

"That's mighty nice of you both," said Hardesty.

The band leader slid off the stool. "Think nothing of it, Hardesty. It's little enough to do as my bit in this scrap." He flicked his hand in farewell. "See you later, up in the studio." He breezed off, nervously hunching his shoulders in his white coat.

Hardesty faced around toward the bar and looked into the mirror, watching the girl's profile as she gazed after the band leader. Then she turned around, her eyes meeting Hardesty's in the mirror.

"Hello," she said to his reflection. "You came back to the Paintbrush quickly."

"Yes," Hardesty told her reflection. "Tomorrow—" he told his lie slowly

DETECTIVE FICTION

—"I'm being confined to ship. That means we may be pushing off tomorrow night." He smiled at the concern that darkened her eyes. "You see now why I came back for another look at you."

There was a silence between them.

It was Doreen who spoke first. "Tell me about—Ulf."

"He said you were going to marry him."

Doreen shook her head. "He couldn't have meant it. Why, we barely knew each other."

"I believe I understand it, now," said Hardesty quietly. "Ulf mistook your friendliness for affection. He built up his thoughts till he actually believed them himself." Hardesty smiled wryly. "Anyway, thoughts like that would help a man in convoy when he got the U-boat jitters."

Doreen's voice was very low: "I can't picture you having the U-boat jitters—or any other kind of jitters."

Hardesty chuckled. "There have been times, Miss Grey, when I wished mightily that I'd never set foot aboard a ship, and I mean it."

The girl finished her drink. "It's good to know that a song of mine might help a little out there on the water. What song would you like me to sing for you now?"

Hardesty's eyes imprisoned hers. "The one I want is 'Then I'll Be Happy.'"

A puzzled frown drew the girl's brows together. "But isn't that the song that Ulf Jorensen—?"

"Yes," said Hardesty quietly. "I never did hear it all the way through."

"Then you come right up to the studio with me. There's another recording up there. If you like it, it's yours."

"Swell!" said Hardesty.

THE STUDIO was on the second floor of the Paintbrush Club. When they entered, Doreen closed the door and led the way across the room to the record file. "And here's the recording," she announced, taking a black disk from the rack. "Would you rather hear it on the studio set or on a portable?"

"Either way," said Hardesty.

"Then we'd better use a portable. That's the way you'll listen to it on your ship." She glanced about the studio, then went over to a shelf holding paper-wrapped cases.

Hardesty took the portable from her and stripped off the brown-paper wrapping. Then he opened the case and wound it with the handle, saying: "This one looks exactly like the portable Ulf brought on shipboard with him."

"It's the same model," agreed Doreen. "And this one will be yours. Jules will present it to you with the recording." She placed the disk on the turn-table and released the catch. The record spun as she lowered the needed sound-box.

The soft music swept Hardesty back across time and space to the *Norman Prince*. Again he was walking over the cement deck blocks to the ventilator near the tanker's rail. Again that young, sweet voice seeped into his very veins:

I'LL DIE WHEN YOU DIE

*"I want to sigh when you sigh,
Cry when you cry . . .*

And again it seemed that those softly murmured words were being crooned to him alone.

*Die when you die,
Then I'll—"*

The studio door was flung open. Band-leader Jules Bachman slammed across the room and swept the needle off the revolving disk. For a moment he hung over the portable like a limp rag. The butler-waiter moved into the room and closed the door. He pointed a long-snouted automatic at Hardesty.

Jules Bachman regained some of his composure. He glared at Doreen. "You damned romantic fool! You almost blew us all to hell!"

Doreen's face drained of color at the vicious force of his words. "What do you mean?"

Hardesty's voice was taut, vibrant with leashed ferocity. "I believe I know what he means, Miss Grey. That little portable case houses a high explosive bomb. Not powerful enough in itself to sink a tanker, perhaps. But capable of smashing the tanks, igniting the oil."

Doreen's lovely young face mirrored the horror that marched across her mind with full understanding of Hardesty's words. "Then that record and portable that Ulf—"

Bachman's heels clicked audibly as he bowed to the girl. "Your part was magnificent—worthy of the Iron Cross."

The butler-waiter put in practically: "Just one mishap, Herr Hauptmann. There was one survivor." He took half dollars from his pocket and tossed them at Hardesty's feet. "I shall take particular pleasure, Mr First Engineer Hardesty, in placing them—in *your eyes*."

Doreen turned frantically pleading eyes to Hardesty. "But I had no idea—I never suspected—"

Hardesty's head jerked toward the portable. "You proved your innocence when you played that record."

Jules Bachman hunched his shoulders in his white coat, rubbed his hands briskly together. "Sorry I can't let you love birds coo into the night, but there's business ahead." He turned to the waiter. "Did you clear the club?"

The waiter's automatic never wavered from Hardesty as he answered: "I passed around the word that one of our waiters had been murdered and hinted at the searching police investigation which would follow. The club is cleared, Herr Hauptmann. Even the help have gone."

Backman nodded approvingly.

Hardesty, eyes narrowed to slits, moved purposely forward. He was seeing the *Norman Prince* split in two, its shattered hull disgorging waves of burning oil. And superimposed on that scene of fiery death was the blond face of Jules Bachman.

The butler tilted his automatic. "One step more and you'll all burn in hell!"

Hardesty chuckled dryly. "After a flaming tanker, hell ain't so hot."

DETECTIVE FICTION

Bachman retreated before Hardesty's steady advance, suddenly cried out: "Shoot the damned—"

*"I want to sigh when you sigh,
Cry when you cry . . ."*

Bachman and the waiter froze in abject terror. When they were capable of physical motion, they turned awe-struck faces toward the portable.

Hardesty struck Bachman, set him sprawling. Then Hardesty tore the gun from the waiter's hand, matter-of-factly breaking the man's arm in the process.

Doreen's mouth was still mutely holding the last note she had uttered. When she saw Hardesty expertly trussing the two Nazis with wire, she sagged limply to the floor.

Hardesty lifted her to her feet, gently shook her. "You should get the Congressional Medal for that singing you just fooled the Nazis with."

"I knew you wouldn't stop—till they killed you," she mumbled against Hardesty's Royal Navy tunic.

"I just couldn't get to the portable. My legs wouldn't move. I—I made myself sing—"

Bachman made his obscene comments in German.

Hardesty guided the girl to the studio door. "You get out of here as fast as you can. Run along the road toward the bus station. I'll catch up with you." He pushed her toward the door.

Doreen had made about one hundred yards along the road when Hardesty, running hard, caught up with her. Without a word he curved an arm about her waist and swept her along with him. At the bus station, now deserted, he drew her down to the ground in the protection of the wall, said grimly, "I told Bachman he was on the *Norman Prince*. In a second he'll believe it. . . . There it goes!"

The earth and sky seemed to crash in an ear-splitting thunder of noise. Hardesty hugged the girl closer to him—the girl he had dreamed about. The girl who wanted to sigh when he sighed. . . . ♠ ♠ ♠

QUIRKS OF CRIME

In Sacramento, Calif., an automobile picked the pocket of a pedestrian and escaped with \$102. The victim had walked too close to a moving car. His coat pocket—wallet and all—was ripped off by the auto and carried away.

Hoosick Falls, N. Y., police are looking for superstitious thieves in connection with a store burglary. The place was completely cleaned of its cash—except for 13 pennies which they left neatly arranged in a row on the cash register.

Few men ever get—or take—the chance to start their lives over again from scratch. The war gave John D. MacDonald his break. A successful engineer, he suddenly decided he wanted to write, and he has been doing so ever since, to the delight of editors and readers alike. His hero has a harder time. An ex-troubleshooter for a syndicate, he heads west to a bright new life—and the ironic discovery that his brother's death has left him a legacy of only more trouble . . . and murder.

VIOLENCE INHERITED

by JOHN D. MacDONALD

THE DESERT, Johnny Hoyt decided, was a very special kind of monotony. It was the drumbeat of tires on the oven-lid road. It was heat making a watery mirage in the distance. It was salt grains crusted around his hair line, hot dry wind cracking his lips, sun turning the big gray convertible into something that could better be used for roasting chestnuts. He drove fast, eager to be out of it, pitying the truckers and envying the cars with the cooling units projecting over a closed window.

One thing, the heat and discomfort took his mind off Al. This sort of grief was odd and unexpected. You have an older brother. You don't think much about him. Last you heard,

just after the war, he was doing well out at a city called Renada. You're doing all right yourself. Maybe too much all right. Maybe a little too close to that vague line between honest and the other thing. Never crooked. But too close to the ones who step over that line and dodge quickly back.

You started out in a small way, investing in a string of vending machines. Akerson decided to absorb that whole area. You made yourself too tough to swallow without a fight. So Akerson made you the offer. You took it. Then you had a lot of machines to watch over. Vendors and the pins and the bandits. Trucks and schedules and a knot on the head for

anybody who tried to set up competition. Short hours and long pay. It was a good setup.

But Johnny Hoyt had been able to see the image of trouble ahead, a glistering image like the heat-pools on the distant road. It had made him restless. He wanted to get out, but not enough to get out without any other reason or any other place to go.

And then the letter had come. Special delivery, registered, airmail, return receipt requested. Letterhead paper. Walter F. Dimming, Attorney at Law. "... tragic accident ... your brother, Albert C. Hoyt, my client ... sole heir ... necessary decisions on disposition of holdings ... suggest you come out here at your earliest convenience, wiring probable date of arrival. . . ."

And then the unexpected grief. Things you'd thought were forgotten. The big attic room in Youngstown, Al's trophies on the shelf he built. Playing catch until dusk made the ball too hard to see. Al's big slow sleepy smile and the way he'd scrub your head with hard knuckles when you got out of line. Summer evenings, with the flap-slap of screen doors, insect song, taste of vanilla ice cream. Al sitting beside you on the porch steps, his voice all funny because it was just changing, telling you what he was going to do with his life.

And Al had died at thirty-four. In a week Johnny Hoyt would be thirty. A good time to make a break, he had decided. And the reason was in the letter. He remembered the look of Akerson's thick white fingers as he

had held Walter Dimming's letter.

"I guess you got to go out there, Johnny. Look, kid. Settle it up and come back. What the hell kind of business was your brother in out there?"

"The last letter I got, right after the war, he was building a big tourist court outside this Renada on Route 50. He said he had a nice location and he'd do a good business."

Akerson smiled. "I was afraid you might take it in your head to stay out there, Johnny, and take over his business. Now it doesn't bother me. I can't figure you changing dirty sheets. I always got a place for you, Johnny."

"I don't know, Paul."

"I seen you get restless, Johnny. Maybe you figure this isn't a pretty business. Sometimes it isn't. I give you that. But where else you going to make this class of dough? Start at the beginning someplace? Compete with the young punks? You and me, Johnny, it's too late for us to find a new line."

"I'll think it over, Paul. While I'm out there."

"I need you. You haven't got a record. You've always been straight." Paul laughed hoarsely, "Just like a comic, I got to have a straight man."

"I told you, I'll think it over."

Akerson had opened the locked drawer of the steel desk, counted out new bills, pushed them across the desk top. "A little bonus, Johnny. You've earned it."

"Thanks, Paul."

"Just remember how good I treat you, Johnny. Keep it in mind."

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So Johnny had closed up the apartment, put the stuff he wanted to keep in storage, put some of the cash balance into traveler's checks, had the car tuned, wired Dimming and took off in the moist thickness of a late September heat wave.

In a funny way it was like being born again, he thought. He had driven slowly through the East into the Middle West, stopping in the early evening, sleeping ten and eleven hours at night. It was as though breaking with Akerson had released a slow spring which was now unwinding. He hadn't been, at any time, as conscious of the tension of working with Akerson as now, when it was over.

There was an anonymity about crossing the country, like a long cruise on a boat. He had allowed himself enough time so that he could take the more indirect, less-traveled highways. Sometimes he had the idea that he was invisible, that no one could see him. But then a waitress would smile, or a gas station attendant would feel like chatting.

He wondered how they classified him. The car was big, the clothes good. They would see a man, not tall, with a good breadth of shoulder, a deep tan, black hair clipped short and heavy brows which almost met over the bridge of his nose, pale blue eyes, very slightly protruding, an air of certainty, of coordination. A mouth with calmness built into it—calmness spiced with a trace of ruthlessness.

Two of his own attributes were a puzzle to Johnny Hoyt. The first was the way other men seemed willing,

almost eager, to accept his leadership, though he had no special urge to command. He wondered what would happen if he ever *did* acquire some great ambition. Things had always come so easily. It was almost as if he were unused—as though the Fates had kept him apart for some unknown manifest destiny.

The second attribute was his effect on women. He knew his looks were average. They seemed to see something that he could not explain. He never had to seek them out. They were always there. And not one of them had ever awakened anything except a quick, sharp interest that faded almost as quickly as it had come.

Now his past stretched behind him and he thought of it as a series of X's. Ex-quarterback, All Conference; ex-lieutenant, infantry; ex-troubleshotter, Akerson.

DURING ALL of the morning and into the middle of the afternoon, the far blue mountains had seemed to recede as he sped toward them. Now, when the heat was at its worst, they began to speed toward him, crowding toward the sky.

The road marched upward and soon, as it began to twist up along the flanks of the hills, coolness came into the wind. At wide places on the shoulder the trucks off the desert were stopped to allow the overheated motors to cool. Cars sped down the road toward the desert, to cross in the relative coolness of evening.

Now that he was close to Renada, he felt a flutter of excitement. He

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came over the pass where the little sign said, *Altitude 4930 feet*. The sun rested on the peak of a distant mountain directly ahead, like a golden ball on the nose of a gigantic seal. He dipped down the slope and saw Renada ahead, a pastel city in the palm of the cupped hand of the plateau. Blue shadows spread toward him as the sun dropped behind the mountains. Neon flicked awake, signaling night that it was time to come.

Here the neon spoke in a boldness denied it in other, more sedate cities. CASINO it screamed. CASINO, CASINO, CASINO. Get a hunch and bet a bunch. Silver dollars clink in the sweaty hand like the faraway bells of a forbidden temple. The goddess has a smirk. She taps the one who needs it least. I dub thee Sir Seven and it is within your power to make fourteen straight natural passes.

Money is a tight-skinned fruit on a golden plate. Bite deeply and the juices squirt like blood.

CASINO!!!

Come right in, friends. It's legal, and to keep the place from having a bad reputation, we'll always fix it so you can buy enough gas to get home—provided you still have your car.

The air had the smell of cedar, and the lodge-pole pine stood proud on the high and distant slopes. The street of entry was wide and clean, and when he stopped for a light Johnny heard a woman laugh, as though she were in pain.

He found a sprawling hotel on the north edge of the city. A one-story U-shaped building enclosed a big

stone patio where a fountain danced where the wrought-iron tables had plate-glass tops, where a girl strolled with an accordion as the waiters move deftly with the trays of drinks.

The clerk was a bald-headed Cupid with pursed mouth and baby-fat rings on his wrists. "Room or cabaña, mister? Cabañas got panel heat, air conditioning, maid service and stainless steel kitchenettes."

"Cabaña, I guess," Johnny said.

The cupid smile widened. "Special cabaña rate if you're taking the cure, Mr. Hoyt."

"Cure?"

"Six weeks and you're a bachelor."

"Not this time, friend. I'll tell you tomorrow if I want it for long."

A boy with a dark Indian face ran ahead of the car down the drive, turned and waved wildly to steer Johnny into the parking place beside his cabaña. It was built of white stone, of vertical redwood planks. Johnny unlocked the back end, and the boy struggled in, taking the three bags in one load. He put the bags in the bedroom, ran around opening windows, turning on lights.

White teeth flashed. "In the morning, sir, you will see. All private. No one looks in your windows. Very private. Very nice, sir. I turned on the ice. But if you want some now, I shall get."

"Do you get drink orders, or is that somebody else?"

"Oh, I can get it!"

"Get me a personal shaker of stingers. Tell the bartender to go light on the mint and the ice."

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Again the flash of teeth. By the time he came back, Johnny was in his robe. He tossed a laundry bag near the door. "Take that on your way out."

"Yes, sir. I shall pour one for you, sir?"

"You shall pour one."

Johnny gave him two dollars, signed the drink chit. The boy took the laundry and went down the drive, whistling in the darkness. Johnny locked the screen, inhaled the aromatic night air, savoring how the shower would feel. He sipped his drink. Mint cooled the hard rasp of the brandy.

The shower stall was big, with a glass door. He washed clean, then stood with his head back, his eyes shut, water stinging his face, his chest, trickling down his open throat. He shaved his beard down to a hint of blueness under the tan, put on white boxer shorts, put his drinks near the bed and lay down. After he finished the second one, he reached for the phone book, found the page, ran a blunt thumbnail down the column. *Dib, dil, dim. Dimming, Walter F. Attny. Off. Thomason Bldg.—2-2112. Res. 9 Arroyo Blanco Rd. 4-4114.*

He gave the second number to the office, heard them dial it, then heard the distant intermittent buzz as it rang in Dimming's home.

"Yes?" A woman's voice, as controlled and cool as the wind that now came down from the mountains.

"Mr. Dimming, please."

"Who is calling?"

"Hoyt. John Hoyt."

"Oh! Yes, Mr. Hoyt. Just a moment, please."

Johnny shrugged. The name had meant something to her. Holding the phone, he reached out to the shaker, filled the glass for the third time.

"Mr. Hoyt? Dimming. Glad you're in town. Been waiting for you." A staccato voice, full of nervous energy. "Where are you? I'll tell you how to find my house. Plenty of room here. Glad to have you."

"I'm all settled in at a cabaña at the Patio House, Mr. Dimming."

"Too bad. Needless expense. You haven't eaten yet, I hope? Tell you what. You're at the end of Barcelona Road. Right out the main entrance and four blocks south on the left is a place called *Gin And It*. Don't let the name scare you. Meet you there in an hour. Sit at the bar. Look anything like Al?"

"No. I'm dark. Shorter."

"Just tell Harry behind the bar you're waiting for me. He'll point me out." Dimming hung up.

JOHNNY SAT on the edge of the bed and finished the drink. Work with Akerson had taught him that life is full of clues. The woman in the Dimming household had known of him. That either made it a big case, an important case—or the woman also acted as Dimming's secretary. The last didn't seem likely. And Dimming had made a remark about 'needless expense.' That might be an inadvertent attempt to convey to Johnny an idea of the smallness of Al's estate.

One summer-weight wool suit was

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not badly rumpled. Johnny put on a white sports shirt. He dropped his key off at the office and walked slowly down Barcelona Road. It was a quiet section of town. Couples sat on the benches in a small park. A whooping quartet of boys on bicycles sped by. The sidewalks were broad, and disciplined flowers grew between the walk and the curb.

He reached the Gin and It with twenty minutes to spare. There was no neon. Just a bulb behind a ground glass screen, the name of the place fastened to the glass, a silhouette in old English script. Expensive cars, diagonally parked, nuzzled the curbing.

Johnny went in. The bar portion was a replica of a village pub, even to the scarred dart board. Beyond it he could see into the dining room. There the motif had been dropped. A girl with a tiny heart-shaped face and great sad eyes played a muted boogie-woogie on a harpsichord, and a waiter crossed the room carrying something aflame on the end of a sword.

Johnny sat on a stool. People at the bar glanced at him. The bartender came over, aloofness on his broad face. This would be a place which discouraged transient trade.

"Sir?"

"Are you Harry?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm waiting for Mr. Dimming. I don't know him by sight."

Reserve melted. "Yes, sir. Of course. I'll point him out to you when he arrives. Your pleasure, sir?"

"Stinger."

The bartender showed him a bottle. "Is this satisfactory?"

Johnny studied him for a moment. "Let's say that it's too good for such a fate. That next bottle will be fine."

The man smiled. Now the last of the reserve was gone.

Johnny looked around him. Up at the curve of the bar was seated a girl with a bold petulant face. As he glanced at her she looked away, then looked back again. She had a dark complexion and luminous gray eyes startling against her skin. And he saw that she was very drunk: rigidly consciously, probably premeditatedly drunk.

SHE WAS alone. Between her and his barstool were two hulking blond men with porcine faces. They wore rayon cord suits in almost identical patterns. They talked in low tones. A bottle of Scotch stood on the bar in front of them. They looked like brothers.

There was no one at his left. Johnny turned a bit so he could look over at the few tables in the bar. One young man sat alone at a table. Johnny wondered what his connections were—connections which made him welcome at the Gin and It. He wore a white linen jacket cut with the garishness of show business, heavily padded across the narrow shoulders. He looked at nothing, with the lidded unblinking stare of a domesticated snake. And Johnny, familiar with the type, suspected that he saw everything. He had a weak narrow face the immobility of a psychopath.

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The stinger was good—tart and crisp. Harry, no demands on him at the moment, came over. "Stranger in town, sir?"

"Yes. I was wondering about something, Harry. I've been wondering if my brother ever used to come in here. Al Hoyt."

At the end of the bar the glass slipped out of the drunken brunette's hand and smashed on the bar top. The two porcine men stopped talking. They both turned and looked at Johnny with the same motion, and the same expression of intense curiosity and wariness.

Every last bit of the reserve had returned to the broad face of the bartender. His eyes were frosty. "Mr. Hoyt came in quite often, sir," he said. "Pardon me." He went to clean up the spilled drink and broken glass in front of the girl.

But the girl had slipped off the stool. She stood up, the stain of the spilled drink on the front of her yellow dress. She looked at Johnny and her face crumpled. "Al's dead!" she screamed. "He's dead!" She acted as though at last, and for the first time, she had managed to fit her mind around that fact.

As the gray-suited manager and the head waiter closed in on the girl, Johnny glanced over at the boy in the white jacket, met his ice-cold glance.

The young man smiled. It was a thin and oddly wolfish smile. He looked away.

Alarm bells rang stridently in the back of Johnny's mind. The girl in the yellow dress had turned her face

toward the wall. She wept into her hands.

The bartender came back to Johnny. He smiled. "They are getting a taxi for her. She is upset."

"Who is she?"

"One of your brother's friends, I believe. Her name is Miss Everingham."

Johnny grinned at the bartender. "You know, ever since I mentioned Al's name, these two puffy gentlemen on my right have been giving me the eye. Any special reason for that?"

The bartender went white around the mouth. The two men were well within earshot. "Please, sir," the bartender said helplessly.

"I'm sorry if we seem rude, Mr. Hoyt," the nearest blond man said. "We were business associates of your brother. Naturally we are interested in you. I am Oscar Honeybell. My brother, Otto Honeybell, Mr. Hoyt."

"So bleased," Otto said. His fat lips curved in a smile. His eyes looked like two blueberries in muffin dough.

"Were you gentlemen and Al joint owners of anything at the time of his death?" Johnny asked. "I just want to know if we're partners."

"It so happened that we had no business venture going at the time Al died," Oscar said.

Johnny, consciously rude, shrugged and turned back to his drink. Miss Everingham's taxi was announced and she went out, steady on her feet, without glancing at Johnny.

She went through the door and a man came in, glancing back at her. He was tall. He carried himself poor-

ly, shoulders thrust forward, chest hollow, expensive clothes baggy on his rail-thin body. His face was oval, unlined, boyish, with warm spots of color in the cheeks, vague-looking eyes, curly fair hair.

"That's Mr. Dimming," Harry said.

CHAPTER 2

The Other Side of the Coin

JOHNNY SLID off his stool, smiled. Dimming glanced casually at the other three persons in the room, came smiling to Johnny. His hand was dry, hot, thin in Johnny's grasp.

"Nice to meet you, Hoyt. Evening, Oscar, Otto. Quiet here tonight, Harry. Wasn't that Johanna Everingham who just went out? She didn't speak."

"She's a little upset tonight, Mr. Dimming."

"I guess that table in the corner is best for right now. Harry, bring over one for Mr. Hoyt of whatever he's drinking, and the usual for me, please."

"Right away, sir."

Dimming lacked any quality of stillness. He scuffed his feet, plucked at his sleeve, drummed on the table. His smile came and went as though it were a nervous tic.

"All right if I call you Johnny, like Al did? Call me Dimmy. Everybody does. Terrible thing, about Al. Know how it happened yet?"

"All I know is what you wrote in your letter."

"It was a little over two weeks ago tonight. On Friday the twentieth.

Just fifteen days ago. He'd been at my home. We had some work to do. I needed his signature on some papers I'd drawn up in connection with the sale of—well, we'll touch on that later.

"Diana made coffee for us and he left at midnight. Blame myself. I knew he was tired. Should have insisted he stay over. Hell of a bad curve down the way from my place. Steep drop on the side and not much of a guard fence. I saw him off and I was just heading for my room when I heard that crash, a long way off. Couldn't think what it might be. Shrugged it off. You know how those things go. In the bathroom when I heard the sirens. So I put a jacket on and went down the road.

"He got thrown out on the way down. The car burned. That's how come somebody reported it. Hell of a thing. Talking to the man one minute. Next minute—thup! Gone. Just like that. Too much work and too much worry. No pain, though. That's what the coroner said. Skull fractured so bad he couldn't have lived two seconds. All rocks down in that canyon.

"So there it is. He talked about you a lot, Johnny. Told me a lot about you when I made out his will eight, nine months ago."

"Was it his idea to make out a will?" Johnny asked.

Dimming's vague eyes widened a bit. "His? No. Mine. Service to all my clients. Heckle 'em, bully 'em. Make a will, make a will."

"Did he leave much, Dimming?"

"We'll go into the details tomorrow. But not much, Johnny. If he'd

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died a year ago, there would have been a nice bundle."

"How much is nice?"

"Quarter million. Maybe more. Now, after taxes, I'd say you come out with thirty thousand. Around there."

"Where did it go?"

"I hate to have to tell you this, Johnny."

"Somebody has to."

Dimming scrubbed at his forehead with his knuckles. "There's a disease out here, Johnny. A fever. You know what they do in the casinos? Hire people to staff the place who have no gambling yen at all. No urge. Mostly girl dealers, that sort of thing. After a couple years they have to unload them. The smell of money gets 'em. Maybe they start with a two dollar bet on a horse. Nobody seems to be immune. Finally you have to can them or they start tapping the house money."

"Are you trying to tell me Al gambled the money away?"

"Right."

"Al was no gambler. Maybe he was a lot of things I know nothing about. But no gambler."

Dimming smiled. "Once you've seen it work around here as long as I have, you won't be so dogmatic."

"Al was no gambler."

"I'll give you your chance to meet the people who watched him lose it, Johnny."

There was no answer to that. "Where's his place? On Route 50."

"Correction. It used to be his place. Now it belongs to Mick Sulla."

"Sulla," Johnny said softly, his head tilted to one side, "Mick Sulla." Suddenly he hit the table with the flat of his hand. Akerson had used the name once. In connection with a new amusement machine firm in Illinois, one that had absorbed a few of their old suppliers using methods anything but dainty.

Dimming stared curiously at him. "You know Sulla?"

"I know of him."

Dimming suggested, "Let's go in and get a table."

As soon as they had ordered, Dimming said, "Sulla is rough. He has a restaurant and casino called the Pot Luck. His games are honest. They have to be. There's too much at stake in a city like this. Rumors could kill us. That's where your brother started to play, ten, eleven months ago. He used up his working capital and then gave Sulla a forty thousand mortgage on Rio Azul. That's his place, you know. A few months later Sulla got into him for another fifty thousand, then another thirty. That made the total of the loan one hundred and twenty thousand.

"Al lost it all and tried to get more about a month ago. Sulla said no dice. He offered Al fifty thousand for his remaining equity and a deed to Rio Azul. Al finally agreed and took twenty-five of the fifty and lost that. He stalled on signing the place over. That was what we were working on the night he was killed. He signed it over. Sulla will pay you the remaining twenty-five thousand. You're the beneficiary on two small insurance

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policies, and there's something left in the bank."

"Who's his executor?"

"I am, Johnny."

"You were his lawyer while all this was going on between Sulla and Al?"

"That's right."

"You know what it sounds like to me, Dimming? It sounds to me as though you were working for Sulla instead of Al. That's what it sounds like."

All the vagueness went out of Dimming's eyes. Something very cold and savage showed for a moment. "And you can go to hell, my friend," Dimming said softly.

Johnny smiled mirthlessly, shoved back his chair and got up. As he walked toward the door Dimming called after him, "Wait a minute, Johnny."

Johnny walked out into the night. He knew how ridiculous he'd feel if everything Dimming told him had been the truth. But there was something that Dimming didn't know.

Al's and Johnny's father had made good money. He sold construction equipment. But the home their mother should have had, the clothes, the leisure, all dropped down the same hole along with Al's college education. Johnny's football abilities had gotten him through school. All the Hoyt's money had gone through the windows at the race tracks, across the table in hotel rooms, through the holes in boards, into the hungry slots of machines. And when George Hoyt finally realized what he had done to himself, his wife, his family, he killed him-

self. His wife had died less than a year later, on Al's twentieth birthday.

No, Dimming didn't know that. Johnny knew one thing. Al would never have gambled. He refused even to flip a coin to see who paid for the lunch. Something was very sour.

He walked back toward the Patio House. The little park was empty. He whirled suddenly and saw a shape, pale in the darkness, dodge into the shadows. Johnny walked on more slowly, thinking hard. When a car swept by, he plunged off into the park. He ran silently, circling back. He posted himself in heavy tree shadows near the sidewalk. In a moment he heard hurrying footsteps. The fellow in the white jacket appeared, staring along the street to where he had last seen Johnny.

Johnny stepped out behind him, reached around the man's shoulders, grabbed the lapels of the white jacket and stripped it down off the narrow shoulders so that it pinned the man's arms. As the man turned, fighting the jacket, Johnny slapped him, forehand and backhand, slaps that resounded in the silent street like a long string of firecrackers.

As soon as he felt the fight go out of the man, Johnny stopped. The man stood, his arms still pinned, panting heavily, bruised mouth open, lank black hair hanging over his eyebrows.

"I don't like people following me," Johnny said.

"I wasn't following you, guy. I don't even know you."

"Dimming had to spot you there. He's the only one who knew I was

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going to meet him there. You were already there when I came in."

"Who the hell is Dimming?" the man said sullenly.

"Next time you get in my way we'll have a little chat about Dimming."

"You're real hard, eh?"

"Put your coat on and go comb your hair. Tell Dimming I'm going to my room and go to bed and he'll hear from my lawyer."

The man shouldered into his jacket, ran his fingers back through his hair, touched his hand to his mouth and looked at his fingers, turning so that the street light illumined his hand.

He turned without a word and walked back in the direction of the Gin and It with jaunty, somehow pathetic dignity. But Johnny did not permit himself to be deceived by the cheap victory. He had seen the man's eyes, the set of his mouth. It was the face of a man who has killed—and will kill again. . . .

RIO AZUL was two miles outside the city limits on Route 50. At that point the Blue River meandered close to the highway, then swung away and looped back again, enclosing an area a half a mile in extent along the highway, a quarter of a mile deep, shaped roughly like half a pie. Every inch of it was landscaped. Johnny parked on the shoulder on the far side of the highway and stared.

There was an office, four long courts set at right angles to the highway, a long building that contained stores—grocery, drug, dry cleaners, laundry,

a recreation hall, a pool, a restaurant, a large gas station, a drive-in theater. It was a small, self-contained city. Al Hoyt had built it. It was in good taste, and it hummed with activity. Johnny was very impressed, and very proud.

Trucks of materials were parked near the recreation hall. Workmen went in and out. A large sign in front of the building said, *Casino Royale will open November 1st.*

He drove into the gas station. He was beginning to realize that a hundred and seventy thousand couldn't be more than a down payment on such an establishment. The location couldn't have been more perfect. And nothing looked jerry-built.

"Fill it up and move it out of your way," Johnny said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

He walked over to the office. A waist-high counter split the room in half. A girl was marking a road map for an elderly couple. Johnny found her pleasant to look at. She wore a white frilly Mexican blouse which left her shoulders and midriff bare. Her tan was almost the shade of toffee. Brown-blond hair was worn in a thick coronet braid. He realized that he hadn't seen that hair style in a long time. She was not beautiful. Her eyes and her mouth both looked as though they had been designed for a larger woman. The eyes were aqua, he decided, and the mouth was stubborn. There was a quickness and a warmth about her.

The elderly couple thanked her profusely and went out. Johnny lit the

cigarette he had just tapped on his thumb nail, and moved over to the counter.

Her smile, for him, was properly cooler than the smile for the couple. "Yes, sir?"

"I'd like permission to walk around and look at things," Johnny said. "Big place you have here."

There was a shadow behind her eyes. "Go right ahead. You're perfectly welcome. But you've been here before, haven't you?"

"Never."

"Sorry, sir. I thought you looked familiar somehow. Your eyes."

Johnny weighed the pros and cons for a moment, decided to go ahead. "That's the only way I look like my brother, I guess. Al Hoyt was my brother."

She shut her eyes for a long second. When she opened them again, there was enough naked revulsion on her face to startle him. She looked at him as though he were something that crawled.

IN A HUSKY whisper she said, "I hope the money makes you happy, Mr. Hoyt. I hope you have a lot of fun with it."

"Hey, slow down!"

"Of course. Slow down. Keep remembering that there's no good reason why you should share your brother's dreams or loyalties. I hope you'll be proud of yourself, John Hoyt. Proud and happy."

The tears came then, and she turned away abruptly.

He spoke to her rigid back. "I

haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"Then let's just drop it, Mr. Hoyt," she said. "Go look around."

"If you'd stop being so damn emotional," he said roughly, "maybe you could help me."

She turned. Her face was cold. "I'm here to help people."

"I am hoping you were close enough to my brother to know what the hell happened to him during this past year. I can't convince myself that he threw this whole place over his shoulder. I want to know how Sulla got his hooks into Al."

She gave him an incredulous look. Her mouth twisted with contempt. "Don't insult me by trying to lie to me, Mr. Hoyt. Sulla couldn't frighten Al, or push him into a corner."

He put his hands gently on the counter and leaned forward. "Then kindly tell me, my emotional friend, how come Al sold out to Sulla before he died?"

Her lips parted. Then she frowned. "Do you actually *believe* that?"

"Courtesy of Walter F. Dimming. He told me. He's got the papers on it. I suppose they'll have Al's signature on them. Sulla is going to give me the last payment. Al got all the rest of the money and gambled it away."

"Gambled!" she gasped. She laughed. There was a note of hysteria in it. "Please, Mr. Hoyt. Getting Al into any kind of a game would be like—like trying to talk Sulla into becoming a monk."

"Dimming says there are witnesses. People who saw Al losing heavily at

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the Pot Luck, losing over a long period of time."

"He lied to you!" she cried. She looked beyond him, composed her face with an effort. A woman and two small children had come in.

The girl gave them the requested information on the restaurant hours. As they went out, a small round man with a balding head and a dejected manner came in.

"Lia," he said tiredly, "I come to say good-by."

"Oh, Andy!" she said. "I am sorry."

"Such people you can't do business with," he said. He saw Lia's warning gesture and he turned and looked flatly at Johnny. There was anger mixed with the dejection. "I don't care who this fella is, Lia," Andy said. "I don't care if he's Sulla's brother-in-law. Al helped me get started here. Al said how a tailor shop could do good. He fixed the rent small on the lease for me to get started. Now the business goes good. Now Sulla takes over. You know what his man asks me for, Lia? Five hundred a month. Five hundred dollars for two hundred twenty square feet! So now I got no business. Just like that. What do you stay on with these robbers for, Lia?"

"It's just to the end of October, Andy. They're getting somebody to take my job."

"Leave now, Lia."

"I want to, Andy. But a lot of Al's people want to stay on. Sulla wants the bonus system eliminated. I do the payrolls. I can stay and fight for them a little while."

The little man sighed. "The truck is here soon. In storage my stuff goes. Good-by, Lia."

She held her hand out. "Luck, Andy. The best of luck to you."

The man blinked rapidly and walked quickly out.

Lia said softly, "He had to come out here, Mr. Hoyt. Asthma. Al helped him. And this is the way it ends. Not the way Al would have wanted it."

An angular dark girl came in, glanced casually at Johnny, lifted the gate and went behind the counter. She said, "Don't try the lamb stew, kid. My digestion tells me it's house percentage stuff."

Lia picked up her purse and came out into the part of the room where Johnny stood. Away from the high counter she looked taller. The aqua eyes were on a level with his lips.

They went out the door together and Johnny said, "We have some talking to do, Lia."

"Lia Webster. Maybe we have. You didn't lie to me, did you?"

"No, I didn't. My car's up in the station."

He paid the attendant, slid behind the wheel and waited for his chance to turn out into traffic. He glanced at her. She had her head back, her eyes closed. She opened her eyes and smiled. "Sorry. The place gets me down lately."

"I'm in town at the Patio House. That all right for lunch?"

"Fine."

He left the car in the main parking lot. The head waiter took them to a

corner table in the shade of an overhead trellis thickly vined.

After they ordered, Johnny said, "We're both thinking the same thing. Let's put it into words. Dimming tells me that all I get is the last payment. Twenty-five thousand."

"Twenty-five thousand! But the court alone—just the hundred and sixty-five rooms gross a year-around average of nine hundred a week!"

"Maybe the theory is that a guy asks fewer questions and digs around less if somebody gives him twenty-five thousand dollars."

"You better tell me exactly what Dimming said just as well as you can remember it, Mr. Hoyt."

"Johnny, Lia." She nodded. He went over the conversation with Dimming. He put in the part about Johanna Everingham, the Honeybell brothers. He left out the incident of the man in the white jacket. He had to stop when the meal was brought, and he continued as soon as the waiter was out of earshot.

WHEN SHE had heard it all, she sat very still. She looked through him and beyond him.

"We all thought you sold out, sight unseen." She shuddered. "Somehow Sulla is stealing the place, Johnny. With Dimming's help. And you know what that means."

It had been there, in his mind, all along. There had been a strong reluctance to bring it up to the level of consciousness. Now he said it, his voice thick and his vision oddly blurred.

"It means that they killed Al," he said. He felt an anger far stronger than anything in his experience. He wanted to smash things with his hands. He came slowly back from that faraway place and saw Lia staring at him. She had gone white around the mouth.

"I—I didn't believe you all the way, Johnny, until I saw your face just then."

He tried to laugh. He was still trembling.

She leaned forward, the words coming fast. "About me, Johnny. That wasn't just a job. I married a man, Johnny. He smashed me, utterly and completely. Broke me down to less than nothing. I came out here for a divorce. The day after it was granted I tried a silly thing. I wasn't very good at it, and all I did was hurt myself. Al picked me up and brushed me off and set me on my feet and gave me back some pride. Whatever you want to do about Al, Johnny, I'm in it with you. All the way."

"I don't think they meant us to get together, Lia. I have one piece of the story. You have the other. Put them together and it spells a bad word. For them. How big is Mick Sulla?"

She put her cup down, pressed her thumb hard against the edge of the table. "This big, Johnny. That's the way he has this city. I suppose he's a run-of-the-mine psychopath. His distortion is a hunger for money. He wants all the money in the world. He uses his profits to buy people so that he can make more money.

"They wouldn't take Al in the serv

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ice, you know, because of his bad knees. Al bought the land with his savings in '40 just before prices skyrocketed. He did the work on the first buildings himself, hiring unskilled labor. Right from the first it went well. Money came in. Al had a phobia about owing money. He lived on nothing and put every cent back into Rio Azul. At the time he died, he was still doing that, Johnny. The only luxury he allowed himself was a small apartment in town where he could go when the pressure out at the place got him down. All his personal things are there. When I knew the place had changed hands, I packed what he had out at Rio Azul and had them taken to the apartment. I have a key."

He looked at her questioningly. She said, "No, Johnny. Not like that. I did the book work there sometimes. He was never interested in me. I used to wonder what decision I'd make if he ever did get interested. I owed him a lot."

"Then he didn't owe money to anyone?"

"He paid his way as he went along. He was generous with the people working for him. We were all on bonus based on profits, so we all felt as though we had a stake in making it work. Know what he used to say? He used to tell me that pretty soon the place was going to be as big as he wanted to make it. Then he was going to take a vacation. He was going east to find you and bring you back out here. He thought that the two of you could run it together and make a good living."

"You said Sulla was after the place."

"Sulla knew that it was a goldmine. He wanted to add a casino to make it a super-goldmine. He tried a lot of things. He tried to get a concession from Al to put in a casino. Al said no. Al said that the place catered to people who weren't much interested in casinos, and if they were, they could always go into town. Sulla tried to buy the whole place. Al told me the highest offer before Sulla stopped trying. A quarter of a million down and another quarter in regular payments over a five year period. If Rio Azul had been within the city limits, Sulla would have had it long ago. City officials, at Sulla's request, would have tied Al hand and foot by rigidly enforcing every silly ordinance on the books."

"Where does Johanna Everingham fit?"

Her smile wasn't entirely pleasant. "Al was always feeding stray dogs."

"And the cat has claws, eh?"

Lia said defensively, "She did some misinterpreting. She lives here on alimony. She drank herself into trouble. Al straightened her out. She thought it was the start of an immortal love or something. Sulla had his hooks into her and Al bought her out of it. She was paying him back by regular installments out of the alimony."

"How about the fat Honeybells?"

She looked angry. "That pair! Al was naive in some ways. They convinced him that they were management specialists. They told him all

the things he was doing wrong. He gave them a contract. I was the one who found out that they were cleverly sabotaging personnel, service, food—even our movie projectors. Sulla was paying them to do it. I proved that to Al and he threw them out. They lost us a good deal of business, of course.”

“How did Al get hooked up with Dimming?”

“We had another lawyer. He died a year and a half ago. Dimming took over his practise. He’s very plausible, you know.”

“I’ll have to have a lawyer. I’ll have to have one without a handle that Sulla can grab.”

“I don’t think a lawyer is going to do you much good, Johnny. I think Sulla could freeze this in the courts until the end of time.”

He studied her for a moment. “Get this, Lia. I want it frozen. I want a legal tangle. I don’t hope to win anything through the law. You don’t hit a man like Sulla with the law very often or very hard. There are other ways to hit people like Sulla.”

“Are you pretending to be something you’re not, Johnny? Don’t be the little boy in the school yard making a fist. We had a little war out here at the time I was getting my divorce. For the sake of the tourist business they managed to tone it down. I don’t know who was after what. I do know that three men died. One was blown in half on the steps of the County Court House. One was killed at his own kitchen table. They shot him through the screen door. The third

was killed as he was unlocking his car.

“It was a bad smell. The police trapped a man with a record as a petty thief. The story is that on the way to the jail, after confessing to the three murders, he tried to escape. He grabbed an officer’s gun and was killed. That ‘solved’ the three murders. After it was all over, Sulla owned the Pot Luck in addition to his other places.”

Johnny smiled. “And Sulla has interests in Illinois, Long Island and Dade County, Florida. He has made this his backyard, and he can romp here happy as a calf provided he takes his overall policy orders from the syndicate and kicks back his assessments as they come due. I could name at least three people who could come out here and say the word and Sulla would crawl on his hands and knees right down the middle of Barcelona Road, barking like a dog. If he decided to be a bad boy, a team of specialists would come in here and pick him clean in three days, pinfeathers and all.”

“How do you know that sort of thing? You sound as though you were—”

“I was. A little man on the fringe. Honest enough, but part of it. I wanted out. I thought I could come out here and take over Al’s business and get out for keeps. So I come out and run into the same damn thing, only now I’m looking over the fence in the other direction.”

“I don’t think I like that, Johnny,” she said softly.

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"You don't have to like me. You better be glad that I have that kind of a background. If I didn't, we'd be licked before we start. Maybe we're licked anyway. But at least we can let Sulla know that there were two members of the Hoyt clan."

After many seconds she answered him. "All right, Johnny. Who am I to be a judge? How can I help?"

"First help me find a lawyer."

"Try Maury Marin. I can't remember his address. He'll be in the book. Then tell me what you think. It's just a hunch."

"What time do you get through out there?"

"The night man comes on at six. I live out there."

"I'll pick you up at seven then."

CHAPTER 3

Call to Battle

MAURY MARIN inhabited a shabby cluttered office on the ground floor of one of the city's oldest apartment buildings, which now housed hairdressers, cut-rate dentists, fortune tellers and one ominous-looking massage parlor. Maury Marin was an old man with a head and face of classic nobility, a mane of pure white hair, a dumpy shapeless body and a whiskey breath.

"Sit down, my boy, sit down," he said. "It is my ethical duty to inform you that divorce is the last step to take when all others have failed. Are you quite certain that there is nothing you have not done to effect a re-

conciliation with the woman you promised to love, honor and cherish until—"

"Wait a minute! Hold it! This isn't divorce business."

Thick white eyebrows climbed high. "It isn't? Then what on earth do you want?"

"Lia Webster suggested I see you."

"Ah, the fair Lia! Lovely child. Perfectly lovely. Had I been born thirty years later, I suspect that . . . What brings you here, sir?"

"My name is John Hoyt. Mean anything?"

"Hoyt. One Al Hoyt was killed here a few weeks ago. Tragic accident."

"I'm his brother."

"Aha! Estate business. A good many years have passed, my boy, since I handled anything of that nature, but the mind can always be refreshed. Glad and happy to serve any friend of the fair Lia."

Johnny leaned back in the chair. "Maybe you won't be so glad and happy when you hear all of it. Maybe you won't want any part of it."

"Kindly permit me to be the judge of that. Tell your story."

Johnny told it. Marin's expression grew more and more troubled. Midway through the story, Marin got up and walked over to the dusty window. He listened, looking out, his hands jammed in his hip pockets as Johnny talked to his back.

When Johnny finished, Marin walked over to the wall sink and took a tumbler off the shelf. He rinsed it out, took a bottle from the file cabinet and splashed in three inches of

whiskey. His throat worked as he drank it down.

"Agh!" he said, shuddering. "Vile stuff. I've forgotten my manners. There's another glass, my boy."

"Not right now."

Maury Marin sat down, rested his forehead on his fist. "This is indeed embarrassing," he said.

Johnny sighed. "Just forget the whole story. I should have known the minute I came in here."

"Known what?"

"That this is business for somebody who is just starting to fight, instead of somebody whose fighting days are over. From the looks of the office, Marin, you haven't got much to lose, but it's all you've got."

"If I were thirty years younger—"

"You'd punch me in the nose and get thrown right through that window."

"People seem to get more belligerent every year."

"Name me a lawyer who won't need the address of a good laundry when I mention Sulla. I'll pay for the information."

Marin went back to the window. As though looking out the window set some reflex in operation, he went back to the file drawer and took out the bottle again.

"Agh!" he said. He sat down. He leaned back and made a temple of his fingers, closed his eyes.

"One wearies of divorce after a time. Males and females who cannot adjust to the idea that marriages are not always the fairy dance that the cinema depicts. With their little pink

tongues hanging out, they devour one mate and charge breathlessly after the next. Biology and the bar become inadvertent bedfellows, and the issue of this mating is named alimony."

"Who shall I go see?" Johnny demanded.

"Patience, my boy. Patience." He picked up the phone book, looked up a number. "Mr. Dimming, please," he said. He smiled owlishly at Johnny.

"Dimming?" he said sharply. "Maury Marin here. John Hoyt is my client. I am filing suit against you Dimming. Yes, in connection with your duties as executor of the unprobated will."

Marin listened for a moment, grinned at Johnny and said softly. "Should I take that as a veiled threat Mr. Dimming?"

After a longer pause he said "Naturally I can't permit Mr. Sulla to take possession of Rio Azul. I'll secure an injunction to have work in progress there under Mr. Sulla's direction halted. . . . No, that's for the court to decide. Wouldn't you say Mr. Dimming, that your position would be considered a bit peculiar if you attempt to act as executor and also as attorney for Mr. Sulla at the same time?"

Johnny could hear the excited rasp of Dimming's voice.

"I'll be happy to come to your office and examine the papers, Mr. Dimming. The deed is recorded, of course. I thought so. And the mortgages? Now that seems a bit odd doesn't it? I'll be over shortly, Mr. Dimming."

Maury Marin placed the phone gently on the cradle. "Mr. Dimming seemed a bit disturbed."

"Can you really keep Sulla out of Rio Azul?"

"I doubt it. I doubt it very much. That transfer of property will be considered as entirely separate from the will. Something your brother executed before his death. But the fact that the last payment is the major part of your inheritance clouds the issue just enough to worry our Mr. Dimming.

"I see the picture this way. Mr. Dimming prepared a deed to Rio Azul. In it, as consideration, he listed the unrecorded mortgages against the property, plus the fifty thousand cash payment. Your brother, trusting him, signed the papers believing they were on a different matter. Some signal was given to confederates. Your brother was killed. Sulla's only outlay would be the twenty-five thousand to you, plus whatever it took to purchase Mr. Dimming's cooperation. I imagine that was a healthy sum. But let us be frank, Mr. Hoyt. At best, we can be no more than a minor thorn in Mr. Sulla's side. He will flatten us out in time."

"If you believe that, why did you take the case?"

Marin smiled with surprising humility. "We'll merely say that I am not pleased with what I have become during these past years. A good fight, even in the face of eventual defeat, is an excellent spiritual cathartic."

"Lia had you pegged, I guess."

"Lia is very astute, my boy."

"You wrap them up in as much red tape as you can manage, Mr. Marin. I'll be making trouble for Sulla in my own way. The key is the murder of Al. That kind of murder is always sloppy. I want to see if I can implicate Dimming and crack him open a little."

"Will you desire police cooperation?"

"It would be nice. But it's a sort of dreamy idea, isn't it?"

"In all other departments of our local force it would be. But you will find a Lieutenant Galvez assigned to the homicide branch. Luis is a rather desperately honest man. Contact him discreetly, my boy."

"How about a retainer for you?"

"I *am* getting rusty, my boy. It almost slipped my mind. Five thousand dollars will be adequate for now."

"All I've got is traveler's checks."

Marin stood up and reached for his hat. "Come along. I'll show you a splendid little bank. They'll welcome a new account."

Johnny grinned. "You win, Marin. Close your eyes while I dig into my mad money." He kept it in an oilskin packet tucked down inside the web brace that helped support an ankle weakened by ligaments torn during college days.

He put the five bills on the corner of the desk, replaced the rest.

Marin picked them up. "I trust that there's no particular government agency with an unhealthy interest in these serial numbers, Mr. Hoyt?"

"They're as clean as a girlish smile."

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Marin tucked the money away. "Some day you must tell me your personal history, Mr. Hoyt. I would gather that it might be interesting."

"It depends on your point of view."

"Let me add that I have a special affection for the fair Lia."

"How nice for her," Johnny said coldly.

OVER THE phone Johnny had given Lieutenant Luis Galvez his license number and the location of the car. He waited ten minutes behind the wheel before a lean man opened the car door and slipped in. Galvez was a tall man, with the blue-white skin, jet-black hair and high-bridged nose of the true Spaniard. His eyes were hawk-cruel, his manner unbending.

"I've got a cabaña at the Patio House," Johnny said. "We can talk there."

"If you wish," Galvez said.

Galvez sat in a deep chair, his eyes hooded, as Johnny paced back and forth and told the story. He left out nothing.

"And Marin took the case," Galvez said. "Poor stupid old man."

"You're an encouraging type," Johnny said.

"I'm a realist. I know what you can do in this city. And what you cannot do. I am also a fool, Hoyt. I keep trying to do what cannot be done. So far I haven't hurt anyone important. Some day, inevitably, I will."

"You don't talk like a cop, Lieutenant."

Galvez gave him a sleepy smile. "And you have talked to a lot of cops no?"

"That could be true."

"Have you ever been a loser?"

"I've never been charged."

"Should you have been?"

"Now that you mention it, yes," Johnny replied.

Galvez stood up and shook hands solemnly. "I find you very refreshing Mr. Hoyt. Like Maury, I'm a sucker for little men with slingshots. We'll go to work. First the man in the white jacket. I think I know from your description who he is. I'll bring some pictures here. You pick him out. If he is the one I think he is, he is a very hard boy. Very hard indeed. But it would be nice to prove a connection between him and Dimming."

"How about my brother's death?"

Galvez shrugged expressively. "I was not called in. The coroner's verdict was death by accidental means."

"Can you work on it without orders?"

"In a quiet way only."

"Suppose you get a case. What then?"

"If the case is very, very strong, I can force it through to the Grand Jury and an indictment. If it is not that strong, there is nothing I can do. Sulla's whisper can be heard at an enormous distance—and our District Attorney can always hear it. The best thing would be a confession."

"I can do things you can't do."

"And you can be killed. I don't think they would kill me, Hoyt. I am a sort of pet because I am not of the

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same species. Like a cat with a litter adopting a mouse. Also, I am nice for their consciences. See Galvez, they say. He is our honest man. As long as we employ Galvez, we cannot be all bad."

"Can you trust anyone who works for you?"

"One sergeant. His name is Terence MacKay. Very big, very stupid."

"Where will you start?"

"With the car. That canyon is so deep it will have been left there where it burned. I don't know how much we can see. I'll go now. You'll hear from me."

At the door Johnny asked, "Why did you believe me without an argument, Lieutenant?"

"Did I say I believed you?" Galvez asked softly. He smiled and left.

At five o'clock Johnny went to the Gin and It. The bar was crowded at this hour. Everyone seemed to know everyone else. There was an air of nervous gayety, of freedom. Johnny found a ten-inch space at the bar. A dainty little woman with a child's mouth and old eyes said, "Name it, Mac, and it's yours. I'm buying. I got my decree today."

Harry came over, seeing Johnny's hesitancy. He said, "A local custom, Mr. Hoyt. One drink for the house."

Johnny ordered.

"I took that ring," the woman said, "and I went into my garage and took a great big hammer and flattened the hell out of it and mailed it to him in Chicago. Hope he scratches himself on it and dies of blood poisoning."

She turned away to greet late arrivals. Johnny looked up the bar and saw Johanna Everingham. This time she had on a pale blue dress. The great gray eyes stared solemnly at him, then crinkled at the corners as she smiled. He picked up his drink and went to where she sat on a stool. She turned around to face him.

"I remember you," she said. "This has been one of those days. All day long I've been remembering bits and pieces of last night. Wasn't I a mess, though?"

"Not that bad," he said. "Medium bad. Medium stinking."

"You're Al's brother, aren't you? I didn't really remember that much. Harry filled in some of the gaps before the crowd got here. Harry's a nice guy. He took away my car keys last night. What's that you're drinking? A stinger?"

"It's the only reversible cocktail. Tastes just as good after dinner as before."

"You're not like Al, are you? You're a different type. What's your name?"

"Johnny."

"I'm Jo. We're going to be friends, Johnny. Good friends. Don't you feel it too?"

"I hadn't considered it."

"See how different you are, Johnny? When I said that sort of thing to Al, he used to get all fussed. But you sit back behind those quiet eyes and watch me. You're a watcher, Johnny. You're cool and all tied up in a neat bundle with the string clipped close to the knot. If you died

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instead of Al, Johnny, you wouldn't be missed as much."

"I guess not."

"How do I get you mad? That's a line with me. Getting them mad. It doesn't work on you, does it?"

"I guess it doesn't."

"But we can be good friends anyway. We can start by you taking me to dinner after we get properly loopy."

"Not tonight."

"But you only got here last night! How did you meet a girl so fast?"

Johnny glanced casually down the bar to keep from showing his surprise. If she got that information from Harry, then Harry had to get it from somebody else. Dimming, White-jacket, Maury Marin, or even Lia. It would be nice to know precisely how she found out.

He reviewed what he knew of her. She'd been in trouble—with Sulla. Al had bailed her out. A good question: how well did she know Sulla?

"On second thought," he said, "maybe we can late date."

She clicked open her purse, took out a small notebook with a slim gold pencil attached to it. She scribbled on a sheet and handed it to Johnny. He saw Harry looking toward them. She had written, *5 Arroyo Blanco Road*. He put the slip in his pocket.

"I can't be sure of the time, Jo," he said.

"Any old time. Come around in back of the place. Jo's open house."

"Just two doors from Dimming, eh?" he said, watching her closely.

Her eyes narrowed a bit. "You

won't find him in my back yard," she said acidly. "Ever."

CHAPTER 4

A Man Named Sulla

AT SEVEN he parked his car near the office at Rio Azul and walked in. A young man with golden hair gave him a smile.

"Miss Webster, please."

The smile remained fixed. Limpid brown eyes shifted away from Johnny's face. "Number eighty, sir. Directly behind the office, sir. Shall I ring her?"

"Don't bother."

He circled the office and went down the line of courts. The one nearest the office was eighty-four, the next eighty-two. A step beyond eighty-two he paused. The dusk had that odd purple look as on the previous night. Light shining through the screen door of Lia's room was yellowish against the dusk.

Lia was saying, "What I do on my own time is my own business." There was clear bright anger in her tone.

Johnny moved closer but he could not make out what the man's voice said.

"Then I'll leave right now," Lia said. "I was a fool even to consider staying here. It won't do me any good to have to say I worked for a crooked—" The impact of palm on flesh was unmistakable, as was Lia's startled gasp of pain.

Johnny tore the screen door open and went in fast. Lia stood against

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the far wall, her fingertips to her cheek, tears standing in her eyes. The stocky man facing her was turning as Johnny hit him.

The solid shock that ran up his arm felt good. As the man rocked back, lifting thick arms, Johnny hit him again. The man took grotesque little running steps backward, arms waving. Johnny heard a quick footstep behind him. Instead of turning into the expected blow, he dived forward, turning then in a crouch, just as the stocky man hit a small end table and crashed backward to the floor, crushing the table lamp. The man who had come up behind Johnny had evidently been standing to one side of the door and surprise had slowed his reaction time as Johnny had plunged into the room.

He was a big man with a face as hard and tight as a chiseled stone, except for the rubbery mouth. His full arm swing with the flat of an automatic had missed the back of Johnny's skull and he stood off balance, in much the same position as a baseball pitcher who has just put a strike over the plate.

Johnny dived for him, and the man tried to step back and hit him with a backhand sweep of the gun at the same time. Johnny ducked under the blow and tensed his neck muscles as the top of his head struck the pit of the big man's stomach. As the breath whoofed out of the man, Johnny clapped his hands down on the backs of the man's knees. The man hit flat on his shoulders and his head snapped back against the floor.

Johnny held his fist ready and decided that any further blow would be superfluous. The automatic was a foot from the limp hand. He snatched it up and turned toward the man who had fallen over the end table. The man was stirring weakly, pushing himself into a sitting position. Johnny reached him in two steps, grabbed the front of his clothes and yanked him up onto his feet.

The man's eyes were still glazed. He had a slack, heavy face, very tanned. Deep folds of flesh slanted diagonally down on either side of the small nose. The weight of the sagging flesh seemed to incline the eyes at the same angle, so that the outer corners tilted down. The nose was a small firm button as though that alone held the face to the deep bone of the skull. The hair had been allowed to grow long on the left side so that it could be combed over the baldness. Even after the blows and the fall, it still clung to the naked skull in thin strands, as though glued there. His clothes were ostentatiously neat and expensive.

Johnny patted him, found no weapon, pushed him so that he fell back into a deep woven-leather chair. The chair slid back a foot or so under the impact. The man shook his head again and his eyes cleared a little.

"Oh, Johnny!" Lia said, and her tone implied that he had done something dreadful, irrevocable.

"Who is our stocky friend?" he asked.

"That's Mr. Sulla, Johnny. You shouldn't have hit him."

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"He hit you, didn't he?"

"That isn't important. He didn't hurt me—just surprised me."

Sulla adjusted a florid tie. He smiled at them. The smile never came close to his eyes. "Mr. Hoyt, you seem to be a pretty impulsive type guy."

"Just a bundle of nerves, Mick," Johnny said quietly. He turned to Lia. "How long will it take you to pack?"

"I've been packed for three days, Johnny. There are just a few things to put in a bag."

"Then get it ready. You can't stay here now."

"Correct, Mr. Hoyt," Sulla said.

He stared at the man on the floor. "You're lucky, Mr. Hoyt. You had to be lucky to take him without getting a scratch even."

"You've been out here in the hills too long, Mick, if you depend on a clown like that."

"Twelve years it's been since anybody hit me," Sulla said wonderingly. "I didn't like it twelve years ago and I don't like it now. It's undignified."

"A social error," Johnny said.

Lia had put an open suitcase on the bed. She was filling it quickly from the bureau.

"What's your play, Hoyt?" Sulla asked. "You're a guy makes no sense. What's this with that old crock Marin? You look too smart to try to law me, boy."

"I'm not smart. I'm just impulsive. I thought you'd be a bad man to buck, Sulla. But your boy in the

white coat that tailed me from the Gin and It was just as easy as that clown on the floor. I'm disappointed. Don't you have any real talent out here?"

Sulla flushed. "With that mouth you can kill yourself. Don't talk so much. I'm a reasonable guy. I lost my head a little talking to the lady. Here's an offer. I forget you hit me. I don't like forgetting a thing like that. I'll double your take, and you and the lady get out of town. You kids can really have a time on fifty thousand. Try Bermuda. It lasts pretty good down there."

"Sorry, Mick. I just guess you've got to have me killed too."

Sulla looked puzzled. "Who else have I been killing lately?"

"Ready, Johnny," Lia said. She had dragged two suitcases out of the closet. The one she had just packed was by the door.

"Sit right there a minute, Sulla. I want to talk to you."

He got the suitcases outside the door and gave her the car keys, asked her to drive the car back, but to wait ten minutes before she did.

"What are you going to do, Johnny?"

"I'll tell you afterward."

HE WENT back in. Sulla stared at him without expression. Johnny stood in front of the chair. "She's gone now and I can talk, Mick. You know what *they* say about how to run your business."

"Nobody tells me how—"

"Shut up. They like legitimate en-

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terprise. Nice clean businesses where you pay your taxes. They want you to buy into those, Sulla. You made a mistake. You're trying to steal this place. Dimming is your boy. You've been too greedy to do any thinking. Now it's going to come out that you killed a legitimate businessman in order to grab his business. That stink is going to make papers all over the country. You know how the boys* taking orders from that Congressional committee are trying to unravel the whole national tie-in. When the stink starts, they're going to tie you right into the picture. And you're going to get no protection from above. A play like this means that they're going to cause a lot of embarrassment by unraveling the details of a lot of other legitimate deals around the country."

"You been taking shots in the leg?"

"Don't try to bluff me, Sulla. I worked for Akerson. On that Illinois tie-in, both Akerson and you cut with Sol Nestik."

Sulla slowly ran the tip of his tongue along his lips and back again. His eyes were wary. "Suppose, Hoyt, there was any sense in what you're saying. If there was, I should be scared you could prove anything on my taking over this place. But just how the hell would you go about that?"

"You think that's a trick? Don't you know the weak point? Walter F. Dimming. His nerves are real close to the surface, Mick. Maybe his feet are tender."

Sulla made his decision. "We can

get along, Hoyt. I'll double it just once more. That's the last offer. One hundred thousand, with twenty-five on top for the taxes to come out of, and the rest in small bills under the table."

"No. Not even for the biggest offer you made Al."

Sulla yawned. "So now I got to get mad at you for hitting me, eh?"

"I don't like to see a man only half mad," Johnny said quietly.

He reached for Sulla. Three minutes later he picked up Sulla's heels and pulled the unconscious man into the tiny bathroom. He stepped over him, kneading his sore hands. Tires crackled on the gravel outside. He went out and picked up the bags and put them in his car. Lia slid to the right and Johnny got behind the wheel.

"Any idea where you want to live?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," she said in a far-away tone.

"Cheer up, Lia. You'll be moving back in here before long."

"Oh, sure," she said bitterly.

"For now I'll get you a room at the Patio House. Will that be all right?"

"I told you that it doesn't matter, didn't I?"

They had a quiet meal at the Patio House. The few moments of violence had seemed to take something out of Lia.

At nine o'clock she said good night and went back to her room. He watched her go. She moved with the listlessness of a far older person.

Johnny phoned Galvez. He sat on

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the step of the cabaña and waited for him. Galvez drove up in a sleek little convertible within ten minutes. Johnny went out and ran his fingertip along the top of the door. "Honest cop, eh?"

"I'm honest because I'm rich," Galvez said. "It only took me two years to save up the down payment."

They went inside and Galvez showed Johnny pictures. The third one was of the lad in the white jacket. "That's Danny Lucas," Galvez said. "I thought it might be that one. A bad one. Call him a loaded gun. A cheap loaded gun. It can be used and then thrown away. Too risky to keep around."

"Can you work on him?"

"Better that you should, if you've got the stomach for it."

Johnny told him bleakly what had happened at Rio Azul. He told of downing the big bodyguard, of Sulla's offers, of making Sulla unrepresentable for a few weeks.

Luis Galvez' dark eyes danced. They held a hawk-like glitter. "I would give up a pension to see that," he said. "I would give up two pensions to *do* it."

"It had a point. I think I rattled him on the Dimming angle. And then I wanted to make him too mad to think clearly. He won't move too fast. But he may move later tonight. He'll be happier with Dimming dead. He isn't afraid of the police. He is afraid of what the boys upstairs do to clumsy people. Now, I don't think Dimming killed Al. And Dimming won't talk. He's got too much to lose.

The only thing in the world that will make him talk is proving to him clearly and beyond question of a doubt that Sulla wants him killed as a safety play. Then I think our Mr. Dimming, given a little chance to cover himself, will talk like the chaperone did after the fraternity dance."

"And if he gets killed?"

"Then you've got to be close enough to grab the killer and stay close enough to him to keep some money-happy cop from knocking him off 'attempting to escape'."

"So, you know about that other, too?"

"Somebody told me about it. I've got a date. I phoned Dimming's home before I phoned you. He's spending the evening at home, I guess. I'll be at the Everingham woman's house. That's two doors from his. I'll stay there until one o'clock. If no attempt has been made by that time, I'm going to have another idea."

"I'll watch your car then. MacKay will share the duty with me."

"If an attempt is made, it would be nice to block it, but in such a way that Dimming gets to know he isn't exactly in the healthiest spot in the world."

ARROYO BLANCO ROAD was white in the moonlight, and it clung to the edge of the canyon wall. The houses on the curve were perched high overhead at the tops of long flights of concrete steps. The house numbers were painted on the curbs. Further up, as the numbers got lower,

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the road climbed to the lip of the canyon.

When he came to number five, Johnny turned into the drive and got out of the car. The view was remarkable. Renada glittered in the middle distance. The moonlight made it a city on Mars, as new as toyland, as old as a legend.

He walked down the drive, the sound of his heels on the concrete loud in the windless silence. The garden behind the house was dark, as was the house.

He stared into the darkness. "Jo?" he called.

"Over here, darling," she said, startling him with her nearness. She was on a chaise longue in the tree shadows. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he made her out. She moved her legs over and patted the spot beside her.

"Sit down and listen to the world turning, Johnny," she said. "And don't kick over the stingers. There's a shaker of them right there. And your glass."

He sat down, groped for the ice-cold shaker, filled the glass. She held hers out over the glass and he filled it too.

"Nice here," he said. "Restful."

"I was getting lonesome for you, Johnny. I was going to howl at the moon like a homeless dog if you didn't come soon."

"I was delayed. I had a talk with your pal, Sulla."

He listened gravely until she was quite through and then he said, "They're all old words, but you fit

them together in a novel way."

"Well, you broke my mood. Bring back my mood, Johnny. Kiss me."

He bent over and kissed her lightly on the lips. Her eyes had a lambent glow, like an animal's eyes at night. She hooked her arm around his neck and made the kiss briefly savage before releasing him, settling back again.

"Better mood?" he asked.

"Not particularly. I guess you're just a symbol or something. Lord, how I miss Al. You know what? He couldn't see me, Johnny. I was an old lady he helped across the street. How do you like that? His eyes were full of that Webster dish. He couldn't see anything else."

"Sulla was slapping the Webster dish around. That's where I came in."

She sat up so suddenly that some of her drink slopped onto his sleeve. She didn't seem to notice. "Say that again, Johnny."

"Sulla was slapping Lia Webster around. So I slapped Sulla around. You know how those things go."

"You—s l a p p e d—Mick—Sulla—around!"

"With gusto. With enthusiasm."

"Johnny, he's bad. I know him. He's very bad. They say he's had people killed. He frightened me. He let me sign IOU's. Too damn many of them. Al got me out of that mess before I went crazy."

"He's had people killed all right. The latest job, and the neatest one, was Al, of course."

She said distantly, "In a way, I

suppose. He had Al so worried, you mean."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean that somebody waited for Al's car and bunted it through the rail down there on the curve. That's the way I mean."

She laughed. It had a harsh empty sound, like a parrot imitating human laughter. "He wouldn't dare do that, Johnny."

He was tempted to pass it off, to say, "Maybe he wouldn't." He thought for a moment. He took the glass out of her hand and put it on the grass. He took her by the shoulders and shook her hard, so hard that the dark oval of her face was a blur in the shadowed moonlight.

"Now wake up," he said between gritted teeth. "Sulla killed him. Sulla as much as admitted it to me. I'm convinced. Lia Webster is convinced. Dimming knows he did. You seem to be the only person running around loose without brains enough to figure out that a man who won't gamble can't lose his business to a man like Sulla."

He let go of her. She didn't say a word. She sat there and he could see no expression on her face. Her lips were slightly parted and her breath came fast.

He stiffened as he heard the slow footsteps coming down the drive. He stood up quickly and moved into the deeper shadows, slipping his hand into his jacket pocket and grasping the automatic he had taken from Sulla's bodyguard.

Then he saw that it was Luis

Galvez. Johanna Everingham gave no sign that she had heard. Johnny moved out into the moonlight.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Come with me, Hoyt."

Galvez took his arm and led him around the house to the front. He said, "Hoyt, I've got to take you in. They were trying to get in touch with me. That bodyguard you hit. Whitey Barrow. He died without regaining consciousness. Sulla says you knocked him unconscious and took four thousand dollars from him. Witnesses saw you and the Webster girl running away."

"Don't be silly!" Johnny said. "Barrow hit his head on the floor but not hard enough to kill him. Can't you see the picture? Sulla was sore at Barrow for not doing his job anyway. Two to one your coroner can prove Barrow was hit more than once."

"Sulla says you hit him several times on the back of the head."

"It doesn't make sense, Galvez. Use your head."

"He gave the serial numbers of the bills you took. They were found in your cabaña ten minutes ago. You shouldn't have tried to kid me, Hoyt. I'm taking you down right now."

Johnny hauled the automatic out of his pocket. Moonlight glinted on blued steel. He aimed it at Galvez middle.

"That won't get you a thing, Hoyt," Galvez said calmly.

"I can't let you take me down there. I've got to convince you that this is a clever frame."

"Yes. You nearly framed me."

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Johnny's car suddenly roared into life and shot backwards out into the street. Gears clashed and it sped down the street, the headlights clicking on. For a moment the driver was silhouetted against the headlight's reflected glow, and Johnny saw that it was Johanna Everingham. The big gray car leaped toward the curve and Johnny held his breath. With a tortured scream of tires, the car made the bend and the taillights whipped out of sight around the rock corner.

Galvez' lean fingers snapped down on Johnny's wrist with startling strength. He twisted and the leverage turned Johnny around, his hand between his shoulderblades. Galvez twisted the gun out of his fingers.

"Now we'll go down into the city," Galvez said.

CHAPTER 5

The Big Bluff

JOHNNY TURNED to him desperately. "Wait a minute, Galvez! Lia Webster can prove I only hit Barrow once. Will you go along with me this far? Will you phone her from here? She's in room 312 at the Patio House."

Galvez thought it over. "I think this house right here is unlocked," Johnny said eagerly. Galvez turned and blinked a pencil flash. Within seconds a hulking figure came out of the shadows.

"MacKay, keep an eye on our friend here."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Johnny said.

Galvez didn't answer. He went around to the back of Johanna's house. Johnny saw the gleam of the flashlight and then one of the house lights went on.

"Who took off in such a rush?" MacKay asked.

"The Everingham girl. In my car."

"Where's she going?"

"I didn't get a chance to ask her, Sergeant."

"Keep your hands away from your pockets, boy."

"Just after cigarettes."

MacKay slapped him thoroughly. "Okay. Light up."

He had taken three drags when the light inside the house went off. Galvez joined them silently. "Not so good, Hoyt. She isn't there. She left the hotel a half hour ago. Somebody came and got her."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Maury Marin."

"But that doesn't make sense! Look, Galvez. The only way Sulla can make this thing stick is by getting Lia out of the way so she can't testify for me. Maybe they got to Marin. He could decoy her out of the hotel because she knew he was handling this for me. It *has* to be that. They must have scared him."

"Or bought him," Galvez said.

"If you take me down there I'm licked. Look, Galvez! They won't bother with Dimming now. They don't have to. Sulla will think he's canceled me out. Will you try one thing? If it doesn't work, I'll go down there with you with no argument."

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"What have you got in mind?"

"You'll have to give me that gun back for a little while."

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Yes. You want to fix yourself so you'll still be little boy blue in the department. You like it this way. You like pretending to be the only honest cop in town. Look at the way you flinch off when you've got a chance of breaking this thing wide open."

"Let me bust him one, Luis," MacKay said.

"Shut up. I want to think."

"You let me have the gun. You go get Dimming out of his house and into the yard. Tell him you have a stool planted with Sulla's boys and you've been tipped that Sulla has given the orders to have Dimming killed. Get him out in the bright moonlight and give me a clear shot at him. I won't hurt him, but I'll convince him."

"It's crazy," Galvez said.

"Taking me down there to the city is crazier. You'll always wonder what might have happened."

Galvez sighed. He handed Johnny the automatic.

"Have you gone nuts, Luis?" MacKay asked incredulously.

"I think so," Galvez said. "Come on along and let me do the talking."

They waited until Johnny was in position. Johnny lay on his stomach under a bush, his left forearm extended, the barrel of the automatic resting on it. He could not get Lia out of his mind.

A band of light shone out when Dimming opened the door. They

talked for a few seconds and then Dimming came out into the yard with them. Galvez cleverly maneuvered him over to fifteen feet of the bush.

"Now what is all this nonsense, Galvez?" Dimming asked angrily.

"Didn't want to alarm your wife, Mr. Dimming. I've got a plant in the Sulla outfit. Tonight's the night they want to eliminate you. I can take you down for protective custody."

"What! What earthly reason would Mr. Sulla have for . . . You must be mistaken!"

"I hope I am, Mr. Dimming. It's supposed to have something to do with the Al Hoyt accident."

Johnny moved the gun just enough to get the sights into the moonlight. He clicked the safety off. He'd previously jacked a round into the chamber. The weapon might throw badly to the right or the left. He aimed over Dimming's head and pulled the trigger.

DIMMING STOOD stock still for a breathless moment, then turned and lunged for the protection of the house. Johnny fired above him twice more, then put three fast shots into the door before Dimming could reach it. The heavier blam of the police service revolvers filled the night. As Dimming slammed the door behind him, Johnny put the last two into the door frame.

As planned, Galvez and MacKay ran down behind the line of shrubs where they could not be seen from the house. Johnny wiggled backwards into the adjoining yard. He stood up

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and joined Galvez. Far down the street a man ran out onto the sidewalk and stared up toward where they stood.

"I think that first one tickled his scalp," Luis said. "And the way he didn't move, I thought you'd got him through the head. He was going to fall down dead and I was going to end up pedaling an ice cream cart."

"Tell him I was waiting in your car. Let me go in with you."

They went up on the porch. Galvez pressed the bell. The white wood was deeply scarred by the slugs. They could hear the muted chime within the house. It was a new house, traditional in design, obviously in the fifty thousand class.

"Who is it?" Dimming called without opening the door.

"Galvez. Open up."

Dimming opened the door a crack, then swung it wide. The oval boyish face had a look of strain. His surprise, when he saw Johnny, was evident.

A tall woman in a coral terrycloth robe stood at the far end of the hall. There was no excitement in her grave face. She was very beautiful. She had the manner of one watching a fairly interesting stage play.

"You didn't get him?" Dimming said nervously.

"He had a car up the street. He was in it and gone. Too much of a lead on us."

"Come in, come in," Dimming said distractedly and led them down the hall and through the doorway into

a long living room. Dimming kept away from the windows, moved to the side of each one in turn, yanked the drapery cords.

The tall woman came into the room. "Diana, this is Lieutenant Galvez, Sergeant MacKay, Mr. Hoyt. We will want to talk privately."

Mrs. Dimming acknowledged the introduction with a grave nod, moved into the room and sat down on the couch set at right angles to the fireplace.

"Please, Diana!" Dimming said with irritation.

"Someone wants to kill you, Walter," she said in that cool tone which Johnny recognized as having heard over the phone. "I find that remarkably interesting."

"She better stay, Dimming," Galvez said.

Johnny sat down facing Mrs. Dimming. He felt that she was watching him with more than a casual interest.

"What are you doing here, Hoyt?" Dimming demanded.

"He's here at my invitation," Galvez said. "He was waiting out in my car. He seems to know more about this than I do. I'd like to know why Sulla wants to kill you, Dimming."

Dimming paced nervously, his shoulders thrust forward. His shirt was damp under the arms. He faced Galvez. "What makes you think it has to be Sulla? That's absurd!"

"Is it?" Johnny asked.

"You stay out of this!" Dimming shouted, his mouth twisting.

Johnny laughed. "Go get a big law

book. Maybe bullets won't go through it. And don't try to play dumb. I know what you're thinking. You want to negotiate with Sulla. You want to tell him that you won't cross him, that there's no point in getting you out of the picture just because you could spill the whole dirty game you two played on my brother."

"You're talking absurdities. It doesn't hold water, Hoyt. We'll grant your absurd premise for a moment and say, just for the sake of argument, that your brother was victimized and killed. The law could never touch Sulla. You know that. He'd have other people do it for him."

"Sulla isn't worried about the law," Johnny said quietly.

Dimming wheeled and stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Sulla knows that the law can't touch him. But some very rough boys can. They've been watching Sulla. They want to prove that he stepped out of line with Al Hoyt. They don't use the same kind of proof the law does. It seems pretty obvious that sooner or later they'll take you off in the brush someplace and work you over until you talk. If they do that, Sulla is not only out of business, he's dead. So he has to eliminate you."

"You don't make sense, Hoyt."

"You just don't know the syndicate, Dimming. The orders have been out for a long time. No rough stuff. Stay as legitimate as you can. And the syndicate enforces its policy orders."

"Why would they single me out?" Dimming asked, almost shouting.

"Because I sent your name to headquarters and told Sulla what I'd done."

DIMMING STOOD very still. He looked through them and beyond them. He walked stiff-legged to a chair and sat down.

"I'm a citizen," he said hoarsely, "and I demand the protection of the police."

"Sulla can call off that protection, Mr. Dimming," Galvez said, "and then plant a man with a rifle on the far wall of the canyon and pot you some morning as you leave the house."

"You're clamped," Johnny said, "Sulla on one side and the organization on the other. How dumb can a man be? You think those were roses being thrown at you out there in the yard?"

Dimming put his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands. He was hunched over. The sweat stains were spreading.

"*You* had to make it the fast way," the woman said. "*You* had to join the smart fast tough ones so you could feel smart and fast and tough too. *You* are the one who wouldn't listen to me. How do you like it, Walter? How does it feel?"

He sprang from the chair and went over to stand above her, fists clenched. "Shut up! Shut up!" he screamed.

Her eyes crinkled up and she began to laugh, deep in her throat. There was no note of hysteria in it. Just

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warm, wonderful laughter that had been bottled up for a long time.

He slapped her, moving his arm the way a woman would. Red finger-lines appeared on her cheek but her laughter didn't stop. She rocked back and forth, hugging herself.

"Stop it!" he screamed.

She fought for control. Galvez and MacKay pretended not to notice the scene. At last she got her breath and stood up. She stared at him and her mouth twisted in an ugly way.

"I'm glad, Walter! Very, very glad," she whispered. "I'm glad that this is the end of it. You can pick up the car tomorrow. I'll leave it at the hotel garage in your stall."

She left the room.

Dimming sat down. He stared at Galvez. "What can I do?" he asked.

Johnny answered. He said, "You can dictate a complete statement and make it so detailed that Sulla can't wiggle out of it. Make it point to a murder charge so that he can't get out on bail. Tell exactly what you did and how you did it. Galvez will take you into protective custody. With Sulla jailed on a charge he can't buy his way out of, even with crooked officials, his people will fall away from him. The syndicate will no longer be interested in you. Sulla won't be able to enforce orders to get you out of the way."

Dimming thought it over. "That would finish me. The Bar Association and everything I've—"

"The Bar Association will probably vote to send a wreath to your funeral."

It was practically over. Dimming made short runs like an exhausted fish nearing the net. Once when he showed signs of escaping, Galvez said, "We'll dig the slugs out of the door, MacKay. Maybe later we can match them with the ones we'll take out of Dimming. Not that it'll do us any good."

Dimming didn't answer. There was a hopeless, drawn look on his face.

Galvez stepped into the hall and called Mrs. Dimming. Johnny heard them talk in low tones. Finally she appeared with a stenographer's notebook in her hand. She sat down with the book resting at an angle on her crossed knee. She had changed to a dark tailored suit.

Dimming looked at her as though she were someone he had never seen before. In a dry, emotionless tone he began to dictate. Her fountain pen made no sound against the paper.

It was a long statement. When Dimming reached one part, Johnny got up nervously and walked to the other end of the room, lit a cigarette.

Behind him the dry voice went on. "... in the afternoon I went to Sulla's office at the Pot Luck. I arrived at two o'clock. He saw me immediately and reassured me that I could talk in front of Whitey Barrow. I explained that the papers were ready for Hoyt's signature. As he had promised the week before, Sulla gave me twenty-five thousand dollars which I put in safety deposit box five twelve at the Renada National Bank the following morning. Sulla instructed me that after Albert Hoyt signed the

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papers, I should excuse myself for a moment and go to the breakfast room windows which face up the canyon road and blink the light three times rapidly, pause and blink them again three times. If Hoyt grew suspicious and refused to sign, I should only blink the lights twice. He made me repeat the instructions until he was satisfied that I would not forget them.

"Albert Hoyt trusted me and signed the papers. I blinked the light as directed. I watched from the living room window as Hoyt drove away. A sedan without lights overtook him and forced his car off the curve. I do not know who drove the car. I do know that it was arranged at the direction of Sulla. The following day Sulla refused to pay me the entire amount agreed upon. He gave me fifteen thousand additional money which I put in the box along with the twenty-five thousand from the previous day. I remonstrated with him, but he told me that I was getting enough as it was, and there was nothing I could do about it. With the twenty-five thousand he agreed to pay to John Hoyt, that made his total outlay to acquire Rio Azul only sixty-five thousand plus whatever he had to give the driver of the murder car."

Johnny walked toward Dimming with quick short steps. Galvez pulled him up short by saying, "Johnny! Easy!"

Johnny stood still and sucked the air deeply into his lungs.

Dimming finished the statement. Mrs. Dimming said that she would

type five copies immediately. A few moments after she left the room, they heard the busy clack of a typewriter.

Johnny knew that it would not be safe to say anything about Lia until Dimming's signature was on the five statements, properly witnessed. He found the phone, whispered to Galvez. The lieutenant nodded.

Johnny phoned the hotel where Maury Marin lived. They connected him with Marin's room. The lawyer answered.

"This is Hoyt."

"Thank God! I've been trying to find you, Hoyt. They tricked me. A girl phoned. She said she was a nurse at the hospital and that you'd been hurt. She was delivering a message, she said, from you. I was to go to the Patio House and pick up Lia Webster and bring her with me to the hospital. They forced me over to the curb a block from the Patio House. Some of Sulla's people, Hoyt. They took her into their car, and they took away that retainer you gave me, too. Sulla was in the car. He didn't say anything. He looked as though he'd been badly beaten, all I could see of him."

Johnny swore softly. He lowered his tone. "In a few moments, Marin, the man you phoned while I was in your office will sign a complete confession."

Marin was silent for a moment. "It won't stand up. He'll claim he was coerced."

"With Galvez and MacKay and his wife and me to testify he gave it willingly?"

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"How in the name of ten thousand small fish did you do that?"

Johnny didn't answer. He said instead, "I'm wanted for murder, Marin. Get down to headquarters and find out everything you can." He hung up quickly.

CHAPTER 6

The Exodus

THE SMALL cell block was brand new. The steel had an oiled gleam; the painted concrete was sparkling white. Johnny stood by the door and leaned his forehead against the bars. Dimming was in the adjoining cell. The high window was turning pale with dawn.

This was the worst part. The waiting. He heard Dimming snuffle and he said, "You start that cry baby act again, so help me, I'll—"

"Shut up, Hoyt. Just do me a favor. Don't talk to me."

Down in the tank a drunk yelled, "Why in hell don't both of you shut up?"

Johnny clicked off the light again and stretched out on the bunk. He was weary but his nerves were so frayed that sleep was a million miles away. He lit his last cigarette, crumpled the pack and threw it aside.

He sat up as he heard the footsteps coming down the corridor. The block guard tripped the switch for his cell from the panel at the end of the corridor and the lock clicked.

Galvez opened the cell door. "I don't know how legal this is, Hoyt,

but come on out. You're free now."

"Where's Lia?"

"We haven't found her. But we've found Sulla."

"Where is he?"

"Come on. I'll tell you about it. The charge against you has been dropped. Marin has been prancing around with a writ, getting people out of bed. Mrs. Dimming has been with newspaper reporters. She's been keeping her ears open the last year or so. Some extras are coming out this morning that are going to blow the lid off this town. Some of it has already been on the early morning news. There's going to be a nine o'clock meeting of the Grand Jury. The word is that a special prosecutor is going to be appointed."

At the desk Johnny signed the receipt and got the manilla envelope containing his possessions from a sleepy desk sergeant. Galvez led him across the street to an all-night lunch wagon. They ordered coffee. Galvez was haggard with weariness.

He said, "I wait for this for years and now I'm too tired to appreciate it. The best reason your charges didn't stick is because Sulla is dead."

"What!"

"The Everingham girl. Damnedest thing. She took a screwdriver out of your car and shoved it in his throat. They've got her in the hospital. Sulla's in a file drawer at the morgue beside Whitey Barrow. Nobody knows a thing. We can't find the Webster girl and we can't find Danny Lucas. All of Sulla's people seemed to decide to leave town at the same

moment. We've grabbed a few. It's an exodus, Hoyt."

"If you people move fast enough, you can keep Sulla number two out of this city."

"We grabbed one gentleman who carried a list of names and amounts. A grease list. Some very prominent names appear on it. That's been impounded to be handed over to the new prosecutor."

"Where's Lia, damn it!"

Galvez looked at him soberly. "It's too damnably easy to hide a body in the desert, Johnny Hoyt, or up a dry canyon."

Johnny felt as though an iron hand had closed on his heart. His eyes stung. "No," he said, too loudly. "They've got her tucked away someplace."

"I hope so, for your sake."

"I'm going to start taking people apart until I find her, Galvez. Maybe I'll start on those fat Honeybell brothers."

Galvez's eyes widened. He snapped his fingers. "Those boys have a ranch. I hadn't thought of that as a possible place. They do a lot of odd jobs for Sulla."

"Let's roll!"

The rim of the blood-red sun showed in the east as the car went over the crest so fast that the momentary weightlessness gave Johnny a hollow feeling in his stomach. Galvez braked hard and swerved into the ranch road. Johnny jumped out and lifted the counterweighted bar across the dirt road, jumped back into the car as Galvez drove through.

It was a frame ranch house, freshly painted, with outbuildings beyond it, a corral of peeled logs.

Galvez killed the motor and they got out. Behind them the dust settled slowly. There was no sign of life from the house. The sun was still so weak that everything was varying shades of gray. Galvez walked up onto the porch and to the heavy door. He kicked the door several times and yelled, "Open up!"

Johnny, standing back, saw a bedroom light go on. One of the Honeybells stuck his head out the window. "Who iss there, please?"

"Police. Open up."

"Vun minute," the heavy man said wearily. "I send my brother."

It was closer to five minutes before Oscar Honeybell opened the door. "A peculiar hour for calling," he said, belting a navy blue robe.

"We want to search the place, Honeybell," Galvez said.

"I assume, of course, that you have a warrant, officer."

"No warrant. I'm asking for your cooperation."

Honeybell smiled. "That man by the steps isn't even with the police. What sort of a fool do you think I am?"

"I don't think you're any kind of a fool, Honeybell. That's why you're going to cooperate."

"Indeed?" Oscar said.

"Yes. Because Sulla is dead, and Barrow, as you know, is dead, and Dimming is in jail and Sulla's people are leaving town in droves; and if you don't cooperate, you might be left

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with a kidnapping charge in your lap, a very fat Federal offense."

With Honeybell's next words Johnny realized that a very keen, very quick mind was at work behind the puffy face.

"That's what I get for doing favors," Oscar said petulantly. "Danny Lucas brought a girl here in the night. Now it appears she may be being held against her will. They're in the bunk house, the long building behind the corral."

"Okay. Get down there," Galvez ordered. "We'll cover you from the sides. Get him to open the door. Tell him you've got a message for him or something."

"I want complete protection," Honeybell said.

"You'll get it."

JOHNNY CROUCHED behind the curve of the corral wall. Galvez flattened himself against the wall to the right of the door, the revolver in his hand.

Honeybell knocked. "Danny! Open up, Danny!"

"What do you want, Fats?"

"I got a message from Sulla."

Lucas opened the door. He had a gun in his hand. He stared out at Honeybell. "For your information, Fats, Sulla told me not to move out of here until he come and told me himself."

Johnny tensed as Galvez jumped into view, his revolver leveled. "Hands high, Danny," Galvez ordered.

Danny fired a snap shot at Galvez

and dodged back into the bunk house. Galvez dropped to his knees and then stood up again, left hand clamped to his right shoulder, a dark stain appearing on the material of his coat.

Oscar made a bleating sound and turned and ran for the house. Though he appeared to be running furiously, he did not cover much ground. There was a tinkle of glass as Danny Lucas broke a bunkroom window. Galvez dived for the shelter of the wall.

Lucas fired three times. At the third shot Oscar fell on his face and rolled over twice. His legs continued to make running motions, then grew still.

"Come out with your hands up, Danny," Galvez called. "Throw your gun out. Sulla is dead."

"You wouldn't kid me, law man?"

"The Everingham girl stabbed him. He's dead, all right."

"Now I got some instructions for you, friend. Move out where I can see you. Then give that gun a healthy toss. I'll give you a three count. You move by then or I give the tootsie in here a slug through the hand. She's got two hands and two feet, and if you play stubborn, I give her the fifth one between the eyes."

Galvez glanced toward Johnny. Lucas could not see Johnny. Johnny imitated a catcher waiting for the pitch. Galvez nodded and said, "Okay, Lucas."

"You're sensible, friend."

Galvez moved out into line with the window. Without glancing toward Johnny, he threw the gun toward him. It hit the dust and skit-

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tered along, coming to rest within a foot of Johnny's toes. Johnny picked it up. It felt good in his hand.

"Anybody with you, copper?" Danny called.

"I'm alone."

"You better be. Because if I see somebody else out there, you're going to get one right through the groceries."

The door creaked open. Johnny wouldn't be able to see Danny until he was clear of the door frame. He raised the gun, leveled it.

Danny came out, crouched low, in a dead run. He ran right by Johnny's point of aim and as the gun jumped in Johnny's hand, he knew that he had missed. Danny swung on him, the gun leveled, but before either of them could fire, the flat vicious whack of a high-powered rifle sounded from the house.

The slug knocked Danny down as though he had been hit by a sledge. He got up on his knees, and the second shot slammed him down again. He lay still. Johnny and Galvez looked toward the house, saw Otto Honeybell at an upstairs window looking down a rifle barrel.

The rifle was withdrawn and the window was slammed shut. Johnny ran into the bunk house. The light over the table was on, a hand of solitaire half completed. Lia was in a far bunk, arms and legs tied, her eyes wide over the strip of dirty cloth across her lips . . .

Six days later Acting Chief Galvez parked in front of the office at Rio Azul. He came in, his face stern.

Johnny was behind the counter with Lia, an open ledger in front of them.

"What are you so grim about?" Johnny asked.

"I'm here in an official capacity, Mr. Hoyt. The city limits are being extended out to include this whole area. Your previous business connections have been investigated. It is the wish of the Citizen's Committee for Municipal Reform that you dispose of your holdings here and move along."

Lia's jaw hardened. "Now you see here! Johnny is going to do no such thing. He's never been a crook and you know it, Luis Galvez. He's going to run this place and I'm going to help him."

"I'm doing my official duty, Miss Webster. Mr. Hoyt, you will kindly tell me how long it will take you to dispose of this property?"

Johnny put his arm around Lia's slim waist. "Tell them I'm staying."

Luis gave them both a slow smile. He took out a cigarette and lit it. "Okay, kids. I did my duty. I told you to move on, Johnny. And you told me you had to get the place back in good shape to get the best possible price for it. They can't kick at that. You know, it might take three or four years to get this thing running right."

Johnny still held Lia in the close circle of his arm. "And by that time, Luis, we might be pretty solid citizens in these parts."

"Buy me a lunch, Johnny. As Acting Chief it's time I got in on a little graft." ♠ ♠ ♠

For sheer audacity, we nominate the murderer in this story as the Killer of the Year. Bluebeard won lasting fame through the amazing quantity of his victims, but our Mr. Blackbeard took a much more ticklish road to immortality—via the quantity of his audience. Richard E. Glendinning, an up-and-coming young writer not so far removed from college classrooms himself, here tells a delightfully different tale about a psychology professor who set the stage for murder—and a killer who wasn't afraid to take advantage of it in front of . . .

FOUR AND TWENTY WITNESSES

by RICHARD E. GLENDINNING

THE TRICK, of course, was not a new one, as Professor Martin Baxter knew only too well. But it was always effective and, more important, it was always exciting. Psychology in the raw could be dull going, and Professor Baxter liked to spice his lectures with a touch of the electrifying.

He glanced quickly at the clock on the wall at the back of the big room. It was eleven-thirteen and the stunt was scheduled for exactly quarter past.

"And now," he said, smiling down at the twenty-four men and women in the seats in front of him, "will someone come up to the board?" He looked at them as if it made not the slightest difference to him who came forward, and then his sharp gray eyes lighted upon the blonde in the second row.

"You," he said. "Would you mind?"

She stood up and came to the front of the room, winking at Professor Baxter as she passed him. Her name was Irene Daniels, and she taught psychology in one of the small New England colleges for women. She was in on the trick, had to be, and when Baxter had taken her aside yesterday to tell her of the plan, she had been wildly excited about it.

"Miss Daniels, we will experiment with word suggestion this morning." Again Baxter looked at the clock. One minute now. "Students will call out words to you. I want you to write on the board the first thing each word suggests. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." She looked as if she were about to giggle, thus spoiling every-

thing, but she suppressed the titter and her lovely face became solemn. "I'll try." She took up a piece of chalk and stood ready.

Professor Baxter stepped back to allow the others a clear view of the setting. "I'll start it," he said. "December."

"Christmas," she wrote.

"Blood," someone shouted from the rear of the room.

"Hands."

Professor Baxter smiled inwardly. Any moment, the door would burst open, a man in black with a red scarf flung around his neck would rush in. A tall man with glasses. The man would have a knife in his hand and would plunge it into Irene Daniels' breast. Not actually plunge it, of course, for the knife would be made of rubber. Then the man would race out of the room and it would be time for all the students in the room to test their powers of observation.

"Love," came the test word.

"Hate," wrote the girl.

"Man."

"Rob—" she began to write, and at that the door opened.

Professor Baxter turned toward it expectantly and watched closely as Frank Hastings, one of his colleagues, ran down the aisle toward the girl at the blackboard. Professor Baxter's attention turned to the faces of the students. It was important to note their reactions to the scene. Their expressions registered puzzlement at first, then surprise; but the surprise lasted only for an instant, giving way to horror and a kind of stunned impotency

which kept everyone glued helplessly to his seat.

And suddenly there came the roar of the gun. Professor Baxter jerked around quickly, too astonished by the unexpected sound to think. He saw Hastings rush to an open window, a smoking automatic in his hand, and go out the window as if the devil himself were after him.

But, no, not a gun! Baxter told himself. *A knife! It was supposed to be a knife. That scoundrel, Hastings! Intentionally mixing things up. If this is his idea of a joke—*

The students were on their feet now and were crowding to the front of the room.

"To your seats, everyone," Professor Baxter cried, scampering forward. "Be calm, be calm! This was only an experiment."

They smiled dubiously but sat down.

"We all think we saw the same crime but—" Professor Baxter chuckled— "you'd be surprised how many different accounts we could get of it. I want each of you to write your own description of the scene. All right, Miss Daniels, you may get up now. Miss Daniels, get up, please."

She made no move to rise. Her golden hair lay in a shining cascade on the floor, and her face had lost its pink freshness. Professor Baxter crouched over her and touched her shoulder, and then slowly took his hand away. He turned and stared blankly at his students.

"She's—good heavens, Miss Daniels is dead!"

FOUR AND TWENTY WITNESSES

THE PROFESSOR had never seen violent death before. In his twenty-odd years of teaching, he had many times dealt clinically with death from the rostrum, had discussed it in all its many ramifications, had probed motives and methods with all the skill and knowledge of one who was an old hand at murder—but he had never come closer to it than the tenth row of a moving picture theatre.

Now, for the first time, he saw the pool of blood which was forming under Miss Daniels' right arm. The arm was lying limply across her breast in such a way as to conceal the bullet wound itself and the stain of red around it, but there was no hiding the darkening puddle on the floor. Professor Baxter felt suddenly ill.

"Mr. Johnson," he said to the man in the seat nearest the door, "will you step down the hall and telephone the police? The rest of you, please carry out your assignment. Write down everything you can remember. The police will be glad to have the information."

Professor Baxter slumped wearily in to the chair behind his desk and, mechanically wiping the lenses of his steel-rimmed glasses, stared thoughtfully at a corner of the ceiling. Poor Miss Daniels, she had been such a sweet little thing. And Frank Hastings! What on earth had prompted the man to rush crazily into the room and commit murder? Psychology suddenly took on a new significance.

Three policemen, two of them in uniform, responded quickly to the phone call and turned Professor Bax-

ter's class room into a branch of headquarters. The policemen were completely new types to the professor. The two in uniform were big and red-faced and, in their mannerisms and appearance, could have been twins except that one was named O'Rourke and the other was named Stein. The third policeman was Bill Kynder, a dapper, wiry man in a neat pinstriped suit. Kynder was in his early thirties, spoke as if he had had a college education and seemed completely at home in the halls of higher learning.

"All right, Professor," Kynder said quietly, "tell me about it."

"I staged this murder as an experiment to test—"

"You staged it?" Kynder's dark eyebrows arched.

"Not a real murder, mind you," Professor Baxter said hastily. "It was to be a stabbing. Miss Daniels was to be writing at the blackboard and Frank Hastings was to—oh, I completely forgot about him. He's the one who did it, of course. But why he shot the girl is more than I—"

"Forget him," said Kynder. "He's in the hospital with a fractured skull. He was found on the floor of his office at eleven o'clock."

"Well, that's a relief," Professor Baxter said. "I'd hate to think of old Frank—"

"Would you mind getting on with it, Professor?"

"Few people have true powers of observation," Baxter said pedantically, "and yet everyone feels he can trust his eyes. I wanted to give a conclusive demonstration of the fact that

our own eyes frequently lie to us."

"Um-hum." Kynder thumbed through the stack of papers the eye-witnesses had written. "Tall man, short man, fat man, thin man." He pushed the papers away in disgust. "Describe the murderer, Professor."

"Certainly. He stood about six feet, weighed between one-sixty and one-seventy, had reddish-brown hair and—"

"Oh, no, sir," called one of the students. "He was nothing like six feet."

"And his hair was black," said another. "He had a beard."

"Well, yes," mumbled the professor, "I guess he did have a beard, and it might very well have been black, but—"

"In other words," Kynder interrupted, "you can't give a definite description."

The professor shook his head in confusion. "You see, I was fully prepared for Frank Hastings. It didn't occur to me that anyone else would come in."

Kynder blew out his cheeks. "Understandable," he said, but he did not sound as if he really meant it. "Who knew about this stunt?"

"Irene Daniels, Frank Hastings and I. They may have told others about it, but I doubt if Frank would have said anything to anyone. He knew the importance of surprise in a test of this sort."

"So that leaves the girl. Who was she especially friendly with?"

"I'm sure I do not know, Mr. Kynder. I don't believe she had had enough time to become friendly with anyone. This, you understand, is a

special three-week seminar course. The students are teachers and they come from all over. We've only been in session for three days."

Kynder turned to O'Rourke and Stein. "Get the names and addresses of everyone in the room." He faced the students. "None of you leave town. If anyone knows anything which might help us, stay after the others leave."

The uniformed policemen took down names and addresses, and the students left the room, except for one prim woman in a dark blue dress. She looked every inch the schoolmarm from her flat-heeled shoes to her dark, lusterless hair, which was parted in the middle and pulled back severely over her ears.

"Lieutenant," she said crisply, "I don't know if I can help but I live—"

"Your name, please."

"Miss Ruth Glover. I teach at the Hinsley School for Young Ladies."

"Yes. Go on."

"I'm living at the Y.W.C.A. for these three weeks. So was Miss Daniels. We hadn't had time to strike up an acquaintance." Miss Glover folded her arms. "Last night, I was passing the—well, I've heard it called the Necking Nook."

"How's that again?"

"Men are not allowed above the first floor, but the girls are permitted to entertain dates in a small and, I must say, quite dimly lighted parlor off the lobby. Miss Daniels had a man in there last night."

"Embracing?" Professor Baxter asked timidly.

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"Hardly," replied Miss Glover. "She was standing up and her fists were clenched. She looked very upset."

"Can you describe the man?" Kynder said.

"Handsome, broad in the shoulders, brown eyes, brown hair. He had a square, determined jaw and a scar on his left cheek which he kept rubbing with his thumb all the while she was talking."

"Did you hear any of the conversation?"

Miss Glover blushed. "Yes. She said, 'I can't help it, Cal. I've tried to forget but I can't, and you can tell him for me that I—'"

"Go on," said Kynder.

"That was all. The man saw me at the door and warned Miss Daniels. I went away then. Is that any help to you?"

"Very much so," Kynder said.

He thanked her, showed her to the door and came back to Professor Baxter. "Well, at least Miss Glover has an eye for detail."

"Now, see here—" Professor Baxter began indignantly.

"Calm down, Prof. We're doing all right. Irene Daniels hadn't been in town long enough to make new enemies, so we're looking for someone in her background. Last night she talked to someone she'd known before, this Cal, and the chances are she told him about today's test. We've also got Miss Glover's description of Cal. How does it tally with your impression of the murderer?"

Professor Baxter, whose faith in his own powers of observation had been

severely shaken, smiled wanly. "The man was wearing a brown hat and a brown suit."

"Positive?"

"Yes. And his beard was black."

"Did it look real?"

"It all happened so quickly—" The professor shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Are you sure Frank Hastings had nothing to do with it?"

"Absolutely. The murderer wanted to take Hastings' place. He came into Hastings' office, conked him with a bookend while he was working at his desk, and left him. The janitor found Hastings at eleven o'clock and phoned the hospital. We got a report on it immediately, but Hastings was unconscious and we had no way of knowing he was supposed to make like a murderer at eleven-fifteen."

Kynder left and Professor Baxter slumped disconsolately into a chair to stare blankly at the blackboard and a column of words—*Christmas, Hands, Hate, Rob*—which signified nothing at the moment. Then it came slowly to Professor Baxter that Irene Daniels had written these responsive words and that they must have had some deep meaning to her.

HE LET his mind play with the words. Christmas, the first, was a perfectly normal response to the key-word, December. But what of the second? What key-word had provoked *Hands*? He remembered suddenly. *Blood*. But where was the relationship? The only connection the professor could see was the famous speech from *Macbeth*: "Will all great Nep-

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tune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hands?" Ridiculous! Irene Daniels had been a sweet, pink-cheeked innocent, not a guilt-ravaged murderess.

The professor forced his tired brain to concentrate upon *Hate*, the third word in the column, which had been prompted by *Love*. Often key-words suggested opposites; black gave white, right gave wrong, left gave right, and thus, love gave hate. But coupled with Miss Daniels' strange reply to *Blood*, Professor Baxter found a sinister meaning in *Hate*. How old was the girl? In her late twenties, the professor supposed. Well, then, perhaps she had been old enough to know the hate which can grow from a crushed love.

And her last word on the list was *Rob*, in answer to *Man*. Rob could be an abbreviation for Robert, Robin, perhaps other names.

Professor Baxter was forced to conclude that Rob had been the object of Miss Daniels' hate. Her mind had been working that way. Blood had started her off on a macabre train of thought, had led her through hatred and brought her to the man most closely associated with her hatred. Wasn't there every reason to assume that she and Cal had been talking about Rob at the Y.W.C.A. last night?

Professor Baxter walked slowly to the front of the room. Taking up a piece of chalk, he neatly lettered above Miss Daniels' column, *Save! Do not erase!* Remembering that the janitor was notoriously indifferent to instructions which were not stamped

with the Great Seal of the University, Professor Baxter added an extra exclamation point to his message and underscored the whole twice.

Then, dreading what he knew he must do, he went to his office and picked up the phone. He got long distance, asked for the Dean of Faculty at Irene Daniels' New England college and, after a short wait, was connected with a pleasant feminine voice.

"This is Professor Martin Baxter at the Univer—"

"Of course. Everyone knows *you*. I'm Dean Wicksley."

"I have bad news," the professor said solemnly. "Your lovely Miss Daniels is dead."

"Not Irene!" Dean Wicksley gasped.

"I suppose she has a family to notify?"

"No longer. Her husband, George, died quite suddenly on Christmas Day. Her married name was Keller, you know."

"Er-hum, yes. And on *Christmas*, you say?"

"It was horrible. George was a cripple, confined to a wheel chair. He had no money of his own, and his sole means of support was Irene's job on the faculty. She had to do everything for him. It wasn't easy. George Keller was not exactly a gentle man. But Irene never complained, no matter how difficult her life—"

"Yes, indeed. And his death?"

"They were going Christmas calling Irene was in the car in the drive, waiting for George to come down the high ramp they had built over the front steps. We had had a sleet storm ear-

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lier in the day and the porch and ramp were sheets of ice. She couldn't see the porch and front door from where she was parked, but as she watched the ramp, she saw George suddenly appear at the top. The chair must have skidded on the ice. It crashed over. The ramp was high, and George's head was crushed."

Professor Baxter clucked his tongue. "Tragic. And Rob? What did he do?"

"Rob? Oh, you must mean Robbie, George's brother. Naturally, he was almost out of his mind. He and George were very close."

"He'd probably be Irene's nearest kin. If you'll give me his number, I'll phone him."

"Why, he doesn't live here now. He couldn't stay on in the house with George gone, of course. He moved to New York and, if my memory serves me, shares an apartment with Calvert Wallace, who used to teach dramatics here until a few months ago."

"Well, well," said Professor Baxter. The surprises were coming thick and fast. He thanked the dean for her help and quickly hung up.

Humming softly, he found a number in the phone book and then called Lieutenant Bill Kynder at headquarters. "This is Baxter," he said apologetically. "I hate to bother you but have you discovered anything about our young lady?"

"Just that she was shot with a Colt .38," Kynder replied glumly. "The bullet entered under her right arm, apparently when she was reaching up to write on the board, and lodged in her heart. Death was instantaneous."

"Then you have the gun?"

"Only the bullet. Look, Prof, if that's all you called about, would you mind letting me get back to work? I've got a million—"

"I had a little something else, not much, mind you, but a little. Miss Daniels was a widow, her married name was Keller, and her husband, George, a cripple, died last Christmas. Her brother-in-law, Robbie, once lived with her and her husband, but is now living with Calvert—our Cal, don't you think?—Wallace, who taught with Irene until quite recently. The address is the Votrene Apartments on East Forty-ninth Street."

"Where the devil did you learn all that?" Kynder shouted in amazement.

"The handwriting on the wall. And, Lieutenant," the professor hurried on, "I believe the man in the wheel chair was murdered! Act five, scene one, you recall? 'Out, damned spot! out, I say!'"

"Yeah?" said Kynder blankly. "We'd better have a little talk, Prof."

Professor Baxter smiled brightly. "Stop here on your way from the Votrene Apartments."

"Who said anything about going there? Well, come to think of it, maybe I was."

Professor Baxter hurried down the hall to his class room, but as he neared the door, he cried out in alarm. The janitor's soapy monstrosity of a scrub bucket was squatting outside the door as placidly as a hatching hen, a sure sign that Mr. Andersen was inside and was perhaps even now washing Miss Daniels' words from the board.

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"No, no!" The professor's short legs churned as he rushed into the room. Mr. Andersen's strong right hand was holding aloft a soggy sponge, bent upon destroying the words forever. "No, Mr. Andersen," Professor Baxter said, clutching the janitor's arm. "It distinctly says it is to be *saved*!"

"That's what they all say," Mr. Andersen muttered indifferently, but he lowered his arm and glowered suspiciously at the writing on the board. "Words, nothing but more damned words. Beats me."

He shrugged his shoulders and left the room.

PROFESSOR BAXTER sank into a seat with a weary groan. He had had a busy day. As he sat puzzling over the case, he dozed off. He was awakened by Lieutenant Kynder's hand on his shoulder.

"Wake up, Prof. I brought company."

The professor jumped to his feet and peered at the two men who stood near the door. In their different ways, they were handsome men. The one with the small scar on his left cheek reminded Professor Baxter of most of the college halfbacks who had passed in review before him over the years. The man's brown eyes were bright and alert and there was a certain amused solemnity about his mouth. The other man was black-haired with a lean, dark face and somber black eyes in which the professor detected signs of arrogance.

Professor Baxter went directly to the brown-haired man with the scar.

"You're Mr. Wallace?" he asked. He turned to the other. "And you must be Robbie Keller. Do you teach, too?"

Keller shook his head. "I'm an insurance salesman."

"I used to teach," said Wallace, "but no more. I'm producing and directing plays now."

"Fascinating." Professor Baxter's eyes became wistful. "I once thought of chucking the class room to become a carnival barker. Nothing ever came of it."

"Say, Prof," Kynder said impatiently, "let's talk. These two can wait out in the hall."

"Why exclude them?" the professor asked mildly. "After all, one of them murdered her husband for her."

Kynder stared at him in surprise then growled, "Stick to your own trade, Prof. What about the handwriting on the wall?"

"Ah, yes." Professor Baxter pointed to the board. "Miss Daniels' last words, gentlemen."

"I can get a list out of a dictionary," said Kynder. "Put them into a sentence."

"So I shall, so I shall. Last Christmas, Miss Daniels'—or Mrs. Keller's—husband died a very violent death. I think it is safe to say she was not heart-broken. In fact, I rather believe she rejoiced, for his death lifted a heavy burden from her pretty shoulders. Obviously, she wasted little time in returning to the use of her maiden name."

"That's true enough," Robbie Keller said. "My brother could be damned unpleasant. He made Irene's life a

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hell. She never complained, but she was plenty unhappy."

"Everyone knew it," said Cal Wallace. "We all felt sorry for her."

"And someone felt so sorry, or loved her so much," the professor murmured, "that he killed George."

"You're wrong!" Keller cried. "It was an accident. The ramp was icy and my brother's wheel chair skidded."

Professor Baxter polished his glasses and set them straight on his nose. "It was murder and Irene was a witness. Only the fact that she was glad to be rid of her husband kept her silent."

"How do you know?" Kynder demanded.

"She told me."

"Nonsense!" Wallace snorted. "How could she tell you something which wasn't true? And if it were true, why would she admit it?"

"Who truly knows the channels of the human mind?" the professor asked. "I can only say the brutal crime was always in her thoughts, growing like a malignancy. By sheer happenstance, I tossed her the key-word *December*, a perfectly innocent word, and, in the same spirit, she replied with *Christmas*. But that started a subconscious train of thoughts in her confused mind and led her quite naturally to the death of her husband. From that point on, there was no hope for her."

The professor looked keenly at Cal Wallace. "Why did you visit her last night?"

Wallace's face tightened. "I can't tell you."

"Go ahead, Cal," Keller said. "It's all right."

"Very well, then," Wallace said. "Robbie asked me to see her and talk her into seeing him. He wanted to marry her."

Catching a faint inflection of sadness in Wallace's voice, Professor Baxter said, "I assume that was not an easy assignment for you?"

"No," Wallace said bluntly. "I never liked the story of John Alden, either. It's no secret to anyone that I loved Irene, too, but she—"

"She had only one love in her life," Keller said bitterly, "and that was for herself." He scowled fiercely at the professor. "She made that only too clear when she told Cal what she thought of me."

"Ah, yes," murmured Professor Baxter. "And did Cal also relay to you the news about our little classroom test this morning?"

Keller nodded.

"Prof," Kynder said, "I've got to be getting these lads down town."

"To question them, of course. Why don't you let me ask them questions here? It would only take a moment. Keller first."

Kynder muttered under his breath, then said, "Well, maybe I owe you something." He left the room with Wallace.

"You understand the principles of word association, Mr. Keller?" Professor Baxter asked disarmingly.

"Enough. Let's get on with it."

"Splendid. Let me start with—sky."

"Ground," Keller replied.

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"Gun."

"Shoot," said Keller.

"Blood."

"Tears."

"Ah, Winston Churchill's influence," the professor murmured. He looked down at his hands, then up quickly. "Comet."

"Star."

"Love."

"Hate," said Keller.

"Ummm . . . Man."

"Woman."

The professor grunted. "Hastings." Keller looked blank, said nothing.

"Eh? Well, then—gloves."

"Cane."

"Colt," said the professor.

"Gun."

"Now that's interesting," said Professor Baxter. "I might have said horse but not gun. Is it your gun, Mr. Keller?"

"I have a Colt."

"Where is it now?"

"I haven't had occasion to look at it for some time."

"Naturally not. It isn't the sort of thing one handles every day, is it?"

The professor started Keller toward the door. "Ask the lieutenant to send Calvert Wallace in, please."

WALLACE CAME in promptly and Professor Baxter explained, "Now, in word association it is particularly important that you answer me quickly—within a second and a half—with the first thing that comes to mind. Ready?"

"Yes, sir," Wallace said.

"Check."

"Scar."

"How did you come by that scar, by the way? Football cleat?"

"Who told you?"

The professor simply smiled. "Sister."

"Brother. Professor, this is foolish."

Professor Baxter shrugged his shoulders. "Gun."

"Death."

"Bookend."

"Bl—" Wallace stopped short.

"Gloves," the professor suggested.

"Fingerprints."

"My, oh, my, you're full of surprises, aren't you? I really believe we should call in the lieutenant to hear the rest of this."

"Damn you!" Wallace's heavy fist crashed against the professor's jaw and sent him spinning backward against the blackboard. In two long strides, Wallace reached the window, slid over the sill and dropped to the sidewalk a floor below.

"Lieutenant!" the professor cried, and as Kynder rushed into the room, he pointed to the window. "He got away."

"Not far." Kynder looked out at the two policemen who had their arms wrapped around the struggling Wallace. "Good work, boys."

Rubbing his jaw, Professor Baxter chuckled. "This has certainly been a busy day."

"I sure hope you scared Wallace away with something stronger than circumstantial evidence," Kynder muttered.

"Well, a gun meant death to Wal-

lace and gloves meant fingerprints. Interesting, eh?"

Kynder cursed softly. "The D.A. will have my scalp."

"But most important, a bookend symbolized blood, and, if you will recall, Frank Hastings had his head bashed in with a bookend. On the other hand, when I suggested Hastings to Keller, he registered a complete and honest blank. He had never heard the name of my colleague."

"Keep talking, Prof," Kynder said, suddenly attentive.

"Irene knew her husband had been murdered, pushed violently by someone behind him on the porch, but because of her position in the parked car she could not see the murderer. She did see something, however; she saw the murderer's hands when they lunged forward. Hands, Lieutenant. Blood—the blood of her husband—suggested hands, and she couldn't wipe the memory of those hands from her mind. But whose hands? From what Miss Glover heard at the Y.W.C.A., I imagine Irene suspected Robbie."

"Yes," Robbie Keller said quietly from the doorway. "I heard about it last night for the first time. When Cal came home after seeing her, he told me she thought I'd killed George and was going to take her suspicions to the police. It hit me pretty hard but it did explain why she had refused to see me so many times."

"He wanted you to have a motive when he killed her with your gun," the professor said. "Only by killing her could Wallace stop her from go-

ing to the police. He didn't want an investigation into George Keller's death."

"I still need more concrete proof," Kynder said.

"Well, there's the black beard—black, incidentally, to suggest Robbie Keller—which very neatly served as a disguise and to cover the identifying scar on his cheek. Certainly your laboratory must have a method for detecting traces of spirit gum on Wallace's face. Then, don't you fellows have a thing called a nitrate test? I don't know if powder specks would blow through gloves, but you could scare Wallace into believing they do. And as for the gun itself, you'll probably find that hidden around his apartment somewhere, no doubt in Robbie Keller's dresser."

"Don't worry, Prof. We'll pin it on him."

Kynder went to the door, then looked back to grin skeptically at Professor Baxter. "Word-association! There's nothing to it."

"Try it yourself, Lieutenant. I give you a—*murderer*."

"Hot seat!" Kynder immediately replied. "Well, I'm damned!"

"You see?"

The professor turned to the blackboard and carefully erased his stern warning to save, but it would do no good. Word-association had no effect upon Mr. Andersen. Now, even with the warning gone, Irene Daniels' writing would probably remain on the board until the foundation crumbled and the building's walls came tumbling down. ♠ ♠ ♠

Peter the Confessor

A Fact Feature

by SKIPPY ADELMAN

A MURDER INVESTIGATION is generally marked completed when the killer finally agrees to sign his name to the bottom of a confession. But in the case of Peter Salemi, a hulking longshoreman who had murdered his ex-sweetheart, a confession was merely the starting point for a further, and remarkably ingenious investigation.

Salemi's victim was 19-year-old Frieda Olsen. The blonde, vivacious young girl had suffered brutal death because she chose to have nothing further to do with Salemi.

The two had met a year earlier, when their families had lived on opposite sides of the same Brooklyn street. They saw a great deal of each other for a few months, then Frieda abruptly broke off the relationship. She told her parents that Salemi was given to jealous rages, and that he had gotten so angry several times that he struck her.

Salemi, however, remained a persistent suitor, and Frieda, flattered by his devotion and laboring under the delusion that she owed him the courtesy of a face-to-face rejection, consented to see him one more time. As the police later pointed out, this was a foolish thing to do; the safest

way to break off would have been over the telephone.

After Frieda had failed to return home that night and the next morning, her anxious parents phoned the Missing Persons Bureau. While her father was talking to the police, a fisherman at the other end of Brooklyn, in the deserted flatlands adjoining the Atlantic Ocean, stumbled upon her body. Her skull had been crushed by several blows from a heavy implement and her body had been partially blistered by fire.

Less than an hour later, three detectives headed by Captain John McGowan of the Homicide Bureau were questioning Frieda's parents. The distraught couple knew only Salemi's first name, and since he had moved from the neighborhood, they had no idea where he might be found.

The three detectives started with Salemi's last known address, across the street from the Olsens. He had moved many times since, but the detectives, tracking him from house to house, soon caught up with him in his latest residence. Salemi didn't try to deny the crime. It was apparent that he had spent the time since killing Frieda composing his version of the happening.

PETER THE CONFESSOR

According to Salemi, he had pleaded with Frieda to continue seeing him. When she refused, he fell into a rage and slapped her. She ran from the car and he hurried after her, pausing an instant in his pursuit to pick up a rock. He caught up with her and blindly struck her upon the head several times with the stone. Then he went back to the car and drove off. A few moments later remorse overtook him and he turned his car around and drove back to where Frieda lay. Thinking she was unconscious, he attempted to revive her. Then realizing she was dead, he siphoned gasoline out of his tank, poured it on the girl and set fire to her, hoping to forestall identification.

The whole point of Salemi's story was that he had committed unpremeditated murder, in which case he could receive a sentence no worse than 20 years to life. But Salemi's recital was too glib and bright-eyed—not like that of a man who was unburdening himself of a terrible secret, but rather that of a salesman overselling a dubious article.

The police suspected he was lying, and knew if he was, it was to cover up something worse than he admitted: that he had actually committed a premeditated murder, which would get him the electric chair.

Suddenly Captain McGowan remembered something he had heard a long time ago from the police medical examiner: a dead body never blisters in fire. Frieda's corpse had been heavily blistered. Therefore Salemi had set fire to her while she was still

alive. This discrepancy between Salemi's account and the truth caused the detectives to continue the case, whereas normally they might have been content to let it rest after receiving a confession. They brought Salemi to Brooklyn police headquarters and then drove to the scene of the crime.

A search of the murder area did not disclose any trace of the stone with which Salemi said he had struck Frieda. They drove back to Salemi's house. Captain McGowan examined the longshoreman's car for a possible murder weapon, while his partners busied themselves in Salemi's room and the surrounding grounds. In the trunk compartment of the car, Captain McGowan found a tool box containing a set of matched wrenches. There was a gap in the set; one of the larger wrenches was missing. Captain McGowan's men soon found the wrench in a refuse can.

At the police laboratory, it was soon determined that this was the murder weapon. Bits of blood and hair, matching Frieda's, were found imbedded in its adjustment screw. This completely demolished Salemi's tale of unpremeditated murder. The fact that he had taken the time to open the trunk compartment and then the tool chest to obtain the weapon removed the crime from the manslaughter category and into that of first degree murder.

Salemi was executed in Sing Sing prison three months later. His last words were the lament: "Nobody cares for me."



If seeing one's name in print is a measure of prominence, the Devil certainly gets his due. Not only has he managed to get free publicity from such literary titans as Goethe and Milton, but he takes up an unholy amount of space in Webster's with his string of aliases. But call him Beelzebub, Lucifer or Satan, you'll meet him in the flesh in the sumptuous office of one John Gray—the upright, all-powerful tycoon of industry who never broke a law in his life. Here's Joel Townsley Rogers to make the introduction in the unusual and dramatic story of. . .

THE BELATED CORPSE

by JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS

THE MAN who for almost twenty years had been known as Henry Jessamon paused at the door of John Gray's offices. Before entering, he removed his weather-beaten hat, brushed his unkempt gray hair with his hand and fingered the knot of his worn tie.

The offices of the Gray Investment Trust were on the eightieth floor of the great limestone and marble stalagmite which towered a fifth of a mile above the midtown avenue.

It had been almost a year since he had last asked John Gray for money, and John had given him a thousand dollars then. With some

impatience and contempt, perhaps—still he had given it. But a thousand dollars doesn't last forever, when a man has no way of earning money. John was always his last recourse, though he hated almost worse than death itself to have to ask him.

He opened the door with apologetic caution and slid his shadowy body in. The paper-thin soles of his shoes, worn as smooth as glass, were creeping now on silky antique rugs instead of rough sidewalk concrete or gritty corridor marble. For an instant his feet slipped, as if on grass, and he had the terrible feeling of falling as he slithered. He caught

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himself and, with an apologetic face, planted his tread down more carefully and firmly.

A blond-paneled reception room was divided in half by a chromium railing. There was a great plate-glass window looking out over the east half of Manhattan. Beyond the railing a cool, blonde young secretary was typing with brisk efficiency from a dictating machine. Her remote eyes were fastened out the window in front of her, looking at the blue, white-clouded November sky.

A little sign, *Miss Stiles*, stood on her desk.

She was new, and the office was new, since he had last come in to see John, anyway. John's offices had always been down in the Wall Street district before. The truth of the frequent casual remark that Wall Street was dying was borne out by John Gray's removal from it.

So long as John stuck with an investment, a locality or a man, they were still good. When he got out, it meant that they were done. He had cut away from Wall Street now, as he had cut away from many businesses and men in his climb to wealth and power. But he had stuck to the man who was known as Henry Jessamon for a long time, out of a sentiment which seemed alien to his nature in other ways.

Miss Stiles, for all her air of cool, brisk capability, was young. Not more than twenty or twenty-one, perhaps. It wasn't a particularly uncommon name, of course. Still there was something reminiscent in her

profile, in her indifferent eyes. Quite possibly she was Elinor's daughter, the man thought, with a numbness in the depths of his hollow mind.

She had never seen him, of course. She wouldn't know him in any way. He was a man long dead.

He had come in like such a shadow, she hadn't noticed him yet. He fumbled his hat in his sensitive fingers, leaning against the chromium railing, waiting for her to turn from her machine. He wondered, while he waited, if the darned patches showed at the elbows of his thin, old tweed suit. The patches that Nora had done so carefully for him last week while she had been in the hospital, with her tireless busy fingers and her tired loving eyes. If he were only wearing a topcoat, in this chill fall weather, he would look a little more prosperous and imposing, he thought. His topcoat was only five years old. It was almost new, comparatively. But he had pawned it last week, to buy a single mottled orchid for Nora, like the great orchids of Loyaquil.

Perhaps it didn't make any difference what his clothes looked like, anyway. A failure and a beggar. Doubtless it was written in the droop of his shoulders and on his hangdog face.

A criminal, too. But that is something which is written on no man's face.

The flat gun in the side pocket of his jacket pressed into his side as he leaned against the rail. He straightened slightly, releasing the intolerable pressure of that reminder. The

blue poison bottle was in his inside breast pocket, where it would not break.

THE GIRL glanced over her shoulder at him. She stopped her dictating machine. "Yes?" she said impersonally, with fingers poised.

He swallowed. "Mr.—"

He had started to give the name of Henry Jessamon to her. But, as she looked at him with her cool, clear young eyes, there arose in him a queer, perverse streak of honor which made him unable to give a false name to her, even one that he had long used automatically.

"A—a personal call," he said with a faint stammer. "A friend of Mr. Gray's. I was just passing by and dropped in to see him, if he isn't too busy."

"Your name?"

"Just say an old friend of Henry Jessamon's, and an old friend of his. He'll know who I am."

She looked at him penetratingly and, he thought, contemptuously. She did not believe that he was a friend of John Gray's, or had ever been one. Still, she rose.

"An old friend of Henry Jessamon's," she repeated. "I'll see if Mr. Gray is in."

She went deftly through a door in the blond-wood paneling, which closed soundlessly behind her. The man leaned with both hands on the rail—his mind a little giddy and a strange far-off roaring in his ears—looking out the wide lofty window while he waited for her to return.

A panorama of half the great city lay spread out, from the Battery in the south to the upper reaches of the Bronx and the hazy blue waters of the Sound. New York! The greatest city ever built by man. One person out of three hundred living in the world lived here, beneath his eyes. It was a world in itself for any man, whatever his desires, his ambitions and inclinations.

His gaze, following the blue East River where it bent like a crooked elbow from the hazy Sound down to the Battery, paused and focussed on the massed buildings of the great medical center on the river shore, shining beneath the sun. It was a compact city of science within the greater city, a modern Acropolis of white temples of healing, more splendid and beautiful than any classic temples of the gods.

Science and knowledge. The healing art. He had had dreams of being a great doctor once. A great surgeon, skillful and daring, devising brilliant new technics which would widen the scope of medicine and make possible the alleviation of many of mankind's ills, performing miracles in the eternal battle against pain and death that no man had ever dared attempt before. He had had the knowledge once. He had had the God-given skill in his hands.

Millions of people. Billions of wealth. New York.

As he gazed out, the memory of a far away day in spring came back to him, when he and John Gray had returned from Loyaquil, after John's

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injury and Henry Jessamon's death, and the termination of the Essandee project there.

Two young, brown, tropic-bitten men just landed from the Venezuelan jungles, en route out to Seattle to cash in on the Jessamon-Gray gold claim. Both of them were convalescent: John still with bandages on his hands that had been mangled in the dynamite explosion; himself with the self-inflicted facial wounds which had made him look like Henry Jessamon, and the superficially injured right hand so that he would not have to try to duplicate Henry Jessamon's signature.

IT HAD BEEN the first sight of the city for either of them. John, from Utah and Arizona and Alaska, a rootless wanderer not even sure where he had been born and caring less, had never been east of the Mississippi before. He had sailed for Loyaquil from Houston. He himself, though he had been born and brought up in a little Massachusetts Berkshire village not a hundred miles away, was as much a stranger in New York.

They had taken a day for sight-seeing, and had gone up into the Woolworth tower, the highest in those days. The sounds of the city had come up to them in a low continual roar. Like an endless cry of pain, it had seemed to him for the moment, as he leaned on the high parapet with John. The cry of millions of humanity, lost in the narrow canyons of their great stone and steel city, cry-

ing inarticulately for help. He had heard the city in that moment—calling to him, who had the surgeon's skill, and to all other men who, because of superior ability, had an obligation to aid and serve those submerged millions.

He had turned to John Gray, to see if John felt it, too. John, with his slender hawk face, his penetrating and purposeful gaze, his mouth that was already a little tight and thin with inner discipline, had been looking out over the city beside him.

"Doesn't it get you, Hank?" John had said, tight-lipped. "Money. Power. Billions of dollars. The biggest, richest city in the world. How would you like to own it all?"

"It would be a little too big a dish for me, I'm afraid," he had replied, somewhat apologetically. His own feeling had been quite different; he had not thought of owning it. "No, thanks. You can have it yourself, John."

"I'll have it, all right," John Gray had replied, with his hawk look. "All of it. I'm only an unknown guy from the back of nowhere now. Nobody in this town has ever heard of me. Beyond my half of the claim, if the syndicate buys it, I don't own a hundred bucks. But someday I'm going to own—" He swept his hand out to encompass the whole city.

"They're going to buy the claim, all right, aren't they, John?"

John's words and his indifferent manner had sent a stab of fright through him. He had been stabbed by a sharp alarm that somehow it

might not go through, after all; that even now some unforeseen hitch might develop and there would be none of Henry Jessamon's money for him, in spite of his deception. The money for which he had taken a dead man's name.

"Fifty thousand bucks apiece," John Gray had said. "That's not dough in this town. Oh, the syndicate will go through with it, all right. The claim's worth it, and our title's clear. But that's just peanuts. What are you going to do with your share when you get it, Hank?"

"I don't know as I've just thought of it. Live, the chief thing. Nora and I can live—"

"Till it's spent," John Gray had said succinctly. "It seems like a lot to you, and it will seem like a lot for a couple of years more. Maybe you can stretch it out for a long time, even ten or twenty years, hiding out in some small town and vegetating. But someday it'll be gone.

"I'm not giving you any advice, Hank," he had added, with his dark brooding look. "It's your dough to use, and to use in your own way. It's not mine, and I don't want any part of it. I only want what belongs to me, what I have earned. But I'm going to make a million dollars with my half. And when I've made it, I'm going to make ten million. That's something even in this town. That's power. That's money. That's what I'm going to have. And you can have your peanut money and your Nora, till they're gone."

"You're certainly feeling cheerful,

John boy, about Nora and me.'

"I look ahead," John Gray had replied. "It's your own life, and your own way of living it. But don't forget that I offered you something else."

Standing together looking out over the city. Long ago, when they had been young. . . .

THE COOL-EYED blonde returned after a half minute or a half hour. The man clutching the rail had lost his sense of time and could not be sure. His head was light. He had not eaten for three days, and it was all a little dreamlike and unreal. But she was Elinor's daughter, he was sure of it. She had been named Alice, he remembered now.

"Mr. Gray will see you," she said coolly, opening the chromium gate for him.

He went through it and through the door in the blond-wood paneling, which she held open for him in turn and closed soundlessly behind him.

"Hello, Hank," said John Gray without emotion, without inflection, from his desk across the room. "What's in your pocket?"

He sat, John Gray, behind his massive desk, cater-corner between two corner windows with deep embrasures and heavy floor-length blue drapes. The drapes were pushed back; the windows were open on the crisp autumn air. The roar of the avenue came up from eight hundred feet below. Between the windows John Gray's face was in shadow. A great cluster of flame-red, lush-

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petaled flowers in a deep blue bowl on his desk was the only color and brightness about him, the only color in the monotoned room.

Orchids, thought the man who had come sidling in. He wondered if John knew that they were Nora's favorite flower. The great wild jungle orchids of the slopes of the Pacaraimas in Venezuela. They had grown in riotous parasite profusion all around the Essandee headquarters camp, fragile, exotic, in all the colors of the pale aurora, haunted by huge slow-fanning butterflies as pale as death.

He stood still, remembering. The orchids of Loyaquil behind the little hospital hut, and the singing fragrant tropic nights. And Nora in her nurse's uniform, so young and loving, in his arms.

These orchids upon John Gray's desk were huge double or triple blooms. He had never seen red orchids before. A red of flame, a red of everlasting fire, the deepest red of anything on earth. They had come from John's own hothouses, doubtless. Some prize rare blooms which had been developed by John's high-priced gardeners. They were infinitely richer and more beautiful than the single humble cattalya which he had bought for Nora last week, and which was withered now. He would like to have this great bowlful of flaunting flame-red orchids for a present for Nora now.

Gray and lean, with his chill penetrating eyes, his thin tight lips, John Gray sat with his big square hands clasped together on his desk top, look-

ing measuringly at the tired, frayed man who shambled towards him. Gray hair, gray eyes, gray tie and suit. Even his face and his locked hands, in the shadow between the windows, looked gray. The color of stone and steel which clutch and guard money. The granite-gray of banks.

Only a cunning eye, a very cunning eye, would have observed the fine lacework of white scars, as delicate as spider threads, around the fingers and knuckles of John Gray's hands.

Those few fine and almost invisible scars were the only trace remaining of the bloody mangled things which John Gray's hands had been when the terrified native boys had brought him and Henry Jessamon into the little hospital hut at Loyaquil—both injured terribly by the dynamite explosion.

He had done a beautiful job on John, thought the tired, frayed man. It had been a miraculous job. What marvelous skill he had had in those days!

Even John had never realized fully just what he had done for him. But if it had not been for him, John Gray would have had no hands. And no life, either. He had saved John Gray's life, let that be put down to his credit. He had saved it when perhaps no one else could have.

He had not been able to save Henry Jessamon's life, though. The poor devil had been dying already when the black boys had brought him in, with his jaw and half his

breast blown away by the force of the explosion.

CHAPTER 2

Blackmail in Reverse

JOHN GRAY, at his desk of money and power, was a man with a good name which had always been his own. A man of shining honor. A man who never violated even an unwritten code.

With Nora, for instance. John must have wanted her for himself, back in those days at Loyaquil. It was inevitable, in that hot and luxuriant tropic atmosphere, in the starry, orchid-scented nights, with Nora the only white woman in two hundred miles. Even if she had been only half so lovely.

Henry Jessamon had been frankly and savagely in love with her. He had wanted to fight for her with guns or knives or dynamite, to the finish, winner take all. But it had been enough for John Gray to know that she belonged to another man.

Youth and love and death and violence, and the hot steaming jungles of Loyaquil. There was a film over the eyes of the tired, frayed man who had come in. He would like to be back there again, with his good skill, with the young years, with his young love for Nora.

The world seemed hollow now. John Gray himself seemed a hollow shadow sitting behind his great desk across the room, saying, "Hello, Hank. What's in your pocket?"

It was John Gray's characteristic greeting, a meaningless salutation. Instead of saying, "How are tricks?" or "What's on your mind?" or "What's cooking?" he said, "What's in your pocket?" A little ironical, implying that if a man had plenty in his pocket everything must be all right with him.

Beside Gray's locked, motionless hands upon his desk, there was a tiny ball of paper, no bigger than a pebble. He had cut it from this morning's newspaper and crumpled it there. He let it lie.

"Hello, John. I just dropped in—"

The frayed man swallowed in his throat. He crossed the silky rug on his paper-thin soles, like a dizzy water-spider creeping carefully on a glassy pond. He reached John Gray's desk. The timeless roaring was in his ears as he slid down into the visitor's chair across from John Gray and sat on the edge of the seat.

"I just dropped in, John. I was passing by—"

"How much do you need this time, Hank, to save your life?" said John Gray with thin lips.

"A thousand—five hundred dollars would do it," said the frayed man, staring with blurred eyes. "Things still haven't been going well with me, John. Nora went to the hospital last week. I've got to have money for her."

"I didn't know that she was ill at all," John Gray said without emotion.

"It was very sudden. An emergency operation."

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"I didn't know," John Gray repeated.

"She's better now."

John Gray unlocked his square powerful hands. He picked up a pencil from his desk and snapped it in two. He laid the pieces down again.

"Yes," he said. "No doubt she is." His eyes were gray as glass. With a fingernail he rolled the little pellet of paper on his desk.

"Much better," said the frayed man, swallowing. "She's out of danger now. But there are the hospital bills, and she needs rest and freedom from worry. Five hundred ought to carry me along till I can get something, perhaps."

John Gray took a gold keycase from his vest pocket and unlocked the top drawer of his desk. He pulled forth a manila envelope, and extracted a small memorandum book from it. There was a sheet of yellowed writing paper in the envelope, too, and a brown withered flower; but he did not pull them forth.

"Have you any idea, Hank, of how much I've passed out to you in the past few years?"

"A lot," said the frayed man, swallowing. "Maybe ten thousand dollars. Nora always kept the exact amount. She always said we were going to pay you back some day."

"Nine thousand, five hundred dollars," said John Gray. "I have the dates and figures. I had set ten thousand as the top. But now that's over." He closed the memorandum book and laid it down. "We'll charge it up to profit and loss."

"I won't ask you again, John," said the frayed man. "I'll try not to. I hate to do it almost worse than death. But I've always counted on you as my last recourse."

"You're an odd kind of blackmailer, Hank," John Gray said with a thin smile. "A blackmailer in reverse. You never understood the principle of your calling, it's quite obvious. The point of the game is that you're supposed to blackmail a man when he has committed some crime of which you alone are aware. You don't blackmail him when you have committed a crime yourself, just because he happens to know you are a crook. It's almost like—well, it's almost like shooting yourself and calling it murder. Or shooting someone else, and calling it suicide. You've got the principle of the thing all wrong."

"I never thought I was blackmailing you, John," said the tired man in a low voice.

"Then just why," said John Gray, "have you come to me through all the years for money? Because I owed you any? I have never owed a man a dime. Because you once saved my life? You may have saved the lives of a hundred others by your skill. It was your profession, your calling, the thing that you had taken the oath as a doctor to do, and that you were paid a salary for doing. I have been reasonably cognizant of the obligation, I think, Hank. But sometime or other, the surgeon's bill is paid in full."

"I never thought you owed me any

money, John. I—I just always felt—”

“That I had some secret yearning for Nora? And so you felt you could play me for money all these years because of her?”

The frayed, tired man sat silent.

JOHAN GRAY frowned. “Let us look at it from the beginning, Hank,” he said. “Henry Jessamon and I had known each other for a number of years. We’d been partners together up north of Nome. We had made our little strike together, fifty-fifty. The claim looked good, but we didn’t have the capital to develop it ourselves, so we had offered it to the syndicate. To keep ourselves going in the meantime, we got this job with the Essandee Oil project in Venezuela. We were the pioneer construction bosses, the only white men on it at the beginning. After we had been on it a couple of months, they sent down a young doctor—you. In another month they sent a young nurse, Nora.

“If the Essandee directors had gone through with their original intention, there would have been a big organization eventually. But the project stalled, and there was only us. The three white men, and Nora. Month after month. Good Lord! If there had been ten thousand women, she would have still stood out above them all. I might as well admit it to you now. I knew from my first sight of her that she was the only woman I would ever want. The woman I was born to have, to complete my des-

tiny. I would have given up my hope of Paradise—”

John Gray tightened his lips, and a gray film passed over his eyes.

“My hope of Paradise,” he repeated, with his lips tight. “And hers, too. To have had her I would have given up all my ambitions for money and power, if she had wanted it. I would have done anything. Henry Jessamon felt the same. But there was no chance for either of us with her. She was all yours, from the beginning. You and she went together like oil and flame. We were just shadows to her. Living in your own orchid-scented Eden, you two. While we lived in hell.

“All right, that was the way the game was. Poor old Henry wanted to fight you for her. He used to malingering on the job, inventing illnesses so as to get himself in the hospital where he could be near her. But I’m not a man to torment myself needlessly. I stood clear. I think you can give me my due, Hank. I never tried to cut in, even by a glance at her. What belongs to a man belongs to him. I have a strong sense of property.

“There was that damned explosion. Henry and I both got it. It was the day after the monthly boat from down river had come, bringing orders from the Essandee offices to fold the camp in the next four weeks. Henry and I had gone up to move the dynamite cache down from the hills. Maybe we were a little careless, because of the end of things.

“Anyway, it happened. The native

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boys rushed us down to the hospital. Henry was dead, or the same as dead, when they got him there. There was nothing you could do for him, as I understand it. I don't doubt that. He was dead, and that was the end of him. You had buried him before I woke up out of it. In that climate you couldn't wait.

"My own hands were pretty badly mangled, you intimated to me. I thought for a while that I had lost them, I'll be frank, and that you were only keeping the bad news from me. You were worried yourself, no doubt. You had experimented with some unorthodox technic, I gathered, which wasn't sanctioned. But your gamble came out all right, and I kept my hands. I give you credit. Hardly a scar."

John Gray flexed the fingers of his big square hands, looking down at them a moment.

"A little awkward and stiff for a long time," he said. "I had lost a lot of the knacks I'd had, and had to develop new ways of doing things. There was a balance of seventeen odd dollars to my credit in a mail-order bank in Chicago, on which they refused my payment because my signature had changed so. And I still tie my necktie differently than I used to, and hold a gun with a different grip. But I am better off than Henry Jessamon, at any rate.

"You and I got to know each other pretty well while I was in the hospital, Hank," John Gray went on quietly, locking his hands together again. "You used to talk to me about

your problems. About your ambitions to be a great surgeon. The feeling you had that there was a unique skill in you, which you should put to the service of humanity.

"But you had blotted your life by marrying a childhood flame while still in medical school. A village girl of no particular intelligence, with whom you had nothing in common, as you at once found out. You were both penniless, and now there was a child, born while you were down there. There had been no opportunity for you to save a cent of your salary, for everything had to go to their support.

"Yet a surgeon can't start in without any money, without a reputation, and with no experience beyond what he has gained as a company doctor in a remote jungle outpost, without any senior medical men to check his work. You felt that you were good, but you couldn't prove it.

"That was your dilemma and your problem. When you returned to the States you would be jobless, and no better off than when you had come down. There would be nothing for you to do but go back to your small village and hang up a shingle, and try to scratch a living for your wife and child in general practice, living on credit for the first year or two.

"After five years you might be breaking even. After ten or fifteen years you might be out of debt. But never an opportunity to use and develop your special skill. Instead you'd have to let it rust away—till finally you had lost it completely.

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"And all the time you'd be living with an unloved woman, a dull woman, a woman grown whiny and nagging with poverty. And all the more whiny because she would realize she wasn't loved. Yet a woman to whom you had been married by the church, and who believed in it herself, and would never divorce you. While now, here in Loyaquil, you had met your great and one true love. She believed in the church, too, Nora Malley did. But her love for you was too great."

JOHN GRAY's lips were thin. The frayed, tired man who had been a dead man for almost twenty years sat silent and miserable in the big, luxurious office.

"That was your problem," said John Gray. "There were various answers to it, perhaps. One—to do as you had to do, forget Nora, forget your surgery, go back to your wife and child, start in your general practice. But there was no idea in your mind of doing that.

"It wasn't my problem, Hank. I had my own problems and my own life, and my own future that I had planned out for myself. I'm not a man to give advice.

"You weren't asking my advice, anyway. What you were looking for was some way out, whereby you could relieve yourself of your obligations and continue to have Nora. You had been looking wildly for such a way out ever since you had known her.

"Henry Jessamon's death might

have been an act of providence, you had almost persuaded yourself. You asked me about his personal affairs. I told you of our little strike, for which the syndicate was now offering a hundred thousand dollars. Of how he had been, like me, a man without ties or family. I said he had no relatives except a rich uncle down in Texas, whom he had not seen for many years, and who didn't care about him.

"I wondered, I must admit, why you were so interested. You told me then that one time when Jessamon had been malingering in the hospital, he had told Nora he was going to make a will naming her his heir. With his money you and she would be free, you thought. The world and heaven forever ahead of you.

"Lots of men like to talk about making someone their heir, more or less jokingly. Still it's not at all improbable in the circumstances that Henry Jessamon really had such an intention toward Nora. Only it's something that a man puts off. A man is strong and full of life. He can't quite imagine being otherwise. To make a will seems to be, in a way, holding out a hand to death.

"I have never made one myself, though I have considerable properties to dispose of, and am older than Henry Jessamon was. I will do so sometime, since otherwise the state would inherit, having no heirs at law. The point is that a man puts it off, though I do not question that Henry Jessamon may have had the intention.

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"I don't know how or when the idea first came to you, Hank," John Gray went on quietly. "The native boys had been paid off, and there were just the two of us, with plenty of time for you to think. Perhaps it was inevitable that it should have occurred to you. Henry Jessamon had resembled you more than a little. The same general type, and more than that. He was ten years older, of course. He had that deep white scar above his left eyebrow that you didn't have. His nose was a little bonier and more prominent than yours, and he had a cleft in his chin. But all those small differences in appearance could be taken care of, with your skill in surgery.

"If you were dead, your wife would get the fifteen thousand dollars insurance which Essandee carried on all its employees as a part of their contract, and she would get along. If Henry Jessamon was brought back to life, he would get his fifty thousand dollars, and only his rich uncle would be deprived, who didn't need it, and who wouldn't know or care. You and Nora could live in joy forever.

"There would be the problem of Henry's signature which you might be called on to make. But a hand injury could take care of that. I'd not be able to sign myself, with my hands still like blocks of dead beef, not feeling as if they belonged to me. The syndicate lawyers in Seattle knew me by sight, however, although not Henry Jessamon.

"It was all quite clear in your own

mind, almost down to the last fine detail, when you first broached it to me, Hank. You asked me if I wanted Henry Jessamon's money myself. I told you no, absolutely, that I would not touch a penny of it; it did not belong to me, and I wanted no part of it.

"You asked me if, that being the case, I would certify you as Henry Jessamon, so that you could get it yourself and for Nora. I was more than a little appalled at the suggestion. I told you that it made no difference to me who got Henry's money, so long as I had no part in it, but that I could not lie. You thought it over for a day or two more, and asked me then if I would denounce you if you tried it.

"Well, you had saved my life, hadn't you? How could I do that? I have my own code and course of action. I have never made myself responsible for another man's morals or actions.

"So when the boat came back up river at the end of the month, there were two of us that it took down again. Only I was still John Gray, and always had been, and always will be.

"But you yourself were no longer the young doctor of Loyaquil. You were Henry Jessamon, with facial wounds and a wounded right hand, and the young doctor was dead. There was a wooden cross, as I remember, with his name cut on it, at the edge of the little clearing back of the hospital hut.

"All right," said John Gray. "We

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landed in New York, and you went out to Seattle with me, Hank. The syndicate's lawyers asked me as a matter of routine if I could identify you as Henry Jessamon. I told them that you looked like a man who had been employed under that name with me at Loyaquil, though perhaps they had better take your fingerprints and verify them from the records of Essandee, who fingerprinted all their employees as a matter of course when they were hired.

"The lawyers laughed. Perhaps we all laughed. Because you must be Henry Jessamon. You made Henry Jessamon's mark upon the contract, and you got Henry Jessamon's fifty thousand dollars. And in the pleasant little Berkshire village of Torkford, Massachusetts, Mrs. Elinor Stiles, the widow of young Dr. Henry Stiles, received her insurance money of fifteen thousand dollars from the Essandee policy.

"And Henry Jessamon lies among the orchids and the ants. No one has ever seen that place again, I imagine. The jungle has taken it back long ago. The cross above him is rotted to decay. The last atom of him has gone long ago to earth. Only you and I know that Henry Jessamon is dead.

"I let you get away with it, Hank," said John Gray, with chill eyes upon the tired, frayed man. "I'm not responsible for another's moral code. But if that makes me subject to your blackmail, I'd like to know how you figure it. If I owe you anything, I'd like to know that, too. I like to pay

my debts. I don't want to owe anything to any man on earth."

CHAPTER 3

The Bird Has Flown Away

THE MAN who had been Henry Jessamon for almost twenty years sat fumbling his hat upon his bony knees, looked with a blurred gaze at John Gray. He did not reply.

John Gray rolled, with his right index finger, the tiny pellet of paper which lay on his desk. He picked it up and unballled it, smoothing it with his thumbs. It was no more than four lines of type, from this morning's obituary page.

Asbury Park, N. J. Miss Nora Malley, aged 37, a registered nurse formerly employed by the Essandee Oil Co., died early yesterday evening in Memorial Hospital.

He rolled it up between his fingers again and dropped it into his wastebasket. That was all the news that she had been worth, Nora Malley. Early last evening. Perhaps at six or seven o'clock, while he had been having cocktails. Or a little later, while he had been dining or at a show. Nothing had told him she was going. He had not known at all.

"Let us survey your situation, Hank," he said, with an air of impassivity and impatience. "You had fifty thousand dollars once. That isn't money, but it isn't beggary and starvation, either. Where did it go?"

The frayed man swallowed in his throat.

"I'm not a good business man,

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John," he said. "I never have been."

"I know," said John Gray. For he had known from the beginning. "I warned you, if you remember. I am not a man to give advice. But it was allowable for me to give you a picture of the future. Even so, you might have done much worse. The market crash. The bank failures. You kept going on your own for almost ten years, before you finally came to me. It was longer than I'd expected."

"Nora went back to her profession," said the frayed man. "She kept us going. Henry Jessamon's money itself had lasted only three years. It was as if a jinx had hold of me. Every investment—"

"Why didn't you get a job yourself?"

"I tried, John. But all I knew was medicine."

"And Henry Stiles, who had graduated from medical school and who had a license to practice, was dead," said John Gray with a nod—for he had known that, too, from the beginning. "Still, there are certain things which a man who is skilled in medicine can do, where a license makes no difference. Illegal things, but they pay big money. Why didn't you go into that?"

"It's a hard thing to say why. But I couldn't—even if Nora wouldn't have left me."

"There was always the W.P.A.," said John Gray.

"I've been on that. But they won't let you stay on it forever."

"All right," said John Gray. "There

are jobs now. Plenty of jobs. The country is crying for men. You should be able to get something in an aircraft factory or a shipyard, and make a decent living."

"I don't know enough, John," said the tired, frayed man. "I've tried. But I don't know enough even to be a sweeper in a war factory. It's not so simple as it sounds."

"I know," said John Gray. "Well, why don't you enlist? You're five years younger than I am. You can't be more than forty-two. You haven't dissipated, and your constitution is still sound."

"I stopped in at the enlistment office this morning on my way here and started to fill out an application. But then I gave it up, John. There was something in it I couldn't answer."

John Gray nodded again, for he had known that, too.

"When you came to the question if you had ever been convicted of a crime," he said. "Essandee fingerprinted its employees, and all prints go for filing to Washington. When the army had classified and tabulated yours, they would be found identical with the prints of Dr. Henry Stiles, of Torkford, Massachusetts, who died at Loyaquil many years ago, and whose widow received fifteen thousand dollars insurance. Only one man has one set of fingerprints, of course. And he has them forever. You know that, Hank, as well as I do."

"Yes," said the tired, frayed man. "The only way you can destroy them is by cutting your fingers off. And

if you do, they won't take you."

"What other recourse is there for you, Hank?" said John Gray, his voice coming quietly out of the shadows.

"You have always been my last recourse, John. I have always hated to come to you almost worse than death itself. But you have never failed me, when I had to come."

"It must have occurred to you, of course, that eventually that last recourse might fail," said John Gray. "Then what?"

He sat looking at the man who had had Nora all these years, though he had been a dead man.

But now Nora herself was dead. And he had not even known.

"Nora—" the frayed man moved his lips.

"She can be left out of it," said John Gray, his eyes gray as glass. "She is out of it. The bird has flown away. We are talking of you now, Hank. Of what there is left for you to do. Have you given that any thought?"

THE BLURRED eyes of the frayed man across the desk swam before John Gray's penetrating gaze. They moved towards one of the open windows. The cool bright noon sky above the city lay out there. The sounds of the street came up from a fifth of a mile below.

John Gray nodded, thin lips tight.

"There's always that, of course," he said. "You have always had it in your mind that sooner or later it must come to that. I rather knew it,

too, Hank, from the beginning."

He reached for his dictating machine beside his desk. He pulled it on its stand toward him.

"A notation, Miss Stiles," he said into it. "To whom it may concern, colon. I, comma, Henry Jessamon, comma, declare that what I am about to do is of my own volition, comma, and that no one but me is responsible for my act. That's all. Please bring it into my office as soon as you have it typed."

He pressed a button. His blonde secretary from the outer office appeared, with her cool young eyes, her cool efficient manner. John Gray nodded towards the cylinder on the machine.

"A couple of letters and a memorandum," he said. "Right away, please."

She took it and withdrew.

The man who had been a dead man too long pressed his face in his palm. She had been born in December. She looked so much like Elinor. Yet it was his mouth she had, and other little features—even mannerisms. There must be things within her mind and heart, too. She was quicker, brighter, more intelligent than Elinor. He wondered what her life had been. What it would be, after he was gone. Her name was Alice. That was all he would ever know about her.

"She came from an employment agency," said John Gray, thin-lipped, as if reading his thoughts. "Quite competent and efficient. There were one or two others whom the agency

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sent around. They were about as good, and more experienced. But the matter of who she was weighed down the balance."

"I have done her one good turn, anyway, it would seem," said the frayed man.

"You will do her another," said John Gray quietly. "Although she will not know it. There is no need of discarding the name of Henry Jessamon, as I see it. For her sake, as well as that of her mother."

"Elinor?"

"Mrs. Stiles still idealizes your memory, Hank, you understand. In a way I have kept myself informed about her. It would shatter her pride to learn that you were alive all these years. It wouldn't be the decent thing to do to her."

The frayed man rubbed his palm upon his forehead. "No," he said. "Elinor must never know. I've always had that on my conscience, above all."

He fumbled his hat in a thin hand, looking at the window with blurred eyes.

"Are you frightened?" asked John Gray quietly, with a tightening of his jaw muscles. "Are you frightened at the thought of going to join Nora?"

"Frightened?" said the frayed man with surprise. "No, why should I be? Where else should I go? I'm only sorry to have been away from her so long. And thanks for all you've done for me in the past, anyway, John. I almost forgot it."

He made a gesture to rise.

"Wait till she has brought the memorandum back before you do it," said John Gray quietly.

"What memorandum? Oh, yes, you dictated something for the girl, didn't you?"

"I might as well be protected from every angle," said John Gray. "I don't like to be too damned cold-blooded about it, but I have a rather strongly developed sense of self-protection."

"I suppose you have," said the frayed man humbly. "I've never had much myself, I guess, or I'd be better off. You've got so many qualities I don't have, John."

"I'm not advising you to do it, understand me," said John Gray with his thin lips. "If I were a man to give advice to anyone, I would advise you against it. The church that Nora believed in preaches that it is the straight way to hell. I don't believe in such things myself, naturally, nor do you, I assume. We both look at the world realistically. Still I do not advise you to do it. I have only tried to help you see your situation, Hank, as clearly as possible. The problem is yours, and not mine."

"I won't bother you again," said the frayed man apologetically. "I'm grateful for all you have done for me."

The door opened again. The cool-eyed blonde came back, placing on John Gray's desk the letters which had been on the cylinder, which she had transcribed, and the memorandum which John Gray had dictated in the name of Henry Jessamon.

"Is that all, sir?"

"Do you remember," the frayed man said suddenly, "Henry Jessamon—"

He rubbed his forehead, shutting his lips. The girl was still there. Looking down at him with her cool eyes, impersonally. A seedy bunch of rags and bones he must look to her in John Gray's blond-paneled, silken-rugged offices. Yet a little curious about him underneath, perhaps.

After all, she was a woman.

His own daughter.

He wondered if she had ever heard the name of Henry Jessamon. There was no reason that she should. Yet he had a flash of feeling that she might have. He had intended to say something to John about how Henry Jessamon had once challenged him to a duel to the death back there in Loyaquil long ago. But it was all a little confused in his mind, and it made no difference.

"That's all, Miss Stiles," said John Gray with an expressionless face. "Thank you."

John Gray watched her with his gray glance as she withdrew, and the heavy door in the paneling closed soundlessly. His thin lips formed a faint smile. She had transcribed the death message with mechanical speed and precision, yet its purport had not registered on her mind. The perfect automaton.

John Gray would explain afterwards that he had supposed it was just a meaningless threat on the part of poor old Henry Jessamon. Jessa-

mon had come to him, crying about his troubles and mumbling about suicide, as he had often done before; and to humor the poor fellow and shock him out of it, he, John Gray, had dictated a farewell message as poor Jessamon had requested him to do. He had done it in the hope that it would bring Jessamon back to his senses—not dreaming Jessamon really intended to go through with it. But before he could do anything about it, Jessamon had seized a pen and signed the note, and had rushed to the window and gone out it like a flash. He, John Gray, was not so good, it seemed in suicidal psychology. . . .

John Gray started pushing the typed sheet across his desk, with a big white-laced hand. His eyes blank and cold, he looked at this man who had had Nora all these years, although he had been a dead man. A dead man who had not had the sense to have understood long years ago that there was nothing for him but death.

Why hadn't Stiles used up the fifty thousand in six months and done it then, at a better time? Why hadn't he had the brains to realize that he was a good surgeon only, and that he had killed himself as a surgeon when he had abandoned his identity? He might have done this thing more gracefully long ago. Leaving to John Gray—Nora.

She was gone now. The bird had flown away.

But not this damned man who had kept her from him.

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"Well, that finishes it, Hank," John Gray said quietly, pushing the suicide note across his desk. His eyes were cold as death.

"What, John?"

The tired, frayed man stared uncomprehendingly at John Gray and at the paper which had been pushed toward him.

"What do you mean, John?" he said slowly. "What do you mean—that you want me to die? Why, it's true, is it? What Nora always said. . . ."

With a dazed gesture he pulled the flat gun from the side pocket of his worn old tweed coat. He laid it shakily upon the desk in front of him.

"I thought it was to be the window, Hank," said John Gray without emotion. "But the gun is as sure a way to hell."

"The pistol which someone sent me anonymously more than fifteen years ago," said the frayed man in a shaken voice. "I never knew who sent it, or why. But Nora knew. You want me to kill myself."

CHAPTER 4

Passport to Hell

JOHN GRAY brushed his fingertips across his desk. "I wasn't advising you," he said. "I never advise anyone. But it was within my province to give you an intimation of the future. A friendly warning of what lay ahead. It was too soon, of course. You still had a little money

left. You still had Nora. You hadn't yet completely realized the full state of your predicament."

"The little blue bottle of KCN crystals which came three years later," said the blurred man. "I have the bottle with me, too. I never knew who had sent that, either, or why. It reached me when things were at their blackest, and I emptied out the crystals down the drain and put the bottle away deep on a back shelf, for I was afraid of it. And you sent that, too."

"It was still too soon," John Gray repeated with thin lips.

"And you want me to die now! You've always wanted it."

"What do you think this conversation has been about?"

"I never knew," said the frayed, blurred man. "I never had a glimmering. I thought from the beginning the evil was all within myself. But Nora knew. The hate and living fear she's always had of you. She told me last week in the hospital when she lay so near to death. She told me you had killed Henry Jessamon, out of black jealousy of him, though you yourself didn't get away scot-free—and that the only reason you hadn't killed me, too, was because you needed me to reach her. She told me that you lured me on to try to get his money, to ruin me and send me to hell—knowing that if you could only send me to hell, she'd gladly go herself."

"Profit and loss," said John Gray. "The bird has flown away."

"I know you now, John Gray," said

the frayed man. "Between the windows, with your face like smoke. Behind your desk of money and power. You took me up onto a high place once and showed me all the riches of the world. And because I didn't know you then, I listened to you. But it was her soul you were after, John Gray, through me. It was her white soul that you were born to get. Only you will never get her soul, John Gray, nor will you get mine. For she has prayed too long for me, and I know you now."

"You are quite crazy," said John Gray, thin-lipped. "I have been negligent in allowing you to starve to quite such an extremity."

"Say the word Paradise without gagging, John Gray!"

"There is no such place."

John Gray saw that the gun upon the desk was pointed at him, beneath the loose clasp of that thin, numb hand.

"You're crazy, of course," John Gray said. "But not quite that crazy, Hank. You'd like to kill me, I don't doubt it. But you would hate more to burn. You know too well how our human bodies are made, each joint and nerve, and all the pain of it. It would not be worth while to have to burn, just for the brief crazy satisfaction of killing me."

John Gray looked at the frayed man across his desk. The pupils of his eyes seemed to contract and disappear, and they were as gray as glass.

"You'll burn here and in hell both!" he said. "I promise you!" He

gripped the arms of his big leather swivel chair, his throne of power, behind his massive desk. He seemed to start up from it like smoke. He swooped across the desk, clutching at the gun and snatching it.

The frayed man said, "I'll burn in neither place, and you know it. Did you really think that I, a doctor, could destroy a man's life—even yours?"

He looked at John Gray dully.

"It isn't loaded," he said. "I took the clip of bullets out of it when I got it, because there had been a black strangling pall over me and I was tempted to use it. The same when I got the blue cyanide bottle. The urge, the black urge to death. Only Nora saved me. She asked me this morning to bring them to you, to have you admit that you had sent them, and for what purpose. But I thought it was only a woman's baseless imagination. I let it pass."

HE LOOKED at John Gray from the timelessness, light-headed and eerie, which surrounded him. There had been a muffled explosion. A second ago. A minute ago. As John had snatched the gun. John Gray had settled back in his chair again, between the windows, in the shadows. With a flung gesture of his right hand he swept the gun to the floor.

"Did it go off?" the frayed man asked in bewilderment. "You must have put one cartridge in the chamber. I didn't think of that."

"Nora," said John Gray, breathing

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heavily. "Nora asked you this morning?" His voice rasped. "You whining crook, she's dead! You just wanted to make me believe she was still alive so you could chisel a few hundred out of me to pay her hospital bills and bury her, and keep on living your damned life for a little while."

His eyes were blank as glass. He seemed to shrivel, in the shadows, settling down deeper into his chair.

"How—?"

"In the papers, you lying beggar," gasped John Gray. "Yesterday evening in the hospital at Asbury. Nora Malley, thirty-seven, once with Essandee. On a back page, two or three lines. If she had been mine, she would have died a queen, covered with red orchids bright as flame, brighter than any at Loyaquil!"

"If she had been mine—but she was always yours. You had her, all these years. Well, you've lost her now! Go to the window and jump out. Die yourself, and go to hell!"

The frayed man turned his eyes toward the window at the right of John Gray. The East River, the hospitals along its shore. He took a deep breath, almost sobbing. For a terrible moment he had almost believed that John Gray spoke from some knowledge which he didn't have. That she had died since he had left her a bare two hours ago, asleep and smiling.

But that could never be.

"Nora is there!" he said with a deep breath of joy. "There by the river. She passed the crisis two nights ago, and she is out of all danger now."

"Nora Malley—"

"Her aunt," said the frayed man.

"It was her aunt whose name you saw. The age must have been a misprint for sixty-seven. Her aunt was head nurse for Essandee for thirty years. It was she who sent Nora down to Loyaquil. She died last night in Asbury. Not Nora. Not my Nora. If you had known that she was still alive, you would still have played for her, wouldn't you?"

"Nora Malley," said John Gray thickly. "Go to hell yourself, you—"

Across the desk John Gray's slumped figure seemed to reach forth again like smoke. He swept his hands across the desk at the frayed man, as if to clutch and strangle with them. One of his sweeping arms knocked the blue bowl of red-flame flowers off from his desk, but that was all. Behind his desk he seemed to shrivel, vanish.

"John!"

Behind his great desk he had vanished. He had slid down from his seat of power. . . .

There had been an explosion when John had snatched the gun. A cartridge in the chamber all these years, which John had put there for him, and he had not known about. John's hands had been clumsy, seizing it.

The frayed man rubbed his blurred eyes, and got shakily to his feet. He stepped around the great desk, clinging to the edge of its smooth glass surface.

The great red-flame flowers lay all over the floor, in the darkness of spilled water.

John Gray lay on the floor with his strong hands spread out. Those white-laced fingers of John Gray's. Only a very cunning eye would have been able to see those scars.

They lay dead and empty now, those hands which he had made for John from the dead hands of Henry Jessamon. Those hands he had made when John had been brought in with the stumps of his hands fingerless, and Henry Jessamon dying. He had never told even John just what he had done. He had wanted to be sure how it would work out, at first, and then he had delayed.

He could never tell John now.

But it had been the hands of Henry Jessamon which had tied John Gray's ties for him, and gripped his golf clubs, and signed his checks in a different way than he had known before. And it had been the hands of Henry Jessamon which had pulled the trigger of that gun.

The bullet had gone in just below John's heart. An internal hemorrhage. No blood on his gray vest at all around the small scorched hole.

Henry Stiles went shuffling to the door set in the paneling, and opened it.

"You had better call the police," he said. "Your employer has just shot himself."

The girl sat at her machine, with her fingers poised motionless, with her face half turned toward the door from which he had emerged. As if she had been listening. As if, perhaps, it had come to her as no surprise.

She sat there with her cool look; poised, unhysterical. Elinor would have shrieked and screamed, and flopped around like a chicken without its head. But *she* was his daughter, Alice. Steady-nerved in the emergency. Intelligent, as well. When he had said that John Gray had killed himself, she did not ask stupidly if he was dead.

"I will call the police," she said. "His real name was Henry Jessamon. They will have to know."

CHAPTER 5

A Curious Case

THE TIRED, frayed man stared at her. "*His* name?" he said bewildered. "*His* name was Henry Jessamon?"

She pressed her hands to the side of her neck a moment, before reaching for the phone. "Yes," she said. "There's no need of trying to hide it any longer. He always called himself John Gray, of course, and nothing else. But I've known almost ever since I first came to work for him that it wasn't his real name. I've often wondered what he was trying to cover up.

"You see," she said, pouring out the words in a momentary state of young excitement, "you see my fiance was with Essandee Oil, in their main offices, before he went into the army. He was studying fingerprints in hopes of getting someday into the F. B. I. Just to tease him I got a set of Mr. Gray's fingerprints once from the

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glass top of his desk and gave them to Jerry. Mr. Gray had mentioned having worked for Essandee, and I wanted to see if Jerry could really identify them. Jerry matched them up in the company records without any trouble. But they didn't belong to a man who had ever been named John Gray. They belonged to a Henry Jessamon.

"I guess that was why I felt all excited inside when you came in and said you were a friend of Henry Jessamon's. I've always been expecting someone to turn up, I guess, every time the door has opened. It was just like in a movie. I wondered if he was going to turn white and deny ever having heard the name. But he just said, 'Send him in.'"

"I noticed when I was in the room later you called him Henry, too. You said something to him, not thinking, like, 'Do you remember, Henry Jessamon—?' And then shut up. You called him Henry, and he called you Hank. That was my father's nickname, too. When a man changes his name, you can't help wondering what he's trying to cover up. Was he a criminal?"

"Your father, girl?"

"Oh, heavens, no! My father was a young doctor, very brilliant. If he had lived, he would be the greatest surgeon in the world. I mean was Mr. Gray a criminal?"

"He never broke a law in his life," said the tired, blurred man. "A man of absolute integrity."

"Of course," she said. "I suppose so. He was always very careful. But

there must have been something he was hiding. Even before I learned he had changed his name, I felt there was something queer about him. He was so cold and inhuman. I wrote my grandmother about him, and she said my description of him reminded her of a man who had come to Torkford when I was a baby, soon after my father died.

"My mother died when I was born, you see, and my father a few months afterwards, in South America, and granny brought me up. This man told her he was an insurance inspector, and that technically it was against the law for insurance to be paid to a baby like me, as had been done, and so she must never, never let anyone outside of Torkford know that mother was dead.

"But granny asked a lawyer, and he said it wasn't so, and the man was just some sort of an imposter. Granny said she or the lawyer never could figure out what his game was. She just remembered him with a hawk nose and thin lips, and eyes as gray as glass. Like my description of Mr. Gray, she said. But why would Mr. Gray do that?"

So John Gray had known that Elinor was dead. He had known it ever since she died. There must have been some message which he had intercepted down in Loyaquil. Eighteen years ago, when he had first known Nora. He'd been free, even then, to marry her—to marry her and live his own surgeon's life.

The tired, frayed man leaned against the door post, swaying. He

himself had learned only last week that Elinor was dead.

"He never broke a law," his lips moved. "But he has been called the prince of liars."

"You are ill. You have been through an awful shock," said the girl. "Seeing him kill himself in your presence, after dictating his note. I suppose you thought it was just a silly bluff of some kind. That's what I thought it was, too."

"But then he really went ahead and did it. What a terrible shock to you! I wonder what possessed him. He might have waited, at least, until he was alone."

"My wife has been very ill," said the frayed man. "I did not sleep for several nights. I have not eaten since I've forgotten when. We have been very close together, more than eighteen years, in good years and bad. I was afraid that I was going to lose her. That's why I may seem a little dazed to you."

"Oh, I am sorry. I hope that she is better now."

"He didn't know," said the tired man. "He didn't know that we were married. I don't know why I didn't tell him today, but I didn't. An old friend. An old, old, friend. I didn't tell him, though, that Nora and I were married last week."

THE GIRL thought: Talking crazily, poor old man. Married more than eighteen years. Married last week. Strain over his wife's illness, plus this sudden shock, had got him. He must love him wife very much.

She suddenly wondered if her father, the cold austere young surgeon, had ever been in love. She knew her mother had. Her grandmother had told her. There had been the young red-haired butcher boy with the laughing eyes whom her mother had been in love with, though she had married Henry Stiles, because he had better prospects. But when her mother had been dying, it had been the red-haired young butcher boy whose name she had been whispering though he was dead in Nicaragua with the marines.

Poor shocked, sick man.

"You had better sit down on the couch," she said. "I'll give you a drink of water."

His eyes were blurred. The timeless roar of eternity was about him. It had been twilight at Loyaquil, and Nora was standing by the river. Henry Jessamon was holding up a stick of dynamite, drunk as an owl, and saying, *I'll fight any man with this for her. And if I lose, she's your partner in the Jessamon-Gray strike, John. I've put my Hancock on a will.* . . .

Later John Gray talking: *Poor old Henry Jessamon died worth fifty thousand dollars, Hank, and he looked like you, and all you'd need to do would be to make a mark for his name. Nora has a moral right to it, and you'd have money enough to be a great surgeon, and live with her always, while your wife was taken care of. Of course, I don't advise it. I never advise.*

The world roared. *Why stop at fifty*

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thousand, Hank? After all, a man can take it and make ten million dollars. That's really dough. That's money and power. All this town. Look out from this tower, Hank. Doesn't it get you? I'll show you how to get it all, if you'll only say to hell with Nora.

No, No!

Give me Nora, or else I'll block you at every turn and in the end you'll rot and die.

No, you'll never have her!

Give me Nora!

You are the devil, John Gray. Go back to hell. . . .

His lips moved. He made a signal with his finger to the blonde girl.

"His name wasn't really John Gray at all," he said. "We always called him that. But it was just a name he took while he was on earth for a while."

"I know," she told him gently. "We discussed that, don't you remember?"

"It was an accident," he kept repeating. "I'm sure of it. He didn't mean to kill himself. The hands of Henry Jessamon just reached—just reached for that gun and killed him."

"Of course it must have been an accident. I'm sure the police will consider that possibility. But don't you think it would be better if we just let them make their own observations, and come to their own conclusions?"

"Of course, it was an accident. But perhaps it would just confuse things if you stayed around. You can give me your name and address, and they can get in touch with you later if necessary."

He gazed at her with his blurred eyes. She looked like someone he had known long ago.

"You know," he said humbly, apologetically, "I think I've forgotten my name."

THE POLICE inspector lighted the big cigar that the commissioner had given him. "A curious case, sir," he said. "A very curious case."

"Why?"

"It's clearly suicide, of course," the inspector said. "He bought the gun fifteen years ago. We've traced the purchase, though nobody knows where he's kept it since. He dictated this suicide note in his own voice on the machine to his secretary, and it absolves anyone else from blame."

"He would do that, of course. He was careful."

"Yes, a very careful man. A man of the highest reputation. Yet it's still somewhat of a riddle why he changed his name. He had been known as John Gray to everyone since he first came to New York to plunge into Wall Street. But his name before that was obviously Henry Jessamon. That is shown by his fingerprints when he was employed by Esandee Oil. It's also borne out by his possession of the will, naming Nora Malley as his sole heir, which he wrote in longhand years ago at Loyaquil and signed *Henry Jessamon*. The writing is somewhat different, of course, but that's explained by the old records that say Jessamon's hands were injured in an explosion. It's not just coincidence that it was found on

his desk, in that old manila envelope with the withered orchid. And, as it turns out, it's his only will."

"A lot of money."

"Yes. He had made that will a long time ago, and then tucked it away and kept it hidden. When he made it, he probably never dreamed that it would be worth so much someday to his inheritor. Curious. His half of the Jessamon-Gray claim, which he specifically mentioned—'my half of the Alaskan claim I hold with John Gray, together with any and all other properties of which I may die possessed'—was apparently the major item that he considered he was willing. But he ran it later to four million dollars."

"What's curious about that? Nobody knows how much his estate is going to be."

"I mean," said the inspector, "it's curious that there was actually a real John Gray, it seems. Like the man we've always known as John Gray, he was without family or connections, and you can't trace where he came from. But he was a friend of Jessamon's, and they made their strike together, and were employed by Essandee at Loyaquil together. The real John Gray's fingerprints were quite different from Jessamon's, of course. His signature, where he witnessed Jessamon's will and again in the Essandee correspondence files, was radically different. The question is, where did this real John Gray go?"

"Murder, you think?" said the commissioner with narrow eyes.

"We'll never know. If it was done,

it was done at Loyaquil; and there would be no trace of the fact after all this time. All we know is that Dr. Stiles was erroneously reported dead when actually he was wandering around in a state of complete amnesia, that Jessamon took the name of John Gray, and that he kept Stiles under his control and thumb for almost twenty years."

"Stiles remembers nothing still?"

"Only vaguely. He says that he knew a man named Henry Jessamon, and that he knew a man of Gray's description. And that he's happy to have found his daughter, and that he loves his wife very dearly. He's started in his medicine again."

"Well, what's curious about that? That's the way things should be."

"I don't know," said the inspector, re-lighting his cigar. "A simple suicide, of course. But I was just thinking in my own mind that—well, suppose a man wanted you to kill yourself and had a note written saying you were, and then you decided to kill him instead, with his own gun that he had kindly given you. And you pulled the gun on him and shot him while he tried to argue you out of it or grab it from you, and then you made the suicide note he had written out for you as if he had meant it for himself, and—Oh, you would have to change his fingerprints, of course. And that can't be done. This John Gray killed himself, all right. I mean this Jessamon. Oh, I've got mixed up in my own mind, I guess."

"Perhaps, after all, there was nothing curious about it." ♠ ♠ ♠

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