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SEPTEMBER

MYSTERY

MAGAZINE



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by C. T. GARDNER

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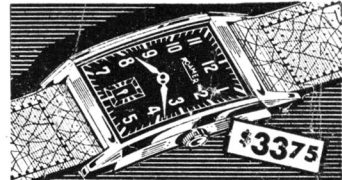
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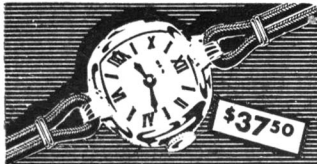
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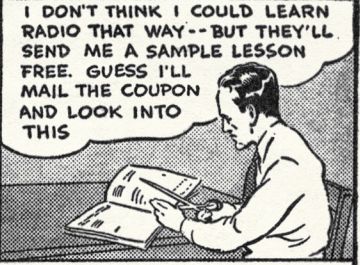
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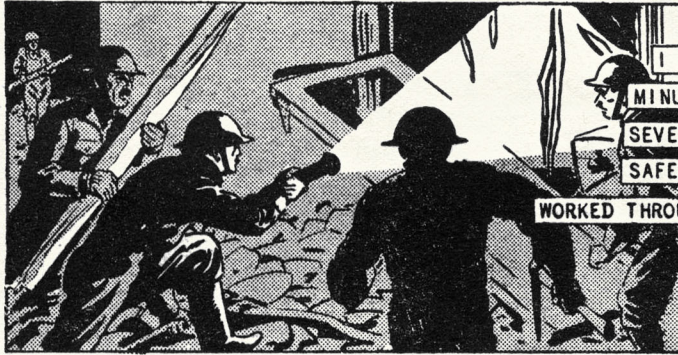
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NEXT ISSUE OUT SEPTEMBER 3rd.

Volume 29

September, 1943

Number 2

A STRONG NOVEL OF EERIE MYSTERY

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When Stanley Paul's daughter, employees and possessions all disappeared, he had to make the devil's own bargain with a berserk killer!

TWO DRAMATIC, CHILLING NOVELETTES

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An empty casket, a mangled cadaver and a man who couldn't talk, provided the weird but only evidence Lee Hazzard could offer to prove he wasn't a killer!

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Val Vickers specialized in the impossible, but it seemed that he was carrying things a bit too far when he sat in the electric chair and pulled the switch himself!

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  **AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!**

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AMAN OF MANY DEATHS!

SOMETIMES a man will laugh and make the fatalistic remark, "Well—you only die once!" But if you pinned him down, questioned him, you would find that he did not really mean that. He would admit that death is not always physical.

There is another pat platitude that does not forever hold true. They say, "A coward dies a thousand deaths—a brave man dies but one." Again we beg to differ. We have just read about a brave man, an exceedingly brave man, who died several times over a span of years. He was buried in a Green Hell called Devil's Island, only to escape from that living death and find that again he had to die—so as to don the identity of another man, a stranger he had never met.

This man, John Brady, was an American, born and raised in New York City. For many years, up to the outbreak of war in Europe, he ran a swank bar and gaming casino in Paris. He married a Frenchwoman. Then came the war and the big-shot politicians of a great Republic sold their country down the river. Then came the day when John Brady killed a man—one of those same double-dealing politicians. John Brady was sentenced to the penal colony at French Guiana.

A Colonel Arnold helped John Brady make his escape and when Brady reached Florida, his instructions were to proceed to Arnold's home on the Gulf coast. But, perhaps we'd better let Day Keene, the author of this powerful, vividly human story, take over.

Talking with Arnold about the man whose identity Brady has taken as a fugitive, Brady says, "This Roberts—we—er—look alike?"

Arnold shook his head. "No two men look alike. You are about of a size and age. Your coloring is similar. But very few people knew Roberts. What time he

didn't spend exploring, he spent locked up in his study. He was anti-social, a recluse." He took a postcard from his pocket. "But I even saved this for you. It should convince anybody that you are Roberts."

Brady looked at the card. It was a Selective Service Board notification that Francis Dawson Roberts had been classified 1 A. "Yes, it should," Brady admitted. He put the postcard into his wallet. "But where is Roberts now?"

Arnold cackled. "He's dead. I murdered him. I killed him in this very room six months ago."

Brady's throat felt dry. "Six months ago? Two months after you met me in St. Laurent."

Arnold sipped his highball. "I let him live two months after I knew I could replace him."

Brady pushed back his chair. His voice sounded strange and strained. "Okay. My own hands aren't any too clean. But what do you want of me?"

Arnold's voice turned suddenly pleading, his eyes sly. "I want you to protect me," he confided. "You see, he's come back from his grave. He wants to kill me!"

A roll of thunder shook the house, followed by a crack of lightning. Rain began to patter on the roof. Arnold's hands were hot on Brady's as he leaned across the table.

"You've got to protect me, understand? I've spent thousands of dollars on you. And now a dead man—!" He broke off with a scream as the rising wind whipped a shutter open and a dry palm frond rasped across a window. "There he is! See him! In the window!"

"The Man From Hell," by Day Keene, is the long, lead novel of the November DIME MYSTERY.

THE EDITOR

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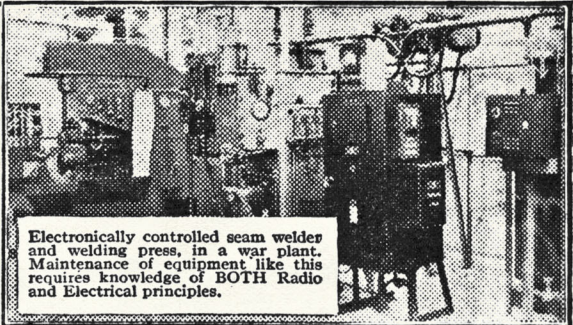
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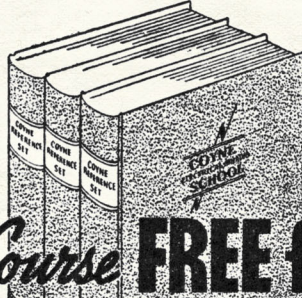
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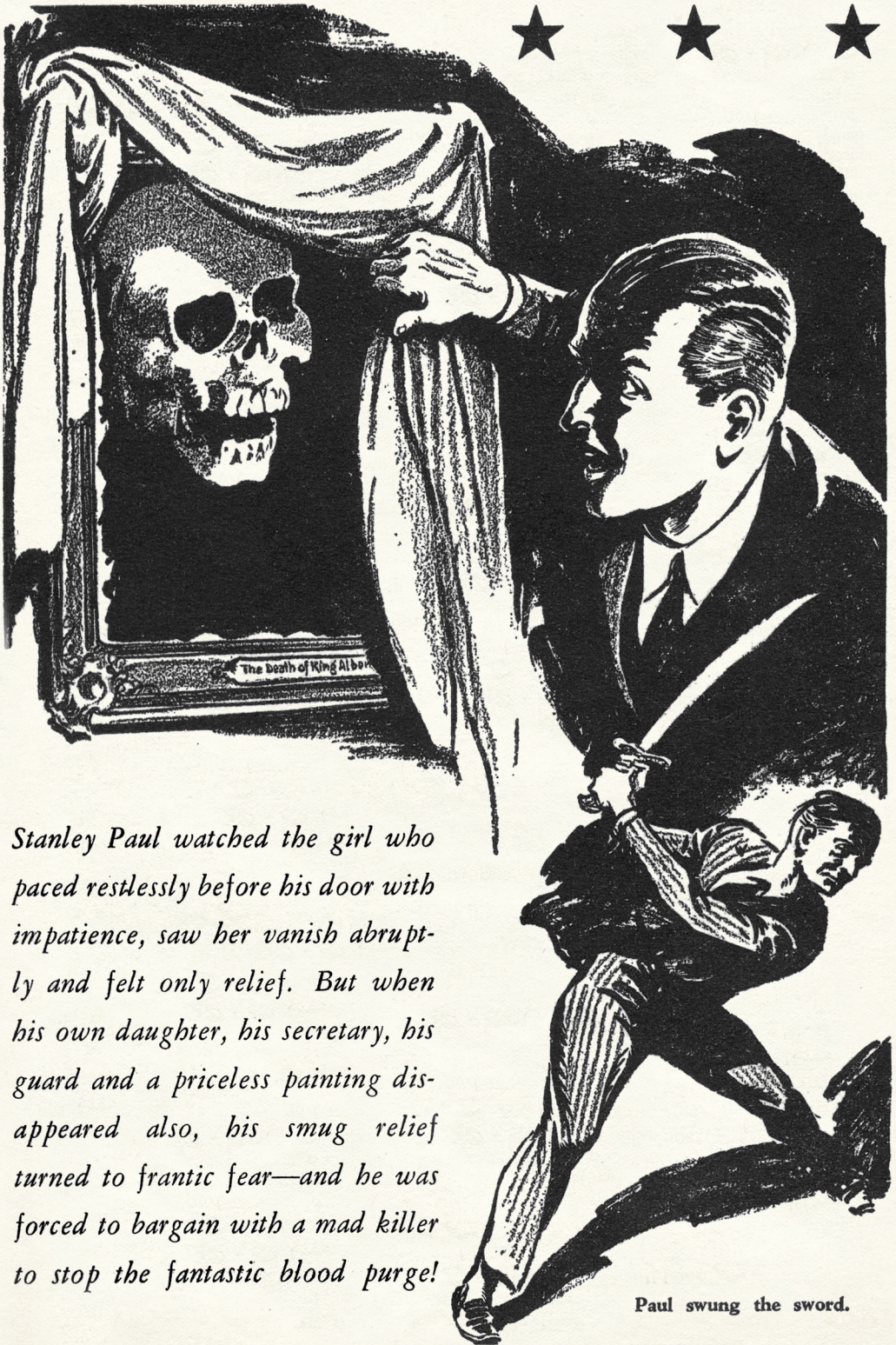
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Stanley Paul watched the girl who paced restlessly before his door with impatience, saw her vanish abruptly and felt only relief. But when his own daughter, his secretary, his guard and a priceless painting disappeared also, his smug relief turned to frantic fear—and he was forced to bargain with a mad killer to stop the fantastic blood purge!

Paul swung the sword.

PORTRAIT OF MURDER



By FRANCIS K. ALLAN

CHAPTER ONE

Death Called Twice

IT WAS after midnight. Stanley Paul heard the cathedral bell ring out the hour, clear and sharp on the cold December air. He heard the scratch of the bare oak limbs as they brushed the roof above his bedroom. He watched the shifting pattern of shadows made by the street-light shining through the window vines. He tried to sleep and he couldn't.

Instead, his mind kept returning to that grey and blue Cantonelli. Eyes closed, he saw it again, hanging on the wall of the east hall, the slanting rays of the afternoon sun lingering on it, bringing out the deep colors. Yes, something had been wrong with that painting. A tone, a hue that the sun had reflected, had not been right. There was some slight wrong there that Paul could not define.

He tossed irritably in his bed. His fingers sought a cigarette from the side-table. Then a second irritant seeped into his consciousness.

From the concrete walk outside, there came a deliberately spaced tapping. Somebody was walking up and down. Again and again, below his window.

"Damn!" He threw back the covers and pressed his hawk-like nose against the cold window-pane, peered down.

In the grey-yellow street-light he saw her, a girl, walking back and forth. A slender girl, her high heels tapped their



A Chilling Mystery Novel

ceaseless rhythm. Her bare gold hair was silvery in the light. Her hands were thrust deep into the pockets of a light coat. Her hair flicked in the gusts of wind. She lifted a hand to glance at her wrist watch and he saw the blue-white flash of a ring on her finger.

Five steps she walked one way, paused, turned. Five steps back she walked, then paused again. Now her face was toward the light. A young face it was, a pretty face. A face that was strangely drawn and afraid! Paul could see her clearly as she stared toward the other corner. And then she turned, began again her pacing before his door.

"Young fool!" he snapped. Stanley Paul was a man of short patience. In his fifty years, he had allowed few things to intrude on his intellectual serenity. Some people called him a crank; others, as sincerely, classified him as a fool. In all justice, Paul regarded himself as a rather brilliant man.

Suddenly his nose pressed harder on the pane. The girl had stopped pacing. Tensely she was waiting. And from the far corner the twin-arcs of car lights swung and straightened, cut across the street, and came to a stop beside the girl. With a click the door opened. A muffled voice came in snatches up to Paul:

". . . too late tonight. Come tomorrow and. . ."

"No! I want to find out tonight!" the girl countered hotly. Her voice was clear. The voice in the car grew louder, angry:

"You're being an idiot! There's nothing the matter with—"

"I'm not! I—I almost think that—I'm afraid to think!"

Angrily Paul slammed up his window. "Go away! I'm trying to sleep!"

A man's head protruded from the car. Arms closed roughly about the girl. A broken scream started from her lips. It was muffled as she disappeared into the car's dark interior. The door slammed.

The motor roared harshly. With a whine of tires, the car sped away and turned the corner. The walk, the night was suddenly empty and still.

Slowly Paul lowered the window, returned to his bed.

"Peculiar! Peculiar, indeed! An absurd thing, to happen at midnight!" But as he relaxed in bed, his mind returned to the problem that had occupied it before. He thought: "I'll check on that Cantonelli tomorrow, the first thing. . ."

* * *

IN HIS never-varying schedule, Stanley Paul rose at eight the next morning, shaved and dressed in his pin-striped grey suit and dark tie. When he descended to the breakfast room, his daughter Sandra was unfolding the paper. He kissed her absentmindedly, sat down and began to eat quickly.

"You seem annoyed about something," she said after a time. He looked up to find her brown eyes regarding him curiously. There was a half-smile on her lips. "Cigars disagreeing with you again?"

"No, no," he said shortly. "I just keep thinking—" He stopped. "Nothing. What are you doing today? You're not dressed for town."

"Unexpected half-holiday," she announced brightly. "They called just now and told me not to come until noon."

His mind wandered off again. He began to stare vacantly at the wall. Abruptly he pushed back his chair. "Got to go," he said.

He settled himself behind his desk in the left wing of the Cosmopolitan Museum and pressed a bell. Almost immediately a door opened and a frail young man looked in.

"Yes, sir?" the young man said.

"Get the key to the East Hall, Tooker, please."

A minute later the man returned. Stan-

ley Paul took the key, thanked him and strode down the chill halls of the cavernous museum, to the massive door of the East Hall. Down the long exhibit room he went, with Tooker prancing nervously at his heels, past perhaps fifty sheet-covered panels. He stopped before a numbered panel, pulled away the covering.

His cigar jerked as his teeth clenched on it. His grey eyes flared wide.

"Gone! The Cantonelli is gone!" He turned on Tooker. "Who's been in here? Who has a key? Who was the guard last night? Get him! Bring him to my office at once! Hurry!"

The sweating little assistant trotted frantically away. Paul stared at the blank wall-space, then stomped back to his office. Twenty minutes later Tooker entered, mopped his face, and stammered:

"It was McCoy, sir. The guard, I mean. Nobody knows where he is." Tooker swallowed. "I—I called his house. His wife says he didn't come home this morning. Then, I called Morgan—he's the guard that McCoy relieved at ten o'clock last night. He said McCoy came on time, seemed all right—"

"What about the man who relieved McCoy?" Paul said.

"That's Shaw, sir. I've talked to him. He came at six, and couldn't find McCoy anywhere. The building was locked. Everything seemed in order, Shaw said. Only—McCoy was missing."

"A thief! One of my men turns thief! Steals a priceless masterpiece! Don't stand there! Find McCoy! Find him!" He choked and grasped his telephone. He dialed.

"Police Headquarters? Give me someone in authority! . . . Hello? . . . Who? . . . No, it is not a good morning, Captain Waters. This is Stanley Paul, Director of the Cosmopolitan Museum of Art. I have just uncovered the theft of a painting. . . . Certainly it's a valuable painting! Worth a hundred thousand dollars! Can. . . .

Yes, I'll wait!" He slammed down the receiver, then buzzed for Tooker again.

"Find out who owns that painting. It was a loan to the Guild Exhibit. I'll have to inform them," he said sourly.

AT eleven o'clock Captain Waters walked in. He was a slight man, round-faced, round-eyed, and wore an expression of child-like surprise. His suit was worn and shiny, his hat limp and shapeless. He shook hands with the museum director and sat down.

Stanley Paul said: "A valuable painting has been removed from an exhibit room downstairs. The guard who was on duty last night is missing. His name is Homer McCoy. He's a thick-set, blond man, around forty. He should be easy to locate. But the painting must be recovered undamaged!" He tapped the desk impatiently. "When can I expect action?"

There was a twinkle in Waters' baby-blue eyes. "In fact, we've located your Mr. Homer McCoy already."

"You have him!" Paul gasped. "Excellent!"

"In the morgue."

"The morgue! You mean he's dead?"

"He was murdered," Waters said flatly.

Paul's mouth opened, but no words came forth.

"At three o'clock this morning," Waters continued, "a cop on the river beat found a body in the waste-flat behind the City Concrete Company. There was a forty-five slug in the back of the head. All identification had been removed from the body. All," he modified, "except the name McCoy, which was tattooed on the left arm. The body answers your description."

"What about the painting?" Paul said.

"We haven't found that. Suppose you give me the details."

Paul picked up the notation that

Tooker had brought. "It was an Eighteenth Century painting by the Italian master, Raphael Cantonelli, titled 'The Death Of King Alberno.' The painting was shown once before, while in the collection of Colonel Reynolds. It was loaned to the Guild Exhibit by Reynolds' niece, a Miss Millicent Reynolds. I don't know Miss—"

"Wait." Waters' baby eyes were narrowed. "Millicent Reynolds—M. R. . . ." he murmured. He looked at Paul. "I think I've come to the right place."

"For what?" Paul snapped frowning.

"The morgue has two guests this morning—McCoy and a young lady. The girl also was completely stripped of identification. All except a ring that wouldn't come off because of a swollen finger. We had to cut the ring off her finger. Inside the band were the initials: M. R."

"You mean you think—My, God!" Paul breathed.

Waters nodded. "M.R. was murdered last night by a forty-five bullet in the back of her head. Her body was found a half mile from McCoy's."

Paul collapsed against the chair, cried: "Tooker! Bring me my aspirin!"

An uneasy stenographer opened the door. "Tooker—"

Paul broke in: "Where the Hell is he?"

"I—I think he got sick, sir. He left in a great hurry. I don't know where he went. . . ."

The two men looked at each other. Waters reached for the phone.

CHAPTER TWO

The Girl Again

WATERS listened to Paul's brief description of Tooker, then relayed it to headquarters over the telephone. He ordered a car sent to the museum. Twenty minutes later two policemen arrived.

"Close up the East Hall and stay there," Waters ordered them. "Give the building a going-over." He turned to Paul: "You're coming to the morgue with me?"

Paul nodded, followed the detective. "McCoy was a tool, probably," he said, in the car. "Possibly he was paid to steal the picture, then killed to shut his mouth."

"And the girl?" Waters seemed amused at Paul's detective work. "Where does she fit in?"

Paul snapped, "Maybe it isn't Miss Reynolds at all."

Waters drove into the court behind the Criminal Office Building and got out. Paul followed him through white-tiled halls to the basement and the morgue. Waters moved to a sheet-covered slab and pulled back the covering.

"Is this McCoy?"

Paul said, "Yes, that's McCoy."

"Here is the girl." He moved to a second slab and removed the covering. Paul stared, licked suddenly dry lips.

"You've seen her before," Waters snapped abruptly. "Where? Is it Miss Reynolds?"

"You said there was a ring," Paul said huskily. "May I see it?"

Waters was gone less than a minute.

"Hold it over there in the corner of the room, under that light," Paul directed. The captain did as he asked. From the sapphire stone, gleams of blue-whiteness sparkled sharply. Paul looked down at the girl again.

He said bluntly, "I saw this girl last night. I'm positive. It was around midnight. She was pacing up and down before my front door. Someone drove up in a car—a man. He pulled her into the car and drove away."

"You didn't see the man?" Paul shook his head. Waters frowned. "What kind of car? What was the car's number?"

"Why should I have noticed the number? I had no idea murder was in the

making. I would say the car was about a 1941 model; a heavy coupe—an eight cylinder job, I'd say."

Waters sighed and rubbed his cheek with his hand. The stubble made a grating sound. Absently he studied the girl's hand.

"That's what kept the killer from getting her ring," he observed. The four fingers of the left hand were badly scratched, and the wounds had been treated with iodine." The scratches made the fingers swell." Waters paused. "But if robbery was the motive, the killer would have cut the band, or forced it from her finger. It's a valuable ring." He turned toward the door. "Let's go upstairs."

Half-way up the stairs, they passed two men coming down. One, a detective, nodded to Waters. The other, a spare-boned young man, was speaking in a quick, soft voice.

"... absolutely sure you are in error. She was never in trouble, never! No one would wish to kill her. I was simply afraid of an accident. It must have been an accident. I assure you that Miss Reynolds has no enemies. . . ."

"That man knows her!" Paul said to Waters. "Get him and—"

"Later." Waters continued up the stairs. He spoke to a policeman at a desk: "When Richards comes up, ask him to bring the man with him into my office."

Paul followed Waters into his office.

There was a battered desk, two rude chairs, a telephone, a window, and a tin ash-tray. Waters sank down behind the desk and picked at his pipe with a match.

"You discovered the loss of the picture just this morning?" he asked.

"I did. Ten or fifteen minutes after getting to my office."

"Do you make a habit of checking the pictures each morning?"

"No, I—" Paul stopped and glared at the sharp eyes that stared at him. "No," he said more evenly. "This morning I

went directly to the place where the missing picture had been hanging because I wanted to check something. I'd remembered some color detail about it, the night before, that bothered me."

"And now I'm curious, Mr. Paul." The captain smiled.

"Well, masterpieces like a Cantonelli don't stray into exhibits often. I was amazed to find it there. Its value alone was more than the total of all other pictures in the East Hall. To the best of my usually good knowledge, there are only three genuine Cantonellis in this country—"

Waters said, "But, tell me what made you curious."

PAUL flushed and swallowed angrily. He was not used to being interrupted or prompted.

"Very well," he snapped. "It was a detail of the coloration. I saw this painting about ten years ago, when Colonel Reynolds loaned it for an International Exhibit in New York. At that time I was deeply impressed with the depth in Cantonelli's colors. The picture shows the bedroom of the dying King, Alberno, the dying monarch on the bed. When I first saw the painting, I was impressed by the unbelievably deep and rich greys and blues. Yesterday, the colors seemed flat, thin and lifeless."

"In other words, you're suggesting that the stolen painting is a fraud?"

"I am not! I—I'm not going that far," Paul corrected. "I was simply explaining why I went to look at it again this morning."

"Why would anyone place a fake masterpiece on exhibit?"

"I repeat, young man, I did not say—"

"You're too annoyed to say." Waters grinned. "And why would anyone steal a fake masterpiece, commit two murders to get it?" He leaned back and frowned. "Where is this Colonel Reynolds now?"

"Reynolds," Paul snapped. "Died three years ago."

The door opened and Detective Richards entered with the soft-voiced, spare-boned young man.

"Captain Waters, this is Harmon Grant. Mr. Grant has identified the body as that of Miss Millicent Reynolds, the girl he was going to marry."

Grant stood in the center of the room. His eyes were blank and black. His mouth was lax with shock. His face was bony and long, as were his hands. There was a suggestion of awkward power and strength about him.

"I—I saw her last night. Eleven o'clock I saw her and she was alive," he said with vacant fixity.

Where did she go after eleven o'clock?" Waters asked quietly.

"I don't—don't know." Grant seemed to shake himself alert, turned to Waters. "I don't know where she went," he said again. "She came to my apartment, I guess it was about ten. She was nervous. She walked up and down the room, twisting her handkerchief. She wouldn't tell me what was wrong, just that she felt tired and nervous. She left as abruptly as she had come. I wanted to go with her, but she refused to let me. She acted as though she was meeting somebody and didn't want me to know!"

Paul and Waters looked at each other. Waters said:

"And so she left your place at eleven. Alone?"

Harmon Grant nodded. "I—I was worried about her so I went by her uncle's house, where she was staying. She wasn't there. I waited there until after three. She didn't come. This morning when I couldn't find her, I called the police. They—they told me there was someone here. . . ." He gestured.

"She was staying in the old Reynolds' house?" Paul said.

"Yes. She was trying to dispose of

some of the things, those we couldn't use when we—" He stopped. "The house was hers," he said. "Her uncle gave it to her. She just got to town last week."

"Where did she come from?"

"St. Louis. She had a job there. Last week she resigned and came here so—so we could be married. I'm a lawyer here."

"What kind of car do you have, Grant?" Paul asked suddenly.

"Car?" The man blinked. "I don't have any car."

"How long have you known Miss—" Waters stopped as the telephone rang. He answered, listened to a voice on the other end of the wire. He snapped: "Wait there. I'll be right down." He cradled the receiver.

"Leave your home and business address with Richards," he ordered Harmon Grant. "If you wish you can then take care of Miss Reynolds."

"I want to, please!" the man said quietly. He and the detective left the room. Paul looked at Waters.

"They've found Vernon Tooker," the captain said. "He's dead. Apparently leaped from the Empire Tower Building. There's a suicide note in his pocket."

Paul shook his head. "I—I wouldn't have believed it! I *don't* believe it!"

CHAPTER THREE

Blind Intrigue

STANLEY PAUL rose silently, moved around the desk, and lifted Waters' telephone. He called his own office. The crisp voice of Miss Evans answered.

"I want," Paul ordered softly, "you to get the guest-register of the Guild Exhibit opening. See if Laurin Azure visited the East Hall. I'll hold the line." . . . Five minutes passed.

"Yes, sir," Miss Evans reported. "Mr. Azure is registered."

"And his offices are in the Empire

Tower, aren't they? Please check that."
 "Just one moment." The pages of a book rattled. "Yes, Mr. Paul. . . . Here it is: L. T. Azure, Art Broker, 1525 Empire Tower." Miss Evans hesitated a moment, then added: "I don't want to annoy you, sir, but a call came through from your house a few minutes ago. The maid is trying to reach you. She said that it was important."

"Thanks, I'll call there." Paul hung up, then dialed his home number. Maude's voice answered. "What's the matter there?" he snapped impatiently.

"It's Miss Paul! She's gone! And I don't know where she went! And they been calling, trying to get her, suh!"

"Who's been calling?"

"Her boss down at the office. He's saying why don't she come to work! And I thought she was at work! She ain't in her room, and things is all in a mess, and I'm scared, Mista Paul!"

"Don't be absurd! She was given the morning off; I heard her say so. Her boss probably forgot. She probably went for a walk."

"Her boss don't say nothing about no morning off!" Maude interrupted. "And her room don't look like she took no walk. Things is all tore up, and there's something that sure do look like blood on that floor in there!"

"Blood!" Paul rasped. "On her floor! When did—did you see her this morning?"

"No, suh. Her door was closed when I come in. I went right out to take your suits to the cleaner like you phoned me to do. When I came back—"

"Suits to the cleaner! Like I phoned you!" Paul stared blankly at the receiver. Then he shouted: "Maude! Stay there! I'm coming right home!"

Fifteen minutes later Stanley Paul slammed his front door behind him and

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3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves



4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

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strode through the house. A wide-eyed and dusky-colored Maude met him in the hall. "I sure don't find her, suh!"

Paul pushed past her, climbed the stairs, and threw open the door of Sandra's bedroom. On the rug lay the shattered bits of a mirror. On the dressing-table a bottle of perfume was overturned, and its scent was heavy in the room. Powder was scattered from an upset box. The chair before the dresser was overturned. And on the cream-colored rug beside the chair was a stain, dark and moist. It was blood!

He sat down abruptly, his face suddenly white. He blinked at Maude. "You say her office called?"

"Yes, suh. Her boss called and said why don't she come to work, and I said she wasn't here, and all he said was just Damn!"

"But I heard her say that—" Abruptly he stopped. Slowly he crossed the room to Sandra's writing desk. There against the pen-holder was propped a white envelope, addressed to Stanley Paul.

QUICKLY he slit the flap and unfolded the single sheet within the envelope. The note was neatly typewritten on good bond paper:

Mr. Paul:—

I regret the conditions that make it impossible for me to talk with you personally, but for the present our dealings must be anonymous. Naturally, you are worried about your daughter. Let me assure you that she will be well-treated and unharmed if my instructions of the future are followed. You will hear from me by telephone at two o'clock this afternoon, at your house. I urge you to be alone. For your own good, and the good of your daughter, I advise you to be discreet with the police in this matter. And last, if you should doubt my seriousness, look at the other enclosure in this envelope. You should realize where it came from. You should then realize who I am . . .

Paul picked up the envelope, shook it. Into his palm fell a rough white stone. He stared at it a moment.

"A slag of concrete!" he breathed. "I should realize. . . ." Suddenly he remembered the concrete waste-flat where the body of McCoy had been found. It was McCoy's murderer who took Sandra! His dazed eyes focused on the bloodstain on the floor. Sandra's blood!

"Maude," he said slowly. "This—this is a note from Sandra. She will be back in a few days. She—nothing must be said, nobody is to know she has gone away. No one must know! Is that clear?"

"I guess so, suh." Maude blinked suspiciously, shrugged, and shuffled out. Paul closed the door. Alone, he read the note again. Then his eyes roamed slowly over the room.

"You never know how much you care, until. . ." he whispered slowly. Suddenly, he threw the note on the floor, stood up. Why was she taken? What is behind it? He began to pace feverishly. For the first time in his life, Stanley Paul felt helpless.

At noon Paul entered the richly-carpeted office of Laurin Azure, art broker. A silvery chime announced his arrival. The tall, conservatively dressed man peered at Paul through bifocal glasses, rose and extended a cold hand.

"Ah, Mr. Paul! Do sit down," he said.

"I understand you visited the Guild Exhibit yesterday." Paul strove to keep his tone casual. Azure nodded.

"I visit even the small shows. Always hoping, you know, that I may find something of value."

"See anything that interested you yesterday?"

"I have never viewed such a dull group of paintings," Azure said flatly.

Paul nodded, moved to the draped windows and looked down to the concrete court fifteen floors below.

"A strange thing happened," he murmured. "Perhaps you've heard that my assistant committed suicide by leaping from this building this morning? You

remember Vernon Tooker, don't you?"

"Tooker? The nervous little chap? So that was what all the confusion was about? Indeed I do remember him! That's too bad!"

Paul touched the heavy lock on the window. It released with silent ease, swung open. He turned to face Laurin Azure.

"It's a terrible day for me. Tooker commits suicide. One of my museum guards was murdered last night. And a priceless Cantonelli was stolen from the East Hall."

"A *what* was stolen?" Azure repeated flatly.

"A Cantonelli—The Death Of King Alberno. You saw it in the Guild exhibit yesterday."

"No," Azure said, looking surprised. "Of course, I was in a hurry, but—a Cantonelli! You must be mistaken, Mr. Paul."

"No. I wish I were." He looked at Azure. "Perhaps the painting will turn up. If it comes to you, I hope you'll let me know. Dealers are often offered stolen paintings, as you know." He looked more squarely at Azure. And Azure, I am not a rich man, by any means, but I will pay anything I have to—to straighten things out. Is that clear? Anything!"

The man's eyes narrowed. "Of course," he said gently. "I will remember that, Mr. Paul, if someone should try to sell me the painting."

Paul moved toward the door. As he went out he saw Azure in the reception room mirror, still watching him, a heavy frown on his thin cold face.

IN THE lobby he entered a telephone booth and closed the door. He waited.

Five minutes later an elevator emptied its crowds into the lobby. The tall figure of Azure hurried out the front door. When Paul reached the exit, Azure was getting into a cab. Paul gestured to

a second cab that came along shortly.

"Follow the taxi ahead," he ordered.

Azure's taxi drove through the main business district, turned West and entered the narrow streets of the old commercial district. Traffic thinned to a few horse-drawn produce wagons, an occasional street-car. There were blocks of many vacant buildings, erratically interspersed with chili-cafes, cheap hotels, and second-hand stores with fire-sale banners. Above the stores were drab looking apartments.

At last Azure's cab drew to the curb in the middle of a block. Paul ordered his driver to stop. He watched as the thin figure left the cab and hurried into a doorway. Then he quickly followed. . . .

It was a dirty old building. One half of the ground floor was vacant. The other half contained a used-furniture store. Heavy old tables and chairs huddled on the sidewalk in front of the furniture store.

Paul walked slowly past the building. From the doorway that Azure had entered, a slump-shouldered man emerged. He wore dark brown glasses, a tattered shawl about his shoulders. In his hands was a violin and bow. His leathery face shone in the pale sunlight. He lifted the violin to his chin and the sobbing tones of Stormy Weather filled the air.

Paul's steps slowed as he passed the furniture store.

"I shouldn't have come!" he thought. "It's a crazy idea! And if I am guessing right, and he sees me—" He glanced back; his cab was gone, the street deserted.

He set his jaw and huddled in his coat. As he passed the doorway, he looked into the building. There was a bare hall with steps rising at the back. He could see nothing else.

The strident notes of the violin rasped against his ears as the violinist came along behind him. The music was faintly annoy-

ing. Paul turned, looked back. The man was playing as he walked. His body swayed in an ominous rhythm. The sun glinted blankly off the brown glasses. Paul began to walk faster. And the blind violinist seemed suddenly to quicken his pace also!

As he turned the corner, Paul saw a small cafe. Quickly he entered and sat down on a stool. A half-minute later the music broke around the corner. Past the window came the thick and swaying figure. In front of the cafe, the man stopped, lowered his violin. In slow-motion he began to revolve, focusing his fixed eyes in the deliberate circle. He stopped, facing the cafe. And the brown lens were now focused squarely on Paul!

He was positive now that the 'blind' violinist could see!

Up went the violin. The music wailed triumphantly again and the man shuffled away.

"Move back to the back booth," a voice ordered.

Paul jerked around, stared up at the round face of Waters. A faltering sigh broke from his lips. Silently he obeyed.

"What did Azure have to say?" Waters asked as they sat down in the booth.

"You know I went to his office?"

"Listen," the detective said with weary patience, "it's my business to know all the crooks in this town, big or little. I know Azure's an art fence. I haven't pinned him yet, but this might be the chance. I know that murder's not your game, and art's not mine. If we get together, we might get the answers. Now, what did he say?"

PAUL said, "He went to the Exhibit yesterday. He must have seen the Cantonelli but he claims he didn't notice it. If he did, he would have realized its value."

"You think he saw it, bribed Tooker to let him into the place last night, then

killed the guard and stole the painting? Perhaps Tooker didn't know it was to be murder and when he learned it was, he became afraid, made the mistake of running to Azure. His 'suicide' was the result. . . ."

"But then, why was Millicent Reynolds murdered? There was no reason for him to kill her."

"She got wind of something. If not, why was she pacing the street at midnight? Why did she act so strangely with Harmon Grant? And, I found that Tooker owned a large coupe. The papers for it were in his bill-fold when we picked up his body this morning. But we haven't found the coupé."

Paul frowned. "Remember I mentioned the peculiar flatness of the colors in the Contonelli painting? I think that painting was a fraud. I think Azure knew it was a fraud when he saw it yesterday."

"Why would anyone murder and steal for a fake masterpiece? I want a look at that old Reynolds house," he decided abruptly. He rose and moved to the telephone booth. He dialed Headquarters.

"Send a couple of plainclothes men to the Four-Hundred block of Rice Street. There's an apartment-job there, next-door to a used furniture store. Give the boys the dope on Laurin Azure; he's inside. I want him followed when he leaves. There's a blind street violinist around there too, only he's not blind. Keep him covered. Let anybody in the joint, but follow whoever comes out. Keep out of sight. That's all. I'll call back when. . . . What? . . . Yeah, put him on. . . ." There was a click as connections were changed.

"Hello? Grant? . . . This is Waters. . . . You what? . . . When? . . . What kind of a car? . . . Wait for me there. . . . At the Plaza Arms? . . . I'll be there!" He hung up and turned to Paul.

"The elevator boy at Grant's place has just brought him an envelope with some car keys inside. There's an unidentified

Packard coupé parked around the corner from his place, and Miss Reynolds' purse was inside on the front seat."

Stanley Paul glanced at his watch. It was twenty until two. . . .

"I've got an appointment at home at two," he said. He shifted under Waters' steady gaze. "Something important. I'll not be able to go with you."

"You look nervous," Waters said gently. "Why?"

"I'm not. I mean—this whole affair. . . ."

Waters reached out and caught his arm. "Mr. Paul," he said slowly, "I

Sandra's room. He called her name, and his voice echoed hollowly in the silence.

Maude had cleaned the powder and perfume from the dresser. The blood-stain was still on the rug. He closed his eyes, sat down with weary heaviness in the chair beside the bed, tried to visualize Sandra sitting opposite him. He opened his eyes. The room was there, naked and real and empty.

The telephone rang, a long, shrill blast that shattered the silence with startling suddenness.

One long instant he stared at it, black and squat on the bedside-table. It rang

TELL IT TO THE MARINES—

That every working man and woman in the U. S. is backing up their fight with 10% this year!

think I want you to stay with me for a while."

"No! I can't! I mean, I—I must go home! I have an appointment—business."

Waters released him. You're lying to me about something. You're not telling the truth, Paul. Listen: so far you look innocent. But things can change damn quick! I'll see you again before long. Get your appointments cancelled, because I'll be wanting all of your time until this case is solved." He nodded curtly, turned away.

* * *

STANLEY PAUL entered his house and closed the door. He leaned against the door, panting, wet with nervous perspiration. The silence indicated an empty house. He looked at his watch, saw that it was five minutes until two.

Slowly he tip-toed up the stairs. With a turn of his wrist, he opened the door of

again. He picked up the receiver.

"Stanley Paul speaking. . . ."

"Hello, Mr. Paul," a man's quiet voice said. "I am going to ask you to listen very carefully, to obey the ord—"

"My daughter! Is Sandra all right?" Paul broke in.

"She is quite all right. Now, do not interrupt me. It is two o'clock. You are to go at once to Cosmopolitan Museum, to the vault beneath the West Wing. There, as you know, are two Chalming Vases of the Fourteenth Century—the only Chalmings in this country. Get those vases, wrap them carefully, put them in a bag. Go to the corner of Marnett Street and 2nd Avenue, at three o'clock. Give the man who meets you there the brief case. And do not follow him, or have him followed if you care what happens to your daughter!"

"But—I—I can't do that! Those vases are priceless! They aren't mine! They belong to the Museum!"

"You seem to forget, Mr. Paul, that I have control over the destiny of your daughter. Get the vases. Give them to my man. I will know if the police are informed. It would not be wise—"

"But, I *can't* do that! I'll do—pay anything I have myself! Listen, I have *some* money! I'll bring you cash! I'll give you all I can raise—"

"You will bring the vases." The voice was very calm. "At three."

"But listen . . ."

The line clicked, then hummed vacantly. Slowly Paul set down the receiver. His eyes fastened on the picture of Sandra, on the soft smiling tilt of her lips, the loose waves of her hair. For a long time he looked at her.

"Oh, God!" He said very softly. "I'd do anything to save her! I'm afraid it won't work—but I've got to try!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Empty House

THREE o'clock. The tide of hurrying humanity ebbed and flowed at the intersection of busy Marnett Street and Second avenue. A biting wind whipped along the grey streets as Paul stood, huddled within his coat and gripping the small suitcase as the scores of people hurried past him.

"Mr. Paul!" an anxious whisper came to his ears. He turned.

"Grant!" he exclaimed. "You!"

"Don't! Please, not out loud!" The man's bony face was white and stark. His eyes roamed nervously about the crowd. "I'm supposed to get something from you. Let me have it!"

"What is this? What are you doing, mixed up in this—"

"For God's sake, don't! I'm not supposed to talk! If I don't do what they say . . ." His finger jerked slightly. Paul shifted his eyes. Fifty feet away, leaning against a building, stood the man with

the brown glasses. Now his shawl was gone, and he no longer carried a violin in his ham-like hands. Hands in his pockets, he was watching, waiting . . .

"I don't know what it is," Grant whispered savagely as he took the suitcase. "They came—he came to my apartment. He shot me." Grant slipped back his sleeve. Just above his wrist, was a raw and ragged flesh wound. "He'll kill me, he says, if I don't—don't do whatever it is!"

"Have you seen my daughter?" Paul whispered.

"There's a girl at his place—I don't know where the place was . . . She's tied up and gagged, but she's alive. I—I've got to go now," he said thickly.

"But, can't you tell me something? Who is the man behind this? Who—"

Grant said hurriedly, "I'm going to throw away my pack of cigarettes. Get them after I'm gone."

Grant turned and hurried away. Slowly the big man followed him.

As Grant reached the far curb, he lit a cigarette and threw away the pack. He hurried on, and the big man followed. A minute later Paul's fingers seized on the crumpled container. He dug out a scrap of paper. There were the penciled lines:

I don't know his name, but he is tall and thin and wears glasses. He tells the big man what to do. We are kept somewhere in an old building in a basement. But please don't try to find us. We will die if you do!

"Laurin Azure!" Paul breathed. "It has to be!" He twisted the note in his nervous fingers. "But what can I do? If I tell the police, Azure will kill her—kill them both! Yet I can't just do nothing!"

* * *

It was three-thirty, a half hour later, when he climbed the steps to his own house. He opened the door and entered.

Waters was sitting there, waiting for him.

"All your appointments over?" Waters asked. He was sitting in the half-shadows on the couch, smoking his pipe.

Paul swallowed. "Yes. They're over. But, if you'll excuse me—I don't feel well. . . ."

"Neither do I," came the sarcastic rejoinder. "Grant's apartment was empty. The purse was empty and ripped apart. The Packard is missing. And there's blood on the kitchen floor. Nobody knows where Grant is."

"Yes," Paul murmured abstractedly.

"Yes, what?" Waters snapped. Paul blinked, said:

"I don't know. Leave me alone, please. I'm tired, worried. I don't know what to do."

"Who was your engagement with?"

"Please! I can't tell you," Paul said miserably.

Waters sighed. "I've been talking to your maid."

"Oh!" Paul's voice was flat and tired.

"You damned fools who won't talk!" the detective suddenly exploded. "You make a hell of a lot of trouble for the police. If you've got any dope, give it to me! If there's something wrong, you can't whip it alone! You'll need us to find your daughter, don't you see that? Who has her? Have they contacted you?"

"I don't know where she is! I don't—I can't answer those questions!" Paul choked. "Maybe I'm wrong! I don't know . . . I can't do anything else! I—I can't kill her!"

Waters looked at him in silence. Finally he rose and crammed the pipe into his pocket. "Let's go to the Reynolds house," he said.

He led the way to his car, drove in tight-lipped silence for a dozen blocks. Paul stared ahead at the unfolding maze of traffic.

"The killer has decided that Millicent

Reynolds told Grant something when she saw him last night," Waters said finally. "So Grant is on the murder list. But what could she have told him? Nothing, he said. Yet she came to your house at midnight, then paced in front as though she were waiting for someone. That someone came, kidnapped her, killed her. Why? To steal a painting that you say was a fake? Hell, no! There's something else, something we haven't touched yet. And you won't talk. . . ."

Paul's face was white but he kept his silence. . . .

Colonel Reynolds house on Circle Drive was a weathered structure of roughened red brick. It set less than ten feet from the street. Circle Drive was a curving half-moon that followed the course of a small creek. Between the street and the creek were set the row of old houses. Where the creek-bed had eaten inward, the lots were shortened, so that the rear of the houses were stilted on pier-like enforcements that rose from the sluggy water of the stream.

The smell of dust greeted Waters and Paul as they entered the front hall. To the right and the left, old fashioned sliding doors were open; there was a living-room to the left, filled with heavy, dark pieces of furniture. To the right was a dark-paneled study. This seemed to have become the store-room of the house's miscellany. Tiers of dust-covered books were stacked against the walls. An old horn-speaker phonograph sat in one corner. A massive desk and chair were shoved against another wall. Two gilded chandeliers lay atop a broken chest-of-drawers. A rolled rug and a set of rolled maps stood to the side of a second closed door. The windows were paper-covered.

As Waters and Paul looked about, the monotonous lap-slap of the creek water came to them. Paul wrinkled his nose at the dust smell.

"What are you looking for?" he said.

Waters shrugged. He wandered into the study. Paul poked his way down the hall to the back of the house. There was the kitchen, bare and stripped of its plumbing. He looked out the window, down to the green sluggish creek water.

He retraced his steps to the front of the house, peered up the ornate stairway, then began to climb. A narrow hallway divided the upper floor. On each side were three closed doors. One was a bathroom, one a vacant room. The third, at the front, still held a bed and dresser. On the bed were rumpled covers. On the floor were two empty suit-cases, women's cases. In the closet hung half-a-dozen dresses. On the dresser was powder, hair-pins, a few coins, and an open magazine: *The Brush And Crayon*.

PAUL looked closely at the magazine. It was open at the announcement of the Guild Exhibit. There was the invitation to members and non-members to make entries. . . .

"Find anything?" Waters' voice said from the doorway. Paul turned.

"No. Have you?" he said.

"You take a look and tell me." He led the way down the stairs and into the study. The second door was open now.

"What was this thing made for?" Waters touched a heavy, metal-bound flat crate. Paul bent down and peered.

"This is a custom-built case for the storage of pictures," he informed. "It's just about the size for—"

"Don't move it!" Waters snapped sharply. "It's empty. I've already looked. And don't touch that damned clasp!" He pulled Paul away. "That's dried blood. Probably Millicent Reynolds'. That's where she cut her fingers—getting the Cantonelli out of this crate."

Paul looked at the tiny room. It was fire-proofed. The inside of the door was metal-sheeted. The walls were lined with shelves, holding some vases of bronze

and silver. There was a stamp collection, some old ledgers, and three small Oriental rugs. A heavy lock on the door was shattered.

"Reynolds died, and his Cantonelli masterpiece was hidden in this place until the girl discovered it," Paul supplied slowly. "A masterpiece, simply gathering dust! The fools, utterly unaware of its priceless—"

"Shut up!" Waters whispered. His fingers locked on Paul's arm; his head tilted as he listened. Paul heard no sound for perhaps ten seconds. Then came a soft sucking sound. It came from the back, below the house.

Slow. Deliberate. Like heavy steps through a morass. The sound stopped.

"Back here! Get down, out of sight!" Waters ordered. He half-dragged Paul behind the chest-of-drawers. Moments passed, then came the whine and creak of a hinge. The faint cool wind from some newly-opened door stirred through the stale air. The door closed. The sucking sound came again.

Down the hall came the slow, soggy steps, the sound of deep tense breathing. Then a man appeared in the doorway.

The blind man! The thick brown glasses were still on his eyes. His violin was gone. His shawl was gone. His heavy shoulders were hunched forward. A mist of sweat filmed his leathery forehead. His pants-legs were wet and muddy; his shoes were soggy. Obviously, he had come through the creek, up through the basement.

He stood still, while his head stiffly revolved, the brown glasses searching. Then he shuffled to the stairs. From an inner pocket he took an envelope as he began to climb. Paul and Waters listened as his steps passed along the upper hall and into a room—the girl's room, Paul decided. There they stopped. At last they began to return.

Waters' fingers tightened on Paul. He

leaned close, said in a low, tight whisper: "Stay where you are. Keep still."

Silently he rose, tip-toed around the wall. He lifted a heavy bronze vase, circled until he stood just within the study at the hall-door. He balanced his grip on the vase.

The wet soggy shoes came clumping nearer. The figure appeared. Waters moved quickly. His arms went up, fell. The bronze vase gleamed, then crashed into the back of the thick head. There was a sodden thud, a thick choked breath. Paul waited for the man to fall. Waters waited.

With hypnotic deliberation, the figure turned. The brown glasses fixed on Waters. The wet lips twisted. A guttural sob came from the throat. Then the arms went up.

WATERS shifted and swung again with the vase. The blow crashed into the man's shoulder. Then the arms began to close. Waters stumbled backward. He half-tripped against a rolled rug, caught himself, and kept retreating, balancing the vase, seeking another opening.

The animal-like figure shuffled forward, relentless and stolid. The throat sent out small wordless sounds. Sweat drained off the leather skin. The arms stayed up, two suspended claws, narrowing on their prey.

Waters reached a corner. The huge phonograph blocked one way; the man came in from the other. Paul could see the tenseness in Waters' face. Saw his lips move and knew that Waters was cursing silently.

The arms reached out and the vase hurtled from Waters' hand. Full into the thick face it smashed. The glasses shattered. The man's tractor-like advance was halted. Then, with a small whimpering sound, the man gripped Waters' shoulders.

Waters screamed, a raw sound, hot with pain and terror, and Paul heard the crunch of a breaking bone. Then Waters was lifted clear of the floor, his body helpless in the massive grip. And the whimpering sounds kept mewling from the blind man's throat!

"Get—out! Get help!" Waters wailed. Paul knew the words were meant for himself.

But he didn't want to leave Waters at the mercy of that mewling madman. His frantic eyes raced about the room, over the golden chandeliers, the rolled maps. Then he saw it. . . .

An old flat-sword, long and delicately carved at the hilt. The edge, he knew, was worthless. But the long blade looked as if it had the whip of a black-snake!

He threw a glance at the huge man, at Waters' now-limp body shaking in his clutch. Then Paul leaped across the room and grasped the sword in both hands. He started deliberately toward the man. The wet wide lips parted in child-like surprise as Paul swung the sword.

The blade, moving flat through the air, made a swishing sound. Then it smacked with the sharp report of a cracked whip across the bridge of the heavy nose. The huge man sobbed wildly, a sound more animal than human. And across the swarthy face a livid red welt leaped into being. The brown eyes fought to open but their stricken nerves merely twitched at the closed lids.

Paul whipped the blade again and again it cracked across the trembling face. Now the huge man screamed, and the sound was human and raw and wild. With a furious lunge he hurled the body of Waters to the floor.

As he lunged for Paul, the man plowed against the victrola, sent it crashing to the floor. His ox-like shoulder crashed into Paul and spilled him into the rolled maps. But the man did not stop. He fought his blinded way down the hall. There came

the slam of a door, then the splashing of water. The man was fleeing down the creek. . . .

Paul stumbled to his feet, glanced at the limp and bleeding Waters, then raced out the front door. At a drug-store a block away, he called Police Headquarters.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Killer

“HIS NOT dead?” Paul asked anxiously.

“No. He’s bad, but I believe he’ll be all right,” the Medical Examiner said. He watched the two white-coated figures carry the stretcher on which Waters lay, out of the room. Then he turned to Inspector Stroud, a gaunt and grey-faced man who had taken charge.

“Anything else, Inspector?” he said.

Stroud turned to Paul. “You were telling me about an envelope.”

“The big man was carrying one when he went upstairs. Waters and I heard him go along the hall, enter the bedroom that Miss Reynolds had been using. When he came down the stairs he did not carry the envelope—or I didn’t see it.”

“Let’s look at that bedroom.”

Paul followed Stroud up the stairs. The Inspector began at the bed, went on to the dresser, found nothing. Then he opened the closet. When he turned, an envelope was in his hand.

“He put it in her pocket.” He smiled faintly as he studied the address. “Somebody’s done a little erasing and re-typing.” Paul looked at the envelope, saw that it was addressed by typewriter to Harmon Grant at the Plaza Arms. Beneath the name and address, the paper was roughened as if by an eraser. Stroud shook out the letter, read it:

Grant:

Regarding the work I recently did for you, I feel it is necessary for me to revise my fee. Inasmuch as my cooperation is es-

sential to your forthcoming transaction, I think that an additional two thousand dollars is not at all unreasonable. I hope that you agree. To aid you, I might point out that any publicity can easily wreck your sale. Furthermore, my work will not stand a really careful examination. Should you force me to do so, I might bring certain suspicion to bear. So, I trust that I will hear from you very soon.

Queen.

“That’s about the painting! It *was* a fraud!” Paul cried.

“It’s blackmail!” Stroud snapped. “Plus some doublecross.” He pointed to the erasure beneath Grant’s name. “This letter was written to someone else. The name was changed and it was planted in the dead girl’s pocket. Somebody is setting-up Grant as the fall-guy!”

“Listen!” Paul said suddenly. “Queen is an artist who was hired to copy the original Cantonelli. He did, learned that a switch was planned. When he wrote this letter, he knew the sale hadn’t been made. He demanded two thousand or he’d throw a wrench in the deal. If we find Queen, we can make him talk!” He stopped. “In my office! The Registry of American Artists!”

“Here! Here it is!” Paul announced half an hour later.

Queen, Jerome Lister: Born 1904, Boston, Mass. Educated Public Schools of Mass., New York; then student in Paris and Genoa. Influenced by 18th Century Italian Masters and returned to U. S. to establish school in New Jersey. School failed (1936). Queen’s exhibits: none. Queen’s hangings: none.

Paul snapped, “The sort of painter who would copy all masters when he’d failed at everything else.”

“Where is Queen now?” Stroud asked.

“I can find out . . .” He pressed his buzzer. “Miss Evans, get me John Shimer, editor of *Brush and Crayon*.” A few minutes later the phone rang and Paul picked up the receiver.

“Shimer? This is Stanley Paul. I’m trying to locate a painter; perhaps you’ll

know him. The name is Jerome Lister Queen. He ran a school in New Jersey in —What?” Paul gasped. His lips went white as he said, “Where? . . . In the concrete . . . My God!” He hung up slowly and faced Stroud.

“Queen was found by your police, a month ago, shot to death. He was found in the dump-ground of the Concrete Company. The body of the museum guard was found there. . . .”

Stroud pulled the envelope from his pocket and looked at the post-mark.

“A month ago. And this letter was written and mailed on March the 8th. A month and three days ago!”

“Stroud, I . . .” Paul stopped. The Inspector waited. Paul’s fingers trembled as he lit a cigarette. “I—I’ve got to tell you something,” he went on. “Something I should have told Waters.”

“**Y**ES?” Stroud asked quietly. “I know who the killer is.” Paul faced Stroud squarely. “I’ve known for hours, now. But I didn’t tell Waters because the killer is holding my daughter. Her life is the most important thing in life to me. But there are other lives at stake now so it is imperative that I tell you what I know.” He mashed out the cigarette and wet his pale lips.

“Laurin Azure is the killer. He knew that Colonel Reynolds owned a Cantonel-

li. When Reynolds died and the Cantonelli didn’t appear among the items put up for sale, Azure probably realized that Miss Reynolds, the heir, was apparently not aware of the picture’s value. So Azure stole it, got Queen to copy it, and replaced it with the fraud. That was to fool Miss Reynolds if and when she made the discovery. The substitution was to avoid any sensational missing-masterpiece story until Azure could find a quiet sale for the picture.

“But apparently Miss Reynolds discovered the picture before Azure could make the sale. She did not realize the painting was a fraud and she put it in the Exhibit. Azure saw it and realized that some critic was bound to see that it was a fake. So Azure bribed Tooker to get him into the museum at night. The guard was killed . . . And somehow the girl got caught in—”

“I think you’re right,” Stroud interrupted. “I’m going to get Azure.”

Paul said, “I think I know where he is—in an apartment building next to a second-hand furniture store in the four hundred block of Rice Street.”

Stroud lifted the telephone, called Headquarters. In crisp flat tones he ordered three squad cars to Four hundred Rice, blockade of the territory surrounding it.

“Want to go?” he asked Paul, as he hung the receiver.



"I do. Wait just a minute for me, please," Paul said. He left his office, stopped at Miss Evans' desk, told her: "In five minutes, tell the Inspector I've gone." Then he hurried out of the office, out of the Museum, into a cab. He told the driver:

"Four hundred block of Rice Street. Hurry!"

He leaned back and closed his eyes. He thought: Three squad cars, a dozen men storming the building where Sandra is held. In the turmoil, somebody would surely get hurt. But one man, even unarmed, might reach the inside before the fight began. He had to reach Sandra, to save her life if he could. . . .

He watched the streets slip past, wondered what it would feel like to stop a bullet, smiled grimly at the thought that he would probably know very soon now. . . .

The cab stopped at the corner of the block. Paul got out, paid his fare, and watched the car depart. He looked at the darkening grey expanse of the empty street. He walked slowly toward the building-entrance. He passed the furniture store, closed and dark now. Without a pause he hurried silently up the steps and into the unlighted hallway. There he stopped and listened.

There was only silence, deep and unbroken. Then came a thin far-away wail of a siren approaching. Abruptly, from somewhere above there came the slamming of a door.

Then the stillness was broken by a whining creak at the rear of the dark hall. Quickly Paul drew himself away from the light of the door. He waited. The whining came again, followed by the metallic click of a latch. Then footsteps, heavy and measured. The vague huge outline of a man loomed out of the gloom.

Paul stood, tense and unbreathing. The man turned at the stairs and began to climb. Paul heard the heavy footsteps

reach the hall above and move toward the front of the building. The footsteps stopped and there came the sound of a window being slowly raised.

Paul tiptoed quickly to the stairs, reached the second floor.

The door to a front room was open. At the street-window of that room stood the man who had attacked Waters. In his hand was a heavy rifle, and he was staring down into the street.

PAUL moved on tiptoe up to the third floor, then carefully slipped to the front of the building. He reached the room and the window directly above that in which stood the man with the rifle. Slowly he raised the sash.

Outside the window was a fire-escape. He looked down. He could see the thin, long barrel of the rifle, poised and waiting on the window-sill below. On one corner he saw two squad cars and a knot of uniformed figures waiting. On the other corner were other figures and another car.

Then, as he watched, the figures suddenly spread fan-wise, across the street and around each corner. The thin net began to close, the men walking slowly in, each with gun ready, eyes on the building.

Suddenly a sharp crack exploded below Paul. Across the street a policeman stumbled, dropped to his knees, then onto his face. His gun clattered on the concrete.

Paul turned and stared about the gloomy room. It was empty. A closet door was open. There was nothing but empty coat hangers in the closet. He twisted around again as the rifle below cracked once more.

Then, from across the street, came the rattling burst of an automatic rifle. Paul heard the slugs shatter against the bricks beneath him, shattering of the window-glass, the tinkling of the fragments as they poured over the steel fire-escape. Now the rifle in the room below was barking

with a short-spaced rhythm. Another policeman dropped back against a doorway and clutched his side.

Then Paul saw Stroud, saw him lift a gun, aim at the window below. He heard the shot, then a grunt and a cough from the room below! But still the rifle kept firing!

"I've got to stop him!" Paul thought desperately. He watched the kick of the thin barrel, not ten feet below him. "Got to give the police the chance to close in!"

Suddenly he plunged to the closet and twisted loose a wire coat-hanger. Frantically, as the gun spit beneath him, he straightened the length of wire, leaving only the hook-loop at one end. He tiptoed back to the window, reached down with the wire. But it was too short! He would have to crawl out onto the fire-escape.

Again the gun barked across the street, and flecks of brick-work bit against Paul's face. He drew a deep breath and slipped one leg out onto the fire-escape. He hoped Stroud would recognize him, order his men to hold their fire. A slug sang past him and crashed the window where he had been. Down the three steps he slid, then extended his wire again.

The wire looped around the gun barrel. He jerked hard, saw the bore snap upward toward him. There was a grunt from the window, then the sweating face of the brown-eyed man appeared. They looked at each other, not six feet apart. Then the huge man jerked his gun free from the fragile binding, and Paul tried to leap back to safety.

A gun roared on the walk below and a gasping sob tore from the man's thick lips. Paul froze, watched the massive fingers loosen on the rifle. He saw the sweat-stained face become a mass of loose features.

The gun roared again. The body below trembled as the slug found its home. Then the rifle slid away from the hands and crashed through the fire-escape to the

walk below. The big man staggered erect. The gun roared a last time. The big man jerked, clutched at the railing, then he plunged across the low railing and crashed onto the concrete below. A siren whined into life at the far corner.

From the rear of the building came the sound of an automobile exhaust, then the scream of tires.

"The alley! A car's getting out!" a cop shouted from the corner.

PAUL leaped back through the window and raced toward the rear of the building. He reached a rear window and leaned out as far as he could.

A Packard coupé was moving down the alley. And Paul recognized the bleak profile of Laurin Azure at the wheel!

Then, across the street-exit of the alley, a squad-car appeared and stopped, blocking the passage. Two cops emptied out and drew their guns, began to fire. The slugs sang metallically as they hit the car. The coupé kept going. Its fender caught one of the cops and flipped him against the near wall. An instant later came the tortured rasp of steel on steel as the coupé drove into the side of the lighter police car!

The squad car tilted crazily, hung precariously an instant, then rolled shatteringly over on its side. The Packard slammed it further into the street, raked its undercarriage as it passed, then cut away down the street, vanished around a corner.

A few moments later a second squad car sped across the alleyway and vanished in pursuit of the Packard. A third squad car followed. The dual wail of their sirens faded over and was finally lost in the distance.

Paul leaned on the window-sill, fighting for breath. "He can't get away!" he whispered. The silence, sudden and oppressive, grew thick against his ears. He thought about Sandra. . . .

He turned back toward the dark steps and descended to the first floor. He found the door through which the big man had come, opened it and looked down at drab crude stairs that curved to a dark basement. He started down. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

The Lamp Burns Low

A BOARD creaked beneath his feet. He trembled involuntarily, waited breathlessly. But the silence remained complete, as heavy as a shroud.

He came to a second door. It opened heavily and closed behind him. He struck a match. He was in the basement of the furniture store. Old furniture almost filled it. At the back he saw a heavy steel door. The smell of oil and grease was heavy. As his eyes accustomed themselves to the scene, he realized that it was an enclosed loading platform.

He turned toward the front of the basement, found another door. Within he found a small rude office, an oil lamp. Cautiously he lit the wick. A dim yellow light fought against the darkness.

There was a desk, three chairs, a closet. On the floor of the closet lay a thick rope. It was strangely knotted and looped. Paul stared a moment at the rope, then he moved to the desk. There was a sheet of paper lying there and there was writing on it. He read:

To whom this may concern:

I am confessing herein to the murders of Homer McCoy, Millicent Reynolds and Vernon Tucker. I realize my position is hopeless. This note, written in abject honesty before my suicide, will remove from Laurin Azure any blame or consequence for the above deaths.

Harmon Grant.

"No!" Paul exploded. "This is another part of the plan! If I could only—"

He stopped. The steel doors of the loading platform were closing!

He waited, listening, holding his breath. Slowly, deliberately came the steps. Then they stopped outside the door! Paul drew himself flat against the wall, behind the door. He stared as the knob of the door turned. The sudden draft as the door opened made the oil lamp flicker. The door closed.

"Hello, Mr. Paul," a voice spoke quietly.

The yellow light played in the depths of black eyes, glistened on the tired, bony face, glinted on the short thick gun.

"Grant!" Paul breathed. "You! But I—"

"I hoped you'd be here. We've got a little time while the cops cut that Packard apart with torches to get to Azure's body." He smiled. "Azure just ran the car off the Jameson Cliff."

Paul glanced at the note on the desk, then looked back to Grant's sardonic eyes. "So Azure was a victim, too?"

"I was with him," Grant said, "when he drove that coupé out of the alley. There was a gun nesting against his side."

Paul said: "You're the killer! You stole that painting! You killed the girl you were going to marry! And you're framing it so the cops will think Azure fixed you!"

Grant nodded, his eyes taunting, glistening.

"When they get back, I'll be tied with that rope in the closet. I'll say Azure had just enough time to force the confession from me, then the cops raided."

"My daughter, Sandra—where is she?" Paul asked.

"Now we get down to business, Mr. Paul . . . You're about to go into partnership with me."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you I was a lawyer, Mr. Paul. I handle estates. People die, you know; rich people. And quite often they leave valuable things behind them, things their children and nephews and grand-daughters know nothing about. It becomes my

duty to liquidate an estate, sometimes. Old Colonel Reynolds was one of my very best clients."

"You steal from the estate! You conceal assets, keep them—"

"Of course not!" Grant said. "Don't think that your new associate is so stupid, Mr. Paul. Consider this Reynolds affair. An emergency case. My dear dead fiancée, Millicent, came here at my suggestion to clear up the estate prior to our marriage. She found the fake-Cantonelli and entered it in the Exhibit. Then, most unfortunately, she found some old documents of the Colonel's—a bill of sale and a cancelled check for eighty thousand dollars in purchase of the Cantonelli. I did not know of these documents. Immediately she called me. I realized there was going to be some difficulty. The appearance of the painting in a public exhibit. She said she was going to you, that you would tell her whether the painting was genuine."

"SHE told you that when she visited you at eleven o'clock that night," Paul said.

"Of course. And I agreed to meet her at your house. I told her I would go to my office and look through the Colonel's old documents. Purely a stall for time."

"Time to bribe Tooker and get his car!"

"Of course," came the ironically pleasant agreement. "As you know, I did

reach her. The rest is mere detail. I identified her corpse. I called Waters to my apartment on a blind-chase. I wished a clear road to reach Azure; Brownie was holding him here. I planted the envelope and keys in my apartment lobby. I cut my own hand. I erased my own name from Queen's letter, then replaced it. I knew that there would be some mention of my name when Azure's possessions were inspected. I thought it best to adopt the role of victim."

"Then you killed Azure and came back here. You saw me come in, even let me slip in. You wanted to trap me!" Paul said. "What is the rest of your damned plan?"

"I called myself your new partner, remember. I've been thinking, Mr. Paul. Azure and I had a nice racket. But you and me—" He gestured and smiled. "You have control of the finest and most valuable art treasures in this country. Tooker has told me about them, many of them stored in vaults; vaults that are seldom opened; vaults from which they would not be missed for years. Mr. Paul," he said softly, "we are partners."

Paul's jaw sagged. His mind struggled with the utter cold-bloodedness of the plan. "But it's insane! Fantastic! I won't! I simply will not steal the art of—"

"Would you kill your daughter?" Grant countered.

NEW SUCCESS OVER ATHLETE'S FOOT

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The flickering lamp threw grotesque shadows over the smiling and bony face.

"You see," Grant continued quietly, "I started making my plan when I realized that Azure would have to be sacrificed. So, I kidnapped your daughter. I have a picture of you, taken by Brownie; you are standing on a street-corner, passing a brief-case to Azure! Not to me, but to Azure. Furthermore, when I visited your house to get your daughter, I concealed the gun that killed McCoy and Miss Reynolds. I could tell the police where it is."

"This is—is impossible!" Paul cried. "No one would believe that I—" He choked in frantic rage.

"But most important, Mr. Paul, you are going to sit down at this desk and write a letter to Laurin Azure, telling him you are frightened, that you are afraid people are beginning to suspect you. You will beg him to leave you alone, to stay away from you until the trouble blows over. You will sign that letter and I will take it and place it in Azure's correspondence. That correspondence will be found—if you don't work with me."

Harmon Grant leaned against the wall and smiled.

"If—if I don't, then Sandra will . . ."

"Be killed, of course. And you, too," Grant added. "And they will think you were shot in the battle. And I am safe, no matter what happens."

"You'll tell me where she is?"

"When you've written the letter." Grant gestured to the desk.

Paul stared at it fixedly. He started forward, then stopped. "No! I can't! I won't! It'll go on forever! You'll ruin me, then turn me in or—"

"Or I'll kill you both now. Make up your mind, Mr. Paul."

Paul kept staring at the desk, at the flickering dirty lamp.

"I don't believe you!" he said harshly.

"If I write the letter, you won't tell me where she is! I won't do it."

"You don't trust me, Mr. Paul?"

"But will you take me to her? Do you swear you will?" Paul demanded.

"Of course."

"You will take me immediately?" Paul repeated. "She is not here, is she?"

"No, she is not here. But I will take you to her when you have written the letter." He smiled. "She is in the Reynolds house, in the unused furnace."

PAUL took a slow, dry breath. "Then I—I will write the letter." As a man who approached his doom, he advanced to the desk. His back was to Grant, and he was between the man and the table on which the lamp sat. He reached the table, leaned over, reached for oil lamp instead of pen.

The reach and the throw were almost one movement. He turned, hurled the flickering lamp at the wall against which Grant lounged, smoking his cigarette.

There was a crash of glass, a cry from Grant. But the cry came an instant after the explosion, as the flames leaped in a wild burst from the oil that had splattered over the wall and over Grant.

The gun slipped from Grant's hand and he slapped wildly at the flames, twisting and screaming. Then the fire climbed over his face, and he tried to run. He plunged into the wall and fell. Abruptly the scream choked as the hot flames engulfed him.

Paul threw his arm across his face and plunged for the door. As he jerked it open, the rush of new air drove the flames into a swirling inferno. He ran.

He reached the street and the cold, clean air. He looked back. The tongues of fire were dancing out of the windows now. He went in search of a taxi, then, to take him to the old Reynolds house. On the way he reported the fire. Later he would tell the police about Grant. . . .

Am I going crazy? she wondered. . . .



MURDER ON WHEELS

By BRUNO FISCHER

The sound of wheels was the prelude to Death that struck relentlessly through locked doors and solid walls. . . . Julia Lewis heard the sound and knew that she was doomed—unless the Phantom Skater found another victim first!

AS SOON as Julia Lewis got off the bus, she heard the wheels again. Last night the sound had followed her the three blocks from the bus to her house, and now here it was again. It was as if a child were skating directly behind her, yet when she looked back, she could see only the other commuters

strung out along the street, behind her.

Last night she had thought that the whirring wheels were in her head, a hang-over from the clamor of the aircraft factory where she worked. But by the time she reached home, the sound had ceased, and it had not returned. Until now, at the identical time and place where she had heard it yesterday!

Julia kept glancing over her shoulder as if she were being pursued. It was already night and the dimmed-out street was shadowy, but the fact was that she would have seen anybody skating behind her. And she didn't, because there was nobody behind her at all.

She crossed the street, and abruptly, as if the unseen skater had hit up against a wall, the sound of wheels stopped.

Purdy, the legless beggar, was at his inevitable post at the corner. His black eyes flicked toward her as she approached, but he made no movement of the tattered cap in his hand. Automatically Julia fumbled in her bag for a nickel which she gave him every evening.

He never thanked her, and she did not want thanks. It was little enough to do for the unfortunate man. But this evening his face was tilted up to hers, and a nearby street lamp reflected strange lights in his burning black eyes. Purdy's face was as hideous as a gargoyle's. That had never scared her before, but now she shivered as if a cold wind had struck her.

Nerves! she thought. *What's come over me?*

She dropped the nickel into Purdy's cap and swung away from him. The next moment he was blotted from her mind. The wheels were back, their sound grinding against her eardrums!

Panic gripped her. She found herself hurrying, almost running. Ahead, a man walked with long, impatient strides. She caught up to him and was passing him when she saw his face.

"Good evening, Mrs. Lewis," he said,

tipping his hat in a nonchalant gesture.

Julia Lewis fell into step beside him. She knew George Baxter hardly well enough to greet, but all at once he seemed a close friend, somebody to whom to cling for sanity. He was a bachelor who lived in the apartment below hers.

"Listen!" she said. "Do you hear wheels?"

As soon as the words were out, she was sorry she had said them. Because again the sound of turning wheels had completely ceased.

Baxter glanced sideways at her. The dimness formed sharp planes on his rather handsome face. In age and build he reminded her of Frank, her husband, who was fighting in Africa.

"Wheels?" he said. "You mean like the wheels of skates?"

Julia's breath came more easily. So others also heard it!

"Funny," he went on. "It's happened three mornings already on the way to the bus. I could swear somebody was skating behind me, but nobody ever was."

"Mornings?" Julia said. "I hear it only evenings. Didn't you hear it a minute ago?"

Baxter looked at her again, frowning now. "No, only in the morning. I imagine it's a motor of some kind, though it's strange there being one in this quiet residential section. I can't understand why I didn't hear it just now if you did."

Julia couldn't either. And a motor doesn't follow at your heels.

TOGETHER they turned into a two-story red brick house. She saw the thin white envelope in the mailbox and forgot the wheels in her eagerness to get her key out. It was a V-mail letter from Frank! She tore the letter open and read it there in the vestibule.

"From your husband?" Baxter asked. "He's in the Army, isn't he?"

"Tank destroyer," Julia muttered. The

few lines told all that he was allowed to write—that he was well and that he loved her.

Baxter held the door open for her. There were four apartments in the house. Baxter lived in the downstairs right apartment and the Roods in the left. Julia lived upstairs above Baxter, and there was one vacancy.

Baxter passed his own door to accompany her down the hall to the staircase. He touched her arm.

"You must be lonely, Julia," he said.

She stiffened. It was not only the fact that he had used her first name that made his intentions plain. His handsome face was smiling at her with a kind of self-confident intimacy.

"Not very," she replied, though it wasn't true.

"What I mean—how about a movie some night? Say tonight?"

She shrank from his touch. "I'm a married woman," she told him coldly.

"Sure, I know. But married women have to have some fun too."

His hand tightened on her arm. His leering face dipped closer. She felt a scream rise in her throat, though that was unreasonable. He wouldn't dare try to force himself on her.

The vestibule door swung open, and Baxter stepped away from her in confusion. Hubert Rood entered the hall. He was a thick-set man with a jaw like a shovel and an ingratiating grin. An engineer of some sort, though Julia wasn't sure. She hadn't had time to become friendly with him or his wife or with any of the neighbors. But now she was grateful for his presence.

"Good-evening," Rood greeted them.

Baxter nodded briskly and turned to the door of his apartment. Julia raced up the stairs.

When she was in her apartment, she locked the door from the inside and stood panting against it. Then she laughed and

threw off her jacket. Skaters who couldn't be seen and handsome bachelors who tried to force their attentions on lonely women! If that was all she had to fear, there wasn't anything to worry about.

These days, exhausted from her work on the assembly line, she went to bed early. She ate and read a little and then prepared a hot bath. She liked a full tub; for a long time the water poured in while she undressed leisurely. Presently she turned the water off.

Julia had one foot in the tub when she heard the moan. It seemed to come from outside. She went to the window and raised the shade and saw nothing below but the deserted yard. And now there was no sound anywhere but a car roaring by in high speed.

Shrugging, she eased into the water. Almost at once she was sitting up again, tense, listening. There it was again, outside her window.

Am I going crazy? she wondered. *First I hear skating where there isn't any, and now moans.*

There was no doubt about the moans, coming and going in low ragged waves. And then she realized that they did not come from outside after all. They came from directly beneath her, from George Baxter's bathrom. His bathroom window must be open and so was hers.

HASTILY she dried herself and got into a bathrobe and slippers and went downstairs. She knocked urgently on Baxter's door, several times.

There was no answer. And the moans had ceased, or else they were not audible from the hall. She knocked again.

The door on the other side of the hall opened. Cora Rood stuck her head out.

"I thought I heard somebody knock on my door," she said. Her eyes slithered over Julia, her too-red lips curled.

Julia flushed. It did look suspicious—a young woman who lived alone, with her

husband three thousand miles away, calling on a handsome bachelor, in a bathrobe.

"I heard Mr. Baxter moan," Julia explained.

Cora Rood's eyes didn't believe her. She was a statuesque peroxide blonde, and she wore the kind of clothes that revealed her figure in all its lushness. Like the sleazy negligee she had on now.

"If he were sick, he'd call out or something," Cora Rood pointed out.

"Perhaps he can't."

"What's this?" a new voice asked. Hubert Rood, a pipe clamped in his heavy mouth, stood at his wife's side. "Who's sick?"

Julia told him.

"Well, we'll see soon enough." Rood stepped past Julia and turned the doorknob. The door swung inward. He grinned down at Julia. It was plain he had the same idea as his wife.

"I—I didn't think of trying the door," Julia faltered. "I just knocked."

"I don't hear any moans," Rood said. "But it won't do any harm to take a look. Hope Baxter doesn't mind."

Julia and Cora Rood followed him into the living room.

"You can see he's not in." Mrs. Rood smirked at Julia. "My dear Mrs. Lewis, Hubert and I are broadminded. We'll think nothing of it if you wait here for him to come back."

Angrily Julia opened her mouth, but Rood beat her to it. "Shut up, Cora!" he clipped. "Mrs. Lewis, you say the moans came from the bathroom?"

"Yes."

He strode across the living room to the little hall that led to the rest of the apartment. In the doorway he stopped dead.

"Get back, both of you!" he yelled.

It was too late. Julia and Cora Rood were only a foot or two behind him, and not even his big bulk could completely block out the doorway. Baxter lay face

down, half of him in the bathroom and half in the hall.

The body blurred before Julia's eyes. After that first glimpse of it her misting eyes rejected the image. But she kept seeing the blood that lay thick on the floor and spattered on the walls, like somebody had been standing in the hall and swinging a can of red paint.

* * *

LIEUTENANT Malloy of the Homicide Bureau studied Julia Lewis with a sour expression.

"I see, Mrs. Lewis," he drawled. "You heard Baxter moan, but you didn't hear anything before that. You didn't hear voices or a struggle or a falling body?"

"The water was running into the tub," Julia told him. "I couldn't have heard anything in my own apartment. I didn't hear the moans until I turned off the water."

"And a minute later, when you got down here, Baxter was dead." His eyes rested flatly on her.

Julia sat on the couch in Baxter's living room, and Hubert and Cora Rood sat beside her. A group of men were bunched around the little hall, but fortunately Baxter's body was out of Julia's line of vision. She could see some of the blood on the walls, though.

"More than a minute," she said testily. "Possibly five minutes. It doesn't take a man hurt like that long to die, does it?"

"I guess not," Malloy agreed. "It's a wonder he lived long enough to moan." He shifted in his chair and split his gaze between Hubert and Cora Rood. "You two live across the hall. You sure you heard nothing?"

Cora Rood leaned forward with her hands clasped. "I did hear—" She thought it over and shook her head. "It was a child. I heard him skating in the hall."

"Skating!" Julia burst out.

"Ah! So you did hear something else,

Mrs. Lewis?" Malloy said, immediately.

Julia bit her lip. Her insides were so tied up that she could hardly breathe. "I told you the water was running. Why would anybody skate in the house?"

"That's what I was thinking," Cora Rood said. "I was in the kitchen washing the dishes. One kitchen wall, you know, is right against the hall. I heard somebody skating down the hall, and then maybe five minutes later I heard the skates go back to the vestibule. Some kid, I thought, bringing a message to Mr. Baxter or Mrs. Lewis and keeping his skates on in the house. Then I forgot about it."

"Did you hear the skating?" Malloy asked Rood.

"No. I was in the living room listening to the radio while Cora was washing the dishes. I guess I had the radio on pretty loud." Rood grinned at Julia. "It made at least as much noise as water running into a tub."

"Skating," Malloy mused. "Screwy." He narrowed his eyes. "Do you want to say something, Mrs. Lewis?"

She didn't want to; it would sound too ridiculous. But Malloy's eyes had read the agitation in her face, and she found herself telling the lieutenant about the skates that had followed Baxter mornings to the bus and followed her home from the bus. The Roods were turned to her with amused skepticism.

"And you saw nothing?" Malloy said, the corners of his mouth lifting. "And Baxter said he didn't see them either?"

"But we heard them," Julia insisted. "And Mrs. Rood just said she heard them

too. I tell you we actually did."

"In the hall," Cora Rood sneered. "With a wall between me and the skater. Otherwise I'd have seen him all right."

Lieutenant Malloy turned his head to a bald man in rimless glasses who was coming toward him. "Well, Doc?"

"It's quite possible that the wound did not kill him immediately," the medical examiner said, "though he was hacked badly at the waist. I imagine the weapon was something like a very big butcher knife with an extremely heavy blade. The blow was angled upward from his left hip. I'd say that the murderer was sitting down when he struck Baxter."

"No other cut on him?"

"No."

MALLOY scratched his nose unhappily. "I don't get it. The killer is swinging this big knife and Baxter managed to knock him down without getting a scratch. Then before Baxter can more than turn toward the bathroom, the killer has recovered enough to draw the knife back for another swipe and take that hefty swing at him from a sitting position."

"That's the way it had to be," the medical examiner said.

"Yeah. And there are no screams or anything during the struggle. Mrs. Lewis mightn't hear moans over the running water, but she'd hear yells." He sighed. "It's as screwy as hearing skates where there are none. And screwier is the idea that the killer would come skating into Baxter's apartment from the street. I don't like it."

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Julia was staring at her hands clasped on her knees. She could keep them from trembling only by digging her nails into her knuckles.

In the morning it was as if nothing had happened. The house was quiet as Julia went down the stairs, but not quieter than usual. The door to Baxter's apartment was locked, the body had been removed, the police had left. It was over.

She stepped into the street and headed for the bus line. Purdy, the legless beggar, was at his usual post against the brick wall of the corner building. But this morning his cap was on his head and he ignored the passers-by, staring with curious detachment straight into the early morning sun.

It struck Julia that always before this she had seen him only in the evening, where the dimout was kindlier to his face and half-body. Now, under the bright sun, he looked like an incredibly hideous carving of something not wholly human. And he was less than legless. He had no thighs either except for an inch or two of stump below each hip.

Purdy's black eyes, glinting in the sunlight, dropped to her as she passed. She could feel his gaze follow her, and again she felt that unaccountable chill which had swept over her last night in his presence.

Then she heard the skates. Twice before she had heard them in the evening, but it was morning now, the time when George Baxter had heard them! She turned her head, knowing that there was no skater behind her.

This time she was wrong. Purdy was coming toward her!

Julia finished the turn of her body so that she faced him. And Purdy stopped, looking up sharply into her startled and horrified face.

She had never seen Purdy move. She had never had the bad manners to look directly down at his stumps. Probably

she wouldn't have noticed anything anyway, for in the past he had always been in the dimness and shadows there against the wall.

But now, in the morning light, she saw the roller skates that were attached to each of his stumps.

Purdy said: "Well, what're you starin' at?"

She opened her mouth and closed it. Though Purdy was a full-grown man of about forty, with a deep chest and brawny arms, the top of his head hardly reached to her waist. Standing on those skates, he was only a trifle higher from the ground than an ordinary man would be who was seated.

Somebody skating in the hall, and Baxter's murderer striking from a sitting position!

She did not know that she was screaming until she saw the panic in Purdy's ugly face. He whirled away from her with a sound of rolling wheels.

People rushed to her. A man grabbed her arm, shook her. "What's the matter? What happened?"

"Stop him!" she shrieked.

They didn't know what she meant. Above the din around her, she heard the retreating skates. She glimpsed Purdy scoot around the corner, his hands wildly flailing the sidewalk as he propelled himself along the pavement.

A PATROLMAN panted up. "The legless man!" she said. "Purdy, they call him! He murdered George Baxter!"

"Purdy?" the cop echoed stupidly. He blinked at her in the sunlight. "Say, I saw you last night in Baxter's apartment. You're the lady who lives upstairs."

"Yes, yes! And Purdy murdered Baxter!"

"You sure, lady? I know Purdy for years. There's no harm in him."

"You fool!" she cried. "You're letting

him get away! He went around that corner!"

The cop trotted off without much enthusiasm. The milling crowd that surrounded Julia increased. As she waited, she lifted her chin, trying to appear the righteous citizen who was doing her duty.

The cop wasn't gone long. He was scratching his head as he pushed through to her.

"No sign of Purdy. What makes you think he killed anybody?"

"I think," Julia said stiffly, "that you had better take me to Lieutenant Malloy."

The cop looked at her and nodded. "I think I'd better, lady."

At headquarters Lieutenant Malloy listened to Julia without interruption. When she was finished he licked his lips.

"Could be," he said. "Only what would a poor legless beggar have against Baxter?"

"That's your job, to find out," Julia told him coldly.

"Uh-huh. That and a couple of other things." He bounced a pencil on his desk. "You say you hardly knew Baxter?"

"Only well enough to greet on the street."

Malloy said carelessly: "It didn't look that way to Hubert Rood when he saw you two in the hall last night. I pried that little incident out of Rood."

Her eyes widened with outrage. "Are you suggesting that Baxter and I—"

"I'm suggesting possibilities. You say you were going into Baxter's apartment. Maybe you'd just come out and then you knocked loud enough for the Roods across the hall to hear you."

"So now you're accusing me of murder?"

"I wouldn't put it that way, Mrs. Lewis. You're free to go."

"And you're not doing anything about Purdy?" she demanded.

"I'm sending a general alarm out after

him." He permitted himself a shadow of a smile which was eloquent of secret knowledge or suspicion. "We don't overlook any angles. Purdy will be picked up in an hour."

Julia managed to reach the aircraft plant just in time to avoid being docked for lateness. She wasn't much good at her job that day; she was too shaken and angry.

During lunch she turned on the radio in the rest room and listened to the news report. After the war news, Baxter's murder and the hunt for Purdy received considerable attention from the newscaster. Her name, she was glad to hear, was kept out of it. And Purdy was still at large.

At five o'clock, when she was through for the day, Lieutenant Malloy was waiting for her at the gate.

"More questioning?" she asked bitterly.

"Not exactly. I've got an apology to make, Mrs. Lewis."

She gave him a hard glance. The lieutenant wasn't the kind to come all the way out here to apologize for anything.

"It looks like you're right about the killer being Purdy," he went on. "We found the heavy butcher knife that killed Baxter in the cellar room where Purdy lives. At least, we think it's the one. And there's no sign of him anywhere. A guy like that is too easy to spot. That means he's hiding. In other words, he's got a good reason for not wanting us to get our hands on him."

JULIA felt easier. In the back of her mind had been the terrible thought that she might have accused an innocent man. She had hoped that was not so.

"Then there's no doubt of his guilt?"

"No doubt. You're a smart woman, Mrs. Lewis. Soon as you saw him, you figured that Purdy was the only person who had to skate in a house. His taking

his skates off would be like somebody else taking his feet off. And the medical examiner agreed that only a guy like Purdy could have struck the kind of blow that killed Baxter."

He walked with her to the bus. "Reason why I'm here, Mrs. Lewis, is to ask what you know about Purdy?"

"Very little," she said. "Only that he's been on the corner of Elm and Avenue D every evening at six. I gave him money every time I passed, but I never as much as heard his voice until this morning. I'm sorry I can't help you."

"You've helped us a lot already," Malloy said.

Cora Rood must have heard Julia open the vestibule door, for she was standing in the open doorway of her apartment when Julia passed.

"So it was that beggar murdered poor Mr. Baxter!" the lush blonde said. "I feel terrible; I could have saved Mr. Baxter. I heard that cripple skating right here in the hall."

"You couldn't know what the skating meant."

Cora Rood shivered. "I hope they hurry and catch him. My husband is working late tonight. I'm not scared to be alone, but I don't feel comfortable with that fiend loose."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Julia assured her. "With everybody in the city looking for him, he wouldn't dare show himself in the street. And he certainly has nothing against you."

"I guess you're right," Cora Rood muttered. She didn't sound convinced.

After supper Julia seated herself beside the radio and kept twisting the dial to the various news broadcasts. There was no new development; Purdy remained at large. She had told Cora Rood there was nothing to be afraid of, but sitting there she offered a silent prayer: *Please, God, let them catch him soon!* She tried laughing at herself, but that didn't help. She

snapped off the radio and walked across the living room to make sure the door was locked. With her hand on the key she heard it.

Somebody was skating along the downstairs hall!

Her fingers turned lifeless, refusing to turn the key. She stood against the door, whimpering, thinking: *He's coming up here for me! He knows I'm the one who told the police!*

The return of quiet downstairs released her from her paralysis. She discovered that the door was locked after all. She listened with her ear pressed against the door, but the house retained its silence. He hadn't come up the stairs; she would have heard him because he could not move without the rolling of skate wheels.

Slowly she relaxed. It was her imagination. Nerves. She started to turn from the door.

She uttered a low, hoarse sound that rattled in her throat. There it was again—the skating in the hall downstairs! Then a door opened and closed. The vestibule door? The passing of two or more cars at the moment made too much noise for her to hear him skating away in the street.

Then she knew. He hadn't been bound for her apartment after all. And at present only two of the apartments in the building were occupied, hers and the Roods.

She rushed over to the telephone table. "Give me the police!"

Reaction came when she hung up. *It was nerves both times*, she thought. *I'm making a fool of myself. He wouldn't go through the streets, now, with the police hunting him.*

From the living room window she watched a police prowler car come to a jolting stop and two policemen hurry out. She was halfway down the stairs when they entered the house.

"You the lady who called?" one of the

cops asked, staring curiously at her. "I heard something," she said. "That door on your left."

The cop didn't burst in. He took time to knock. Evidently he didn't quite believe her. She didn't quite believe herself. She went all the way down the stairs and stood between the two cops, stared at them questioningly.

"She don't answer," the first cop said. "You sure somebody's home?"

"I'm not sure of anything," she said weakly. "I heard—" She paused and then her voice rose in near hysteria. "Well, why don't you go in?"

The cop turned the knob. He looked surprised when the door was suddenly opened.

The overhead lights were on in the Rood living room. The cop flung the door wide—and from where she stood in the hall Julia saw Cora Rood. But Cora did not see her.

The woman lay on the other side of the room. She lay the way George Baxter had, face down. And there was blood everywhere.

The second cop threw an arm about Julia as she swayed on her feet, saved her from falling.

POLICEMEN and newspapermen filled the apartment and spilled out into the hall. There was constant movement as they came and went, yet they were strangely subdued, making very little sound and speaking only in restrained whispers. After a while they ignored Julia. Lieutenant Malloy, his face dark with anger, had questioned her briefly, and after that the newspapermen had kept her busy with questions for a few minutes.

She remained outside in the hall, leaning against the wall and later sitting on the bottom step of the staircase. It did not occur to her to go upstairs to her apartment. Nothing occurred to her.

She saw Hubert Rood, who had been working late, come in. His big body pushed his way up the hall in a kind of frenzy. His heavy face seemed to have no life in it. He stepped into his apartment, and for a long minute there was silence.

Then Rood's voice lashed out. "I only ask one thing, Lieutenant. Let me get my hands on that damn cripple! Just give me two minutes with him!"

"Take it easy, Rood," she heard Malloy say gently. "The law will take care of him."

*I THANK MY
LUCKY STARS
I MET YOU!*

*THANKS TO
STAR BLADES
I MET YOU!*



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After a while Malloy came out of the apartment and walked over to where Julia sat on the step. "May I have a talk with you in your apartment?"

She nodded dully and together they went up the stairs. She sat limply on the easy-chair in her living room, but he remained on his feet, watching her through a cloud of cigaret smoke.

"What about those skates you heard?" he asked.

She had told him once an hour ago. She told him again.

"And that's all you heard, just those skates?"

"That's all."

"No screams? No conversation?"

"Nothing." She blurted out what was tormenting her: "Listen! Three people heard those skates—Baxter and Mrs. Rood and myself. Two of them are dead."

He expelled smoke through his nostrils. "Hundreds of people heard Purdy's skates every day. What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. But—" She twisted her hands. "I'm afraid."

"You think Purdy is out to get you, is that it? I don't see it. It was a hell of a risk he took slipping through the night to this house. If he were after you as well as Mrs. Rood, he'd have come up and tried to finish the job there and then."

"I suppose so," she said.

"Do you intend to spend the night here?"

She nodded. "I've got to. I know nobody else in the city. I moved here only because I got a job in the aircraft factory. And I can't quit or even miss a day. My husband and millions of other soldiers are depending on the planes I'm helping to build."

He nodded approvingly. "You've got spirit, Mrs. Lewis. And you needn't worry. I'll station a man in front of the house for the night."

After Malloy was gone, Julia got into

bed. She lay wide awake, listening to the last of the police leave, and then the house resumed its quiet. A deeper quiet, somehow, than the house had had before. The quiet of death, she thought.

She curled herself up into a tight ball and pulled the cover over her head. Still sleep would not come. The ticking of the alarm clock was like the beating of a second heart in that lonely room. And gradually her consciousness absorbed another sound.

FOR a while she thought it was somebody dragging something out in the street. It came and went sporadically—muffled, yet heavy. Or was it in the street? She pulled down the cover and propped herself up on an elbow. It could be nearer than the street, right here in the house. It could be somebody dragging something up the stairs.

Abruptly Julia sat up. She was trembling; sweat plastered her nightgown to her body. But the quiet was back. It had been nothing—nothing at all. The only sound that would mean anything would be the rolling of skates.

Her head hit the pillow. Nearby something creaked. But things were always creaking in a house.

The hall door! Had she locked the hall door after letting Lieutenant Malloy out? She couldn't remember.

There it was again—the smallest of sounds that could be caused by anything. That could be caused by a door being pushed slowly and gently open.

She put on the bedside lamp. The flood of light was kindly, comforting. Outside she heard footsteps on the sidewalk. After all, a policeman was guarding the house. Furniture creaks by itself; houses settle. One could go crazy fearing every sound.

But had she locked the door?

She threw her robe about her and stepped into slippers. She went through the little hall and into the dark living

room. She snapped the wall switch on.

Her suddenly constricted throat turned the scream that rose from her lungs into a demented moan. Purdy was dragging his legless body across the living room. The skates were no longer attached to his stumps.

In a flash she understood how he had got through the police guard. He had dragged himself around to the back yard and had pulled himself through a window into Baxter's vacant apartment and then up the hall stairs. She had been listening to the last part of his progress. She could shout for help to the policeman outside, but now it was too late because he would kill her before help could reach her.

Purdy stood erect on his stumps, shorter than ever because he was not wearing his skates. And suddenly Julia realized that she might still be able to save herself. She had two legs and he did not!

"Wait!" Purdy said. "Please wait. I never hurt nobody in my life."

Something in his face checked her—that hideous gargoyle face. There was a strange pleading in the dark eyes. She had seen those eyes every evening, and they were always gentle. That was why she had made a ritual of dropping a coin into his cap on her way home from work. And he had no knife visible and she was beyond his immediate reach.

"You gotta help me," Purdy pleaded. "You got the cops after me. And I never did nothin' to nobody. I never hurt nobody. You gotta tell 'em."

She stared down at him, no taller than a young child, yet a full-grown man. Face to face with him now, somehow she was no longer afraid of him.

"You always been good to me," he said. "They say I'm a killer. All day I been hidin', so afraid I'm goin' crazy. Why did you do that to poor Purdy?"

"I thought—" she whispered.

Her eyes jerked above Purdy's head. Purdy had left the hall door open, and

now Hubert Rood stood in the room. He was in his shirt sleeves, and his large hairy right hand held a heavy butcher knife and his left hand held a squat automatic pistol.

"This is a break," Rood said thickly.

Purdy swung himself around on his knuckles. Then he glanced back at Julia in bewildered terror.

"Who's this guy?" he demanded. "What's he got the knife and gun for? He the killer?"

"Yes!" Julia said. "Of course he is!"

SHE looked at the open living room window. The policeman was so close! It would take him less than a minute to come up here! A minute that could be an eternity!

Rood read her mind. "Go ahead and scream. By the time the cop comes up here, I'll be finished."

Her hands rubbed her throat as if to ease whatever was choking her. He was right—it was too late to scream. It was too late for anything!

Hubert Rood moved into the room, toward her. Purdy dropped down on his knuckles, trying to sidle out of the way. Swinging the knife in his hand, Rood ignored him, heading inexorably toward Julia. His face was grim, drawn. His eyes were wild, insane looking.

Julia found herself backing away. If only she could get into the bathroom, lock herself in! Baxter had tried it and hadn't made it. . . .

"You've gone far enough, Rood," a voice said.

Rood stopped and glanced over his shoulder. Lieutenant Malloy stood in the doorway, holding a gun against his hip.

Without warning Rood swung his automatic toward him. Malloy shot from his hip.

The explosion filled Julia's brain. Her eyes shut of their own volition. When she opened them, Purdy was staring wide-

eyed at the sprawling, inert heap Rood's big body made on the floor, and Malloy was coming toward her.

* * *

EVEN now, when it was all over, the whirring of the rapidly turning skate wheels rasped against her nerves. She drew deeply on the cigaret Lieutenant Malloy had lighted for her.

He had two connected ball-bearing skate wheels in his hand, and he made them spin by rubbing them against his palm. Then he ran them over the wall, and it sounded like a child skating.

"I found them in Rood's apartment where he had hidden them," Malloy told her. "That's what you and Baxter heard. You paid no attention to Rood walking behind you; it was dark and he was just another commuter on his way home. Anyway, you were looking for somebody skating. He planned the whole thing carefully in advance. He'd found out that his wife was unfaithful. She dated George Baxter."

"Baxter was that kind," Julia said. "He went after married women. And Cora Rood always struck me as being no better."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Rood also insured his wife for a large sum," Malloy went on. "We'll check into that. He had to scheme carefully. He couldn't just wade in and murder his wife and her lover. He'd be suspected at once. Purdy was to take the rap for the murders, and you would be the unwitting stooge who would put the finger on Purdy. He implanted the idea of skates in your mind, then was ready for his play. Before and after he murdered Baxter, he ran the skate wheels along the hall floor for his wife to hear. He did the same thing for your benefit tonight when he murdered his wife."

"And he found out that Purdy was

coming here to see me. Is that it?"

"I doubt it," Malloy said. "It was an accident that he found Purdy here. From the first he'd planned to kill you too. He had nothing against you, but you had to be included to break the wife-lover design, which would make things hot for him. It would stand to reason that Purdy, on the assumption that he was the killer, would want to murder you too. You were the one who'd given him away. It seemed to work out nicely for him when he found Purdy here with you. He'd kill you with the knife and shoot Purdy and be the hero who had come on the scene just too late to save you from the crippled fiend."

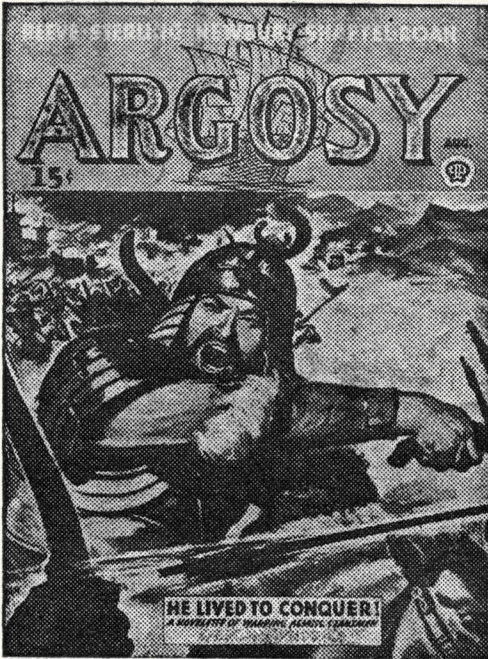
"But you were outside in the hall all the time," Julia said.

"I was playing it safe. I thought the killer might be you or Rood. Not Purdy after Mrs. Rood was murdered. You heard skates, or what you thought were skates, going up the hall to Mrs. Rood's apartment. She knew what they meant too, and she would have screamed or something. At the least she would have locked her door. But there wasn't a sound out of her. Apparently she just waited there for a minute or so to be killed. Well, she didn't, of course, which meant that she didn't hear the skates. They'd sounded twice, coming and going, after she was dead. And it also meant that she trusted the killer and let him come close enough to her so that he could cut her down before she could cry out in alarm."

Malloy dropped the ball-bearing wheels into his pocket and put on his hat. Rood's body had been removed; several plain-clothesmen were waiting for Malloy near the door.

"Well, we're through here," he said. "It's close to dawn. I'm afraid you won't get much sleep tonight."

Julia stared at her cigaret. "Perhaps not for many nights to come," she muttered.



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By DAY KEENE

CHAPTER ONE

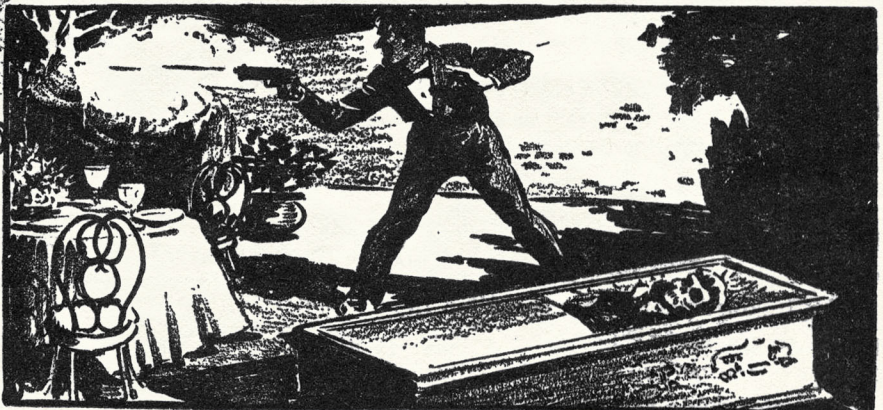
The Unseen Guest

Los Angeles — (AP) — A distinguished visitor to this city last night was Colonel Lee Hazzard, the twenty-seven-year-old fighting Marine whose life story Colossal is filming under the title of THE INCREDIBLE COLONEL. While cheering crowds thronged the airport, the modest holder of the Congressional Medal of Honor slipped quietly away from his escort and went directly to his hotel room where he . . .

THE truth of the matter was, Lee Hazzard didn't give a damn about being a hero. All that he wanted, all he had wanted for five years was Natcha. And he had returned in a blare of trumpets to learn she was to marry another man.

He wondered, as he scowled across the table at his host, if the film star knew that he had loved her.

It was, as Hollywood bachelor suppers go, a small affair. The table had been laid in the flower-banked patio of Blyth's two-hundred-thousand dollar, hill-top mansion. Night was a soft black velvet drop, lighted only by the flickering tapers in



the great, silver candelabra, overhead.

Of the four men at the table, none was sober, although Hazzard and Postoff, the Russian, were holding their liquor well. Ike Master, Colossal's ace director, was frankly and nastily drunk. Lean, gaunt-faced, his unruly gray hair plastered to his temples with sweat, he leered across the table at the actor.

"No one this marriage of yours is going to upset, is there, Pretty Boy? No broken hearts?"

Blyth smiled his white-toothed smile.

"Millions of women in seven continents will be broken hearted," he said.

Postoff, whom Natcha had insisted that Colossal hire as a technical observer for those scenes in Lee Hazzard's life that were laid in China, drained the last few drops of brandy in his glass.

"To Natcha. May she be very happy."

He said it sadly. Hazzard said nothing at all. He didn't trust himself to speak. Where he had come from, life was cheap—and Blyth was ripe for killing. He sat and surveyed his host through an alcoholic fog.

This drunken, leering, over-dressed popinjay, this cashiered coward was, by some malicious quirk of Fate, not only to portray his life upon the screen, he was marrying Natcha, his Natcha, in the morning.

"I lov' you, Lee. I nevair, nevair, lov' any other man," Natcha had said. That had been five years ago, in Shanghai.

Postoff made conversation. A big man, his voice was as deceptively soft as his body.

"You have been in China, Mr. Blyth?"

Blyth glanced at Hazzard, nodded. "I have. Right after I—er—resigned my commission."

The Colonel knew the reason for the pause—Blyth was a blot on their record and the Marines didn't advertise failures.

The actor continued glibly, "That was in '37. In fact, the first picture I made was

in China. In support of John Able. You may remember him. He was an old silent picture star."

Master weaved drunkenly in his chair. "John was an actor." He pointed an accusing finger. "And you're a thief, tha's what *you* are! John felt sorry for you. He took you off the beach. And what did you do, Pretty Boy?" He answered his own question. "You killed him and you stole his place in pictures, tha's what you did."

Anson, Blyth's mute valet, refilled the director's glass and left the patio to answer a distant but insistent door bell.

Postoff broke the awkward silence. "Were you in the interior of China, Mr. Blyth?"

The actor sipped his brandy, hesitated.

DAMN the past! Damn the Marines! Damn Hazzard! Damn John Able! Would the old fool's ghost never lie still in its grave!

"Hell, yes! Of course he has," Master answered for him. "After the picture was in the cans, he and John, and John's wife, Doris, made a personal appearance tour of all the big cities of China. John was trying for a come-back."

The director gulped his brandy, shuddered. "They were in Peiping when the Japs came in. And Blyth left John and his wife to die while he saved his own rotten hide by tipping off the Japanese to how much John and Doris would be worth in ransom."

"That," Blyth said thickly, "is a lie!"

Master ignored him. "Colossal paid a ransom of two hundred thousand dollars." His voice broke slightly. "But we never saw John again, just two shreds of gristle that the Japs claimed were his ears."

The director looked into his empty glass, his nose wrinkling in distaste.

Hazzard told him grimly, "It isn't in your glass, that smell. There is a fifth guest at the table. I've smelled him for

the last couple of hours or so."

Postoff nodded soberly. "Death's stench is very plain tonight." He shrugged with Asiatic fatalism. "I have been wondering beside which one of us he sits."

Blyth scowled uneasily, looked from one face to the other. Neither man was smiling. "What the hell is this, a gag? You *can't* smell death!"

"No?" Hazzard grinned. "I've smelled him many times."

The big Russian nodded sagely.

"All right." Blyth staggered to his feet. His usually well modulated voice was shrill. The face that had thrilled a million women was contorted and livid with rage. "I've tried to let by-gones be by-gones. I've tried to be a gen'laman. But if that's the way it's going to be, you can get the hell on out of here, all of you!"

Hazzard and Postoff rose slowly.

"That," Hazzard smiled, "suits me just fine." He clenched one hard, bronzed fist into a lethal ball, then thought better of the impulse. "I should beat the living hell out of you for several reasons, but I won't, at least not now." He added wryly. "But if I ever do see the old outfit again, I'll remember you to the boys."

"Do that," the actor sneered. "And tell them that—" He stopped abruptly as Anson re-entered the patio, followed by two expressmen carrying a large, burlap-wrapped object on their shoulders.

"You Blyth?" an expressman de-

manded in a rough, deep, booming voice.

The actor eyed the object with distaste. "I am," he admitted. "What do you mean, coming—"

Anson hastily showed the pad. There was a note scribbled on it. Blyth read:

It is insured. They insist that you sign in person.

Master studied the object with drunken approval as the expressmen lowered it to the flagging. "It looks like a coffin."

Postoff slit the burlap with his pen knife. "It is a coffin." His thick lips parted in a mirthless smile. "From some well wisher, no doubt."

Hazzard grinned, "No doubt!"

"Out! Get out of here" Blyth screamed at them.

"With pleasure," Postoff nodded.

Supporting the drunken director between them, the two big men wove their way across the patio and were swallowed by the night.

Alone, Blyth stared hard at the coffin. This was the crowning insult. The evening hadn't gone at all as he had planned. He had thought that Master, Hazzard, and Postoff would be impressed. They hadn't been. All three had reason to hate him. They knew him for what he was, a cheat, a coward, a sham.

His valet touched his elbow and pantomimed a removal of the coffin.

Blyth shook his head. "No. I want to



know just whose idea of a joke this is, before I call in the police," he said. His brandy-numbed fingers fumbled with the thumb screws that held the lid of the coffin in place. "I'm tired of being laughed at. I—"

He stopped, staggered back abruptly, his eyes distended with fear and horror. His mouth gaped, lips quivering.

Once the screws had been loosened, the half lid of the coffin was rising slowly of its own accord.

Then the lid wrenched free and fell, drowning out Blyth's scream. The bony cheeks of the thing were daubed with rouge. Long, black hair grew on a fleshless skull. As Blyth, rooted to the spot in terror, watched, the skull turned to seek him out with eyeless sockets and the hinged, lipless jaws began to move.

"Police?" Anson scribbled the word with trembling fingers.

Blyth shook his head. He knew at a glance whom the bony, graceless, thing in the coffin was meant to represent. "No. You go to bed." He crossed the patio into the house and returned with an automatic. "You go to bed," he repeated. "Forget that you saw the coffin. Forget what you saw in it."

The valet turned and shuffled slowly to the house.

Blyth searched—forced himself to feel the interior of the coffin for hidden wires or springs. Cold sweat drenched his forehead when he found none. He turned and searched the darkness with frantic eyes.

He retreated to the table and sought to drown his growing panic in a great gulp of brandy. He coughed, chokingly, on the fiery stuff.

"Where are you? Where are you?" he demanded.

His hoarse breath was loud in the silence. In the distance a dog began to howl. Outside the patio proper a shadow moved near a pepper bush. Blyth fought his fear, crept toward it stealthily and fired.

It had been a shadow, nothing more. The night closed in around him. He stifled a sob of fear and turned back to the coffin, then whirled again as a twig snapped in the darkness.

"Where are you?" he babbled. "Speak up! Let's talk this over!"

He waited, his knuckle white on the trigger, but the answer did not come.

It was then that he smelled the man behind him and knew that Lee Hazzard had been right—death had been sitting at his table!

He whirled, slaving with fear.

"Anson! Police!" he whimpered. Then he screamed. But the scream died in his throat as the hard heel of a hand struck savagely, shattering his thorax. He tried to run and couldn't. The gun dropped from his hand. Then, eager, white, disembodied hands reached out of the night to batter at his cringing flesh and mash his hands and face into a pulp.

CHAPTER TWO

The Groom Is Dead

"I" LEE HAZZARD mused, "have become a symbol. Politicians wave me with the flag." He brushed the morning paper from the bed.

"I'd rather have Natcha," he thought, "than their plaudits."

His head ached dully from the brandy he'd drunk the night before. He wished he knew where he had gone when he left the last bar he remembered. He wished he was back with his boys. To hell with the fan-fare and glory! He wondered if he could call Colossal Pictures and tell them that the deal was off.

"The Incredible Colonel, hell! I'm getting out of here," he grunted.

He fumbled on the night table for his cigarettes and lit one. Outside the drawn shades of his downtown hotel room win-

dow, Los Angeles moved about its morning business in a soothing blur of sound. The morning drip and stench of the jungle seemed very far away. So did Natcha, for that matter. She was marrying Blyth at noon.

He lay savoring his cigarette and blowing smoke rings at the ceiling. It had been a nice dream while it had lasted. He wondered wryly if she'd wear a veil. He lay thinking of the girl as he had known her.

Skin white ivory, warm and fragrant to the touch. Her lips two splashes of blood. "I, Natcha, White Russian," she had told him on the Bund. "And I hongry, ver' hongry! You like I should be your girl?"

Hazzard crushed out his cigarette. It tasted bitter.

"I like," he told the ceiling grimly. "The trouble was I liked too damn well!"

He re-lived the night of horror when he had lost her. All through the hot China night he had been forced to remain at his street barricade waiting for the war that wasn't to begin until the treacherous little yellow men of Japan dumped their load of hate on Pearl Harbor almost five years later. But it had been touch and go that night in Shanghai. And Natcha had gone up river in the last boat load of evacuees. He still could feel her kisses hot and wet upon his lips as he saw her off.

"I lov' you, Lee! I nevair lov' any other man! You come for Natcha soon!"

She had been crying when she left him. It had been the last time he had seen her. He had searched five years for her, in vain. Pretty white Russian girls named Natcha grew on the trees in China.

The big Marine got to his feet, staggered into the bathroom and showered. To hell with the whole damn mess! He'd head back for the fighting zone as soon as he could get a Clipper.

"Colonel Hazzard! Colonel Hazzard!"

Both the voice and the tap on his door

were insistent. A towel draped around his middle, Hazzard swung it open.

"You Hazzard, Colonel Hazzard?" A grizzled little man in blue serge stood fanning himself with a derby.

The Marine nodded.

Pop Murphy of Homicide felt embarrassed. He wasn't accustomed to running in heroes. "It—it's just for questioning, you understand," he said. "But, if you don't mind, and even if you do, I'd like to have you get your clothes on and come along with me."

Hazzard's gray eyes narrowed. "Come-where?"

The Homicide man eyed him shrewdly. "Out to Blyth's twenty room shanty on the hill-top. It's known you were out there last night, and, well—" he shrugged.

"Blyth's dead," Hazzard guessed. "Someone's killed the louse at last."

Pop Murphy scratched his bald spot. "Well, if he ain't dead," he admitted, "he's sure fooled the Coroner. And that makes him a good actor."

* * *

THE coffin still sat on the patio flagging. Master and Postoff were already there. The big Russian greeted Hazzard with a hand wave. The white-faced director looked as if he wanted to be sick.

"He identified the body," Postoff said.

Inspector Owen shook hands with Hazzard warmly. "I'm sorry to bother you, Colonel, but—"

"No, I didn't kill him," Hazzard said. "Perhaps I should have, but I didn't."

"I'll bet," Pop Murphy said dryly, "that you tell that to all your corpses."

Hazzard glanced at the body the tech men had put on the patio flagging. Whoever killed Blyth had certainly hated him. Eager hands had torn his throat to shreds and the actor's once handsome face had been mashed to a bloody pulp.

Owen felt his way cautiously. "Blyth, of course, was alive when you last saw him?"

"And drunk as a fool," Hazzard said. "None of us were sober."

"And you did have—er—reason to dislike him?"

The big Marine lighted a cigarette and spoke through the match flare. "Very frankly, I hated his guts. We kicked him out of the Marines five years ago. He was a louse, a cheat, and a coward. And when I hit town last night I wasn't very flattered to find that he was impersonating me in the picture Colossal is making—was making," he corrected.

Master conquered his nausea. "Is making," he insisted. "We'll get a *man* to play the part now."

Postoff beamed at the corpse on the flagging. "Did we not tell him we smelled death? Too bad we could not stay to see him die."

Master giggled hysterically. "*Eenie meenie mimie moe!* Which one of us killed him?"

The policeman glanced at the other man sharply. It wasn't a laughing matter.

"I don't suppose," Inspector Owen asked, pointing to the coffin, "that any of you gentlemen will admit sending that to Blyth?"

The three men who had dined with the actor shook their heads. Hazzard tried to remember where he had gone the night before. He remembered parting with Postoff and Master at the curb. Master had insisted that he was not too drunk to drive. Postoff had hailed a cab. He believed that he had headed for the nearest bar but wasn't certain. He knew that he had walked for hours with but one thought pounding through his mind:

Blyth was marrying Natcha in the morning.

"No," he told the Inspector. "I might have come back up here and killed him, though I doubt it. But I didn't send him

the coffin. I wouldn't even know where to buy one."

Master had stopped his hysterical giggling. "I didn't kill him. None of us killed him," he said. "And I'm sick. I had too much to drink last night. And I want to see my lawyer."

Pop Murphy came out of the living room with a typewritten sheet in his hand. "This is Anson's statement."

Owen grunted unhappily. "And this is one hell of a case. An empty coffin, a mangled corpse, and the one guy who might tell us something can't talk." He glowered at the dead man's three guests. "And the rest of you lads won't talk."

Postoff shrugged. "We haven't been asked any questions."

Owen skimmed through the mute Anson's statement:

". . . quarreled with Colonel Hazzard when the Colonel said that he smelled death and Mr. Postoff agreed . . . two expressmen with an object wrapped in burlap. . . . Mr. Postoff cut the wrapping. . . ."

The fat cigar in Owen's mouth paused in its clockwise cycle and tilted skywards sharply. "What the hell?" he demanded. He read again from the statement:

". . . then the skeleton of a woman with rouged cheeks and long black hair sat up in the coffin and the skeleton's jaws began to move. . . ."

Hazzard grew really interested for the first time. "Well I'll be damned!" he said. "Where is the skeleton now?"

O WEN glowered at the valet who had entered the patio with a small, portable bar on wheels. "I didn't see a skeleton," he said. "You saw this?" He jerked the note at Anson, who was watching his lips.

Anson paused in his self assumed duties of a host to lift his right hand. "I did." His lips formed the words distinctly.

Inspector Owen's cigar began to roll again. "Then someone right here in this patio is going to the chair," he promised. "That skeleton and the coffin were just a couple of gags to soften Blyth up before he was pounded to a pulp." He stabbed an accusing finger at Master. "You're a hot-shot director in pictures, Ike. You could rig up a gag like that, a moving skeleton."

"I could," the director admitted, "but I didn't." He gulped the drink that Anson offered him and added, more composed, "I swear on my word of honor, Owen, that I never saw that coffin before I saw

much of your master's finest brandy?"

Anson scribbled on his pad, "I do not drink."

"And you heard no sounds, no screams, or a noise of any kind after Blyth told you to go to bed?" Pop Murphy demanded.

Anson pointed to the statement.

"He says in here," Owen told his assistant, "that he thought he heard both a scream and a shot right after Blyth sent him into the house, but when he came down to investigate Blyth wasn't in the patio. He waited up for him all night and when he hadn't returned by daybreak

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it here last night. And then I was so drunk that until I was picked up this morning I thought I had dreamed it."

Postoff looked suspiciously at Anson.

"How do we know that the valet is not lying? How do we know that he did not kill Mr. Blyth?"

"We don't," Owen admitted sourly. "But on the other hand there's no known reason for him to want to see Blyth dead. This thing has cost him his job."

Anson bobbed his head in somber agreement.

"But in the name of time!" Master demanded. "If there was a skeleton inside the coffin, whose skeleton was it, and where is it now?"

"We'll find it," Owen assured him. He continued to read the mute valet's statement.

Postoff cornered Anson. "You are positive that you *did* see a skeleton in the coffin?" He pantomimed taking a drink. "You are certain that it was not just too

he searched the entire grounds and—"

Master interrupted. "To hell with all that. What I want to know is: are you charging me with Blyth's murder or not?"

"Someone killed him," Pop Murphy pointed out. "And you three were the last guys to see him." He glowered at the trio. "How about it? Anyone care to confess?"

Hazzard poured out a drink and gulped it. An idea was growing in his mind and the more he thought of it, the better he liked it. Feeling about Natcha as he did, he was surprised that he hadn't thought of it before.

"I don't, for one," he admitted. He looked from the corpse on the flagging to Owen. "But how about the bride?"

"What about her?" the Inspector demanded.

"She knows? Has she been told he's dead?"

Inspector Owen shook his head. "Not yet. We— Hey! Just where do you think

you're going? Hold it. Come back here."

Hazzard hesitated briefly in the opening in the patio wall. "I'm under arrest? You're charging me with murder?"

"N-no," Owen admitted, "I'm not." He added dryly. "At least not at the moment."

"Then," Hazzard told him gravely, "I'm going to tell the waiting bride that the bridegroom cometh not."

CHAPTER THREE

The Wild Bullet

THE night plane from Yuma was late. An animated bit of serge in the throng of uniforms, Pop Murphy whistled tunelessly as he lounged around the airport waiting room. He didn't relish what he had to do.

"The damn fool crazy kid," he grunted. "Here we have Postoff nailed down solid in the chair and he has to nudge him out."

He mooched a late edition paper from the newsstand. The whole affair was a press agent's dream. Pictures of Natcha and Lee Hazzard were smeared all over the front page.

"Fast workers, these Marines," he commented to the girl in back of the counter. "He goeth to tell the weeping bride that the bridegroom is a stiff—and elopeth with her to Yuma."

"She's good-looking," the girl admitted.

A group of cameramen and leg-men passed the newsstand on the run. The Yuma plane was circling for a landing. Murphy laid the paper back on the stand with a sigh. His usually mild blue eyes were worried. The newsboys thought they had a story. They didn't know the half of it!

Still whistling tunelessly the aged detective walked out to the barrier. He felt sorry as hell for Hazzard. If the young fool had wanted the pretty little tramp badly enough to kill Blyth for her, why

hadn't he waited a few weeks before he married her? Now, Owen had as sweet a case of circumstantial murder as any Grand Jury ever nursed on. No one, not even a hero could beat this murder rap! It was too pat.

* * *

Aboard the Yuma plane, Hazzard unfastened his wife's safety belt as the wheels of the big plane touched the ground. Natcha smiled up at him rather sadly.

"You weel not regret this, Lee? You weel not grow to hate me? I am theenk for years that you are dead." Twin tears formed in her eyes. "And when I know, eet is too late."

He kissed her tears away. "It's us from now on, kid. What's happened doesn't matter."

The story she had told him was simple. It had also been the truth. She had thought that he was dead. A girl had her way to make, and she had made it. Now they were together again. She still loved him. She had always loved him and that was all that mattered.

Hazzard tightened his arm around his bride.

She wrinkled her nose at him, then beamed through the plane window at the waiting crowd.

"They do not want us to be alone."

"To hell with what they want," he grinned. "You're getting out of this picture racket."

"Whatever you say, Lee," she told him simply.

The stewardess opened the door of the plane and filled Natcha's arms with roses. The crowd began to roar. Flash bulbs exploded as they stepped out on the ramp. Then the familiar *pling* of a bullet sang past Hazzard's ear and thudded into the plane. It went unnoticed in the uproar. All eyes were on Natcha.

The Marine stepped quickly off the low-

wheeled ramp on to the ground. He hadn't been forgotten. He also had a public—of one killer. His eyes stabbed the faces of the crowd, saw no one whom he recognized. He started to stalk on after his bride. The crowd was calling for him now.

A soft voice at his elbow stopped him. "Just a minute, son. We'd like your autograph—down at headquarters."

Hazzard scowled coldly at Pop Murphy and shook off the restraining hand. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Murder," the other man said quietly. "You shouldn't have done it, son. We've got you dead to rights."

Stripped to the waist, his bronzed, muscular torso glistening with sweat, Hazzard stared into the blinding light on Owen's desk.

"No. I didn't kill him," he repeated. "You're making a big mistake."

"I don't think so," Owen said. "We've got too much against you."

"Look, Hazzard," Murphy insisted. "This is almost as tough on us as it is on you. Why don't you make it easy on us all? You'd known the girl before. You'd been sweethearts. You came back and found out that she was marrying Blyth. So, you lost your head and killed him. Is that the way it was?"

"No," Hazzard shook his head. "I'd known Natcha, yes. I knew her years ago, in China."

"And Blyth?" the Inspector asked quietly.

"He was alive when I last saw him. He was staring at a coffin."

Inspector Owen pounded on his desk.

"A coffin *you* sent him!" he roared. "You do admit that you sent Blyth the coffin?"

The Marine Colonel shook his head. "I do not!" He was fighting hard to keep his temper. He wanted to bash in their stupid faces and go to the woman he loved. He wondered why she hadn't called

or shown up at the police station. Both the papers and the radio had been filled with his arrest.

Owen crossed the office and called into the squad room.

"Send in those two expressmen, Mack."

The expressmen shuffled into the office kneading their hats in their hands.

Owen pointed to the man in the chair. "You ever see him before?" he asked.

"I have," an expressman admitted. "Twice. Once when he came to our trucking office with a big burlap wrapped parcel in his car that he wanted us to deliver to Mr. Blyth." He hesitated, added, "And he was out there when we delivered it."

Owen was hard but fair. "Take a good look at him now. You're positive he's the man?"

"Y-yeah, I think he is," the second expressman hesitated.

"Say something," Owen ordered Hazzard.

THE big Marine glowered at the expressmen. "You men are either fools or liars," he boomed. "The first and only time I ever saw either of you was the night you delivered the coffin to Blyth's house."

"So?" Owen asked the two men. "Is it the same voice?"

One of the expressmen was positive that Hazzard was the man. The other wasn't so certain.

"His voice sounds different," he admitted. "It was kinda high and thin before."

"That's all," Owen dismissed them. "On your way out tell Lieutenant Mack to send in Anson."

Blyth's former valet was frightened. He looked like a furtive rabbit afraid of the hewn copper figure on the chair.

"You say, Anson," Owen asked him quietly, "that Colonel Hazzard here told Mr. Blyth that he 'smelled' death, and Blyth took it as a threat?"

The valet scribbled feverishly upon his pad. "Yes, sir. But I don't believe that Colonel Hazzard meant it as a threat." He hesitated, added, "And I don't believe he killed him."

Owen showed the scrawl to Hazzard. "At least you've one supporter."

Hazzard thanked Anson with a nod, demanded, "And just when do I see a lawyer?"

"You don't," Pop Murphy told him wearily. "At least, not until we break you. Hell, you being the popular public figure that you are we'd probably be strung up for trying to do our duty." He resumed the routine questioning. "How long have you known Natcha?"

"Five years," Hazzard admitted. "I met her in Shanghai."

"And it had been how long since you last saw her until you called on her and told her Blyth was dead?"

"Five years," Hazzard grinned. "Make something out of that."

"I think I can," Owen told him grimly. "You knew she'd been married to Postoff and that this switch to Blyth was just one step up the ladder?"

Hazzard got slowly to his feet. He hadn't known. That had been one thing Natcha hadn't told him. But if she had been married to Postoff he thought he knew now who it was who had murdered Blyth! The big Russian had baited Blyth all evening.

"I want out of here," he said. "If what you tell me is the truth, then Natcha isn't safe. Postoff will kill her, too."

"Sit down." Owen attempted to force the Marine back into his chair.

"No."

The Marine's left fist flashed in a lethal arc that crumpled Owen on the floor.

"Here!" Pop Murphy said. "You can't get away with—" He stopped as Hazzard leveled Owen's gun upon his middle.

"I can—and I have," Hazzard said. He slipped into his shirt and transferred the

gun to his other hand as he reached for his coat. "And I'm leaving here, right now."

Murphy's hand streaked for his gun—too late. The barrel of the gun in Hazzard's hand slapped sideways swiftly and struck the other man a blow beneath the ribs that paralyzed the nerve centers of his body.

Anson cowered against the wall, gibbering in fear.

Far below on the busy corner a newsboy's voice rose shrilly in the sudden silence in the office:

"The Incredible Colonel arrested for moider. Police claim he killed Blyth to wed film star!"

Hazzard remembered the thudding bullet that had smacked into the plane as he started for the outer office and smiled grimly. He hadn't killed anyone—yet!

"But the night," he told Anson in parting, "is still young."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Skeleton In Red

THE house was large, and white, and rambling. A typical movie version of a butler answered Hazzard's insistent ring. He stared, haughtily.

"No. I'm sorry," he informed him, "but Miss Natcha is not at home."

"Mrs. Lee Hazzard," Lee corrected. "I'm her husband."

The butler shrank from him slightly. "I'm sorry," he repeated, "but Mrs. Hazzard is not at home. She left shortly before your arrival in response to an urgent phone call."

The Marine brushed past him and into the house.

"A phone call from who?" he demanded.

The too English butler shook his head. "I regret I cannot inform you, sir. Miss Natcha—er—Mrs. Hazzard did not say."

Hazzard doubted the man was lying. Natcha wasn't home. She had no reason to avoid him. It was possible, very probable that even now she was on her way to the Detective Bureau out of which he had slugged his way. He sat down on a sofa to think and the butler set a decanter and glass beside him.

He made no mention of the paper that lay open on the table its headline screaming:

HERO ARRESTED FOR MURDER!

Hazzard poured himself a drink and sipped it. He was next on the killer's list and he knew it. The problem was how he could contact the killer. By now every prowler in the city would be howling for him.

"You knew Natcha had been married to Postoff?" he demanded.

The liveried butler shook his head. "I am merely Miss Natcha's butler," he said simply.

Hazzard tried another tack.

"Then perhaps you can tell me this: Do you know if Ike Master and the old silent picture star John Able were good friends?"

"They were, sir," the butler told him. "They were inseparable. They were the Damon and Pythias of Hollywood."

Hazzard poured himself another drink. That was something new to chew on. He skimmed through the paper on the table. But there was nothing he did not know. Blyth's film career had been meteoric. He was a new and dynamic male star. He had replaced the once famous silent picture star, John Able, as Hollywood's favorite blue-shirt leading man.

The little veins in Hazzard's temples began to throb. The thing was mad, impossible, but it could be! Someone had impersonated him when the coffin had been delivered to the trucking office. It was just possible that someone was—

"Where," he demanded of the butler,

"would I find Ike Master at this time of night?"

The butler dialed the home of the director, spoke briefly to Master's butler and hung up.

"He is believed to be in his office at the studio. At least he left for there an hour ago."

Hazzard got to his feet. "And as soon as I leave here you're going to phone the police, tell them that I've been here, and where you think I'm headed."

The butler grew suddenly human. "No, sir," he said simply. "I don't believe you did it. I was a Marine in the last war. My boy's a Marine in this one. And we leathernecks have always stuck together."

"Thanks," Hazzard said. They shook hands.

The big Marine felt better than he had for hours. He decided to see Ike Master next. There was a lot that Colossal's ace director could explain if he would.

On the curved walk in front of Natcha's home he paused to light a cigarette. The cab he had told to wait was still standing at the curb. He started towards the cab, stopped as he felt the hard, round, muzzle of a gun press firmly against his spine. The deep voice that spoke from behind him was filled with passion.

"You will please to keep on walking," the Russian said. "I have a wish to show you something."

Hazzard asked, "Up the street or down?"

"To the cab at the curb," Postoff instructed coldly. "Tell the driver to take us to the side gate of the Colossal studio lot."

THE Marine Colonel hesitated briefly and the gun dug into his spine. "Refuse, and I shoot you here."

Hazzard shrugged, climbed into the cab, and gave his instructions to the driver. The affair was failing to make sense. If Postoff had killed Blyth, if he hated him

enough to have made one try for his life at the airport, why was he wasting time? Why hadn't he simply blasted him off of the walk as he had come out of Natcha's door?

He turned to the man on the seat beside him. "What is it you want me to see, Postoff? That is," he added in sudden suspicion, "if you're Postoff."

"I am Postoff," the other man assured him. "And you know what I wish you to see. It is the body of a woman."

"The body of a woman?" Hazzard puzzled.

"The body of a woman," the Russian echoed grimly. "And when you have looked upon her for the last time—"

"Yes?"

"Then I am going to shoot you," Postoff told him quietly.

Hazzard made no reply. At the moment there was nothing he could say.

The dark, palm-lined street was deserted. There was no sound but the rustling of the dry palm fronds overhead and the distant screaming of a prowler car.

"Pay the driver," Postoff insisted.

Hazzard hesitated briefly. The gun-muzzle was still digging into his spine. He thrust a hand into his pocket.

"You can keep the change," he told the driver. "And you needn't wait this time."

The cab driver eyed them sharply, then drove away fast.

But for the lights in the guard house at the main gates, a light in Mark Master's office, and a light in the portable bungalow dressing room used by Natcha, the great Colossal lot lay in darkness. Due to the general coastal dim-out, even the street lamps were unlighted.

There were no guards at the side gate. Postoff opened them with a key. The gun ever insistent in his back, Hazzard allowed himself to be prodded down a fantastic studio street lighted only by a crescent moon. Across from a towering black

pagoda Postoff stopped him before a dressing room bungalow door.

"Inside," the Russian said quietly. "The dead woman I wish you to see waits."

Hazzard looked at the dimly lighted door. Above it was the legend:

Through This Doorway Passes
NATCHA
Hollywood's Most Beautiful Woman

"Inside," Postoff insisted.

Hazzard opened the door, entered.

The skeleton of a woman fantastically dressed in scarlet silk scanties and bra sat in a tufted taffeta chair before a huge wall make-up mirror edged with lights.

"You're mad! You're nuts!" Hazzard said. He had the whole story now. He knew who the killer was—and Postoff wasn't the man.

"Behind you," the Russian gritted. "You will please to turn around and look at the woman you have killed and not at the skeleton buffon."

The big Marine turned slowly, fear clutching at his heart.

Small and still and white, Natcha lay on a studio couch, the left breast of her traveling suit stained with blood. He attempted to kneel beside her and Postoff stopped him.

"No," he said sharply. "No. In death she belongs to me."

Hazzard stared, grim-eyed, at his bride. "I don't suppose," he asked quietly, "that it would do any good to tell you that I didn't kill her?"

"It would not," Postoff said.

Hazzard touched his bride's cheek with his hand. It was warm. "Then suppose you tell me this: Why in the name of God would I kill her? I loved her. I've loved her for five years."

POSTOFF had the answer to that. The man was half insane with jealous rage. "Because you learned that she had made a fool of you! You learned that

she had merely married you, as she intended to marry Blyth, for the publicity it would bring. You learned that it was really me," the big Russian beat his barrel chest with one fist, "Postoff whom she loved, Postoff who helped her escape from China, Postoff who worshipped the ground on which she walked." The Russian exploded a great breath.

Hazzard made no answer. There was no need to add to the Russian's grief. If Natcha had refrained from telling him of Postoff it was equally obvious she had not told the other man of him. A girl had her way to make—and she had made it.

But the Russian hadn't killed her. Neither had he killed Blyth, nor fired the shot at him. Hazzard was certain of that now. The killer was insane, a madman who played with death and prop-room skeletons as saner men move checkers on a board. He was possibly, probably, even now watching the two big men in the dressing room, planning their demise. Both of them knew too much, once the facts had been fitted together.

The pressure of the gun in his spine had lessened and Hazzard ventured a step toward the door.

"No," Postoff stopped him. "No." He tossed the gun on the couch beside Natcha. "The stench of death is very close again tonight." The statement was almost sobbed. "With my two hands I shall kill you."

Hazzard slid out of his coat. "You're making a big mistake," he said quietly. "I am not the man you want. I can assure you of that."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Undead

THE Russian circled cautiously, then danced in and back, the hard heel of his hand slashing viciously upwards in a death blow. The Marine

blocked it with his elbow and countered with a stinging right to Postoff's temple. The Russian merely shook his head and continued to bore in, trying for Hazzard's ribs, his kidneys.

Hazzard gave ground slowly. A man who wants to die, and in his dying take you with him, is a difficult man to fight—especially if he, too, knows dirty fighting and you have no desire to kill him. The dressing room wall at his back, Hazzard forced the fight out to the center of the room, the Russian contesting every step, now slashing with the heel of his hand, now landing a solid blow, one after the other.

Sweat began to bead on both men's faces.

Postoff fought doggedly, determined. Hazzard slashed, retreated, and punched with the precision of a machine. The deep carpet muffled their footsteps. The only sound was their rhythmic breathing and an occasional hack as one man or the other cleared his throat.

Postoff was the first to speak. "You should have been with me in Stalingrad last winter," he panted. "You are a ver' hard man to kill."

"It's practically impossible," Hazzard assured him.

They were trading punches now in the center of the room. Postoff tried to break Hazzard's shin with a raking cow kick and the Marine blocked him with his thigh, then stepped back quickly, his back half turned to the other man.

The Russian walked into the trap. He lunged both big arms extended for a bear hug that would crush Hazzard's ribs to matter. But Hazzard wasn't there. He had sidestepped and turned, and turned again, one lethal fist connecting with Postoff's jaw. He followed it with a left, and then a right, and a left, and a right.

His eyes staring, glassy, unseeing, the Russian's knees gave away and he crumpled to the floor, his head smacking the

baseboard sharply, in a sickening thud.

Sucking breath in great gulps Hazzard crossed the dressing room to kneel beside his bride. Morals, he reflected, had little to do with beauty. In death the tempestuous film star still looked like the little White Russian girl he had known.

"I Natcha, White Russian," she had told him on the Bund. "And I hongry—ver' hongry. You like I should be your girl?"

"You bet I like," he said softly. "You'll always be my girl."

He kissed her—found her lips still warm! He scrambled to his feet. Post-off had been mistaken! The girl's pulse still beat feebly. She might be dying but she wasn't dead. His eyes searched the dressing room for a phone and found none. He had, somehow, to call a doctor!

The Colossal lot seemed even darker than it had been before. The silhouette of the false-fronted pagoda across the street loomed a dark and ominous mass against the fleecy clouds that hid the moon. Behind it shone a lighted window in what he knew to be Ike Master's office window.

Hazzard raced across a sound lot towards the light.

The door which opened into the hallway was dark but a crack of light shone under the door of the office on the second floor.

"Ike! Master!" Hazzard called. He bounded up the stairs and burst in through the door.

A man lay on the floor, face down. There was a spreading pool of blood beneath his chest. Hazzard could not see his face. He strode over to the body, stopped to listen. There was no sound, no motion. So far as he could tell there was no one in the building but himself and the dead man on the floor.

He glanced swiftly around the office for a phone and stepped across the body to the desk on which it stood. There was no click or buzz. The line was dead. The

phone wire had been cut clean through.

Hazzard lowered his eyes to the body on the floor. The clothes were those of Anson, Blyth's rabbity, mute, valet. He tried to turn the body with his foot and couldn't. He knelt beside it and felt the flesh. It still was warm. Cursing, he used both hands to turn the body over, gasped.

The clothes were the clothes of Anson, but the lean, fallow face was that of Ike Master, the director!

A high, reedy voice jeered from the open window.

"You seem surprised, Colonel Hazzard."

The Marine whirled on his knees toward the window. There was nothing, no one there!

He turned back to the man on the floor—too late. One of the supposedly dead man's arms had locked itself around his throat in a steely embrace of death. As he twisted, vainly, to get free, the dead man's other arm swung up.

Hazzard saw that it held a gun. It was all he had time to see. The gun exploded in his face with a concussion that rocked the office.

CHAPTER SIX

Terror's Finale

THE smell of blood was warm, and fresh, and strong. Hazzard opened his eyes on darkness. He tried to move and couldn't. A heavy weight pressed him down.

"I've been buried alive," he thought.

Then he found that his feet were tied. The whole side of his head throbbed madly. He could move his fingertips slightly. The surface they touched felt like silk.

"I'm in a coffin," was his second conscious thought.

A door opened somewhere nearby. A light switch clicked and the dark gave away to light. Hazzard lay motionless

staring up into the face of the object that pressed him down.

"You," Ike Master's voice repeated what Postoff had just said, "are a hard man to kill, Colonel Hazzard."

The Marine cleared his throat of blood. The voice was the voice of Ike Master, but it wasn't Master speaking. That hard-drinking, eccentric genius was dead. His gray-green, sightless eyes were a half inch from Hazzard's face. His body was the weight that held him down.

"So," Hazzard said finally, "it was you, Anson, after all."

The other man rolled Master's body to the floor like so much cord wood.

"Anson is dead," he said. "He died when I put his clothes on Ike. From now on my name is Ike Master."

Hazzard shook his head and veins of pain shot through it. "No. You won't get away with it. You look like Ike Master. You talk like Ike Master. But you aren't Ike Master."

Disregarding the pain, he raised his head. He had been carried from the office back to Natcha's dressing room. The skeleton still sat before the mirror. Natcha still lay on the couch. Postoff was still slumped against the baseboard. Hazzard hoped that he wasn't dead.

"No," he repeated. "You can't get away with this. The best thing that you can do is to climb back into your coffin."

He hunched his body against the wall in an effort to sit up. Something sharp bit into his hand. He felt it with his fingers and decided that it was a bit of broken mirror. He talked to cover his stealthy movements as he began to saw at the cords on his wrists.

"When Anson disappears they'll suspect that he killed Blyth. Inspector Owen isn't a fool. He'll trace it back and find out it was you who killed him and tried to pin the blame on me."

The other man hooted.

"So what? Anson isn't going to dis-

appear." He nudged the dead director with his toe. "You see, Ike is going to play Anson in the fire scene. Anson is dying right here in Natcha's dressing room with Postoff, Natcha, and yourself."

Of one thing there was no doubt. The man was a capable actor. He paused dramatically to paint a picture.

"I can see the headlines now—Hero and beautiful film star die with film star's former husband, and fiance's valet, in tragic fire following a drunken studio party. The exact cause of the fire is unknown."

Hazzard continued to saw grimly at the cord.

The man did not see his stealthy movements for he was making his final preparations by drenching. Natcha's clothes and hair with whiskey. He poured the last few drops of the whiskey into her mouth, laughed wildly.

"The most beautiful woman in Hollywood!" he scoffed. "I loved one twice as beautiful!"

Hazzard sawed desperately at the cord.

"But she wasn't in Hollywood, was she?" he said quietly. "She was the girl you wanted Blyth to think of when you sent him the skeleton in the coffin."

"I loved her," the other man said simply. "She was my wife." His voice grew bleak. "I saw her tortured and burned before she died." He laughed insanely. "But it doesn't matter now. Nothing matters. Hollywood is filled with beautiful women. As the great Ike Master, I can have my choice."

HE transferred a heavy ring from his finger to the dead director's hand. "A drunken party, that's what it was. You came here and found Postoff, Natcha's former husband, making love to your bride. In an insane fit of jealous rage you killed them both."

"You're talking like a scenario," Hazzard taunted. "How about the fire?"

The other man shrugged. "Fires start in all sorts of ways. Perhaps you upset the Sterno samovar on which she was making tea. What difference does it make? Anson was here—" he paused briefly to sprinkle a powder that Hazzard knew was probably a form of thermite, over Master's body, "Anson was here," he continued, "because he wanted the money that you had promised him for killing Blyth."

Hazzard continued the story. It was mad but plausible. In Hollywood anything could happen. It often did.

His preparations completed, the mad man lighted a cigarette and toyed a moment with the lighted match before he blew it out.

"When did you learn who I really was?" he said.

"Not soon enough," Hazzard admitted. "I was dumb. Your playing mute fooled me, for one thing. And you've had a plastic surgical operation."

"In China," the other man nodded. "I had them copy Ike Master's face. I planned this a long time."

He lighted another match. Hazzard talked desperately. The cord on his wrist refused to part.

"But why in the name of God did you choose to impersonate Ike? Ike Master was your friend."

"I have no friends," the other man said bleakly. "I've been in hell too long."

Hazzard glanced at his wife on the couch. He would have sworn he had seen her move. "And Natcha?" he demanded. "Why drag her into this?"

The madman chuckled. "She came here to talk to Ike about getting a lawyer for you. She was with him when he recognized me." He shrugged. "There was nothing else that I could do. I had only planned to kill Ike. But this way will be much better."

He built a trail of thermite to the door. The big Russian on the floor sat up

abruptly and gathered his muscles to leap.

"I wouldn't!" a voice called sharply from behind him.

Hazzard called out a warning too late. As Postoff turned to face the voice, the killer stepped across the room and smashed at the base of his skull with a filled whiskey bottle. The Russian collapsed and lay still.

"A marvelous art, ventriloquism," the killer smirked at Hazzard. "I had a lot of fun with Blyth before he died."

He struck a third match casually and backed toward the dressing-room door.

"Wait," Hazzard begged. He struggled to his feet. "You can't do this. It's murder. You're headed for the chair."

The other man shook his head.

"Don't fool yourself, Marine. I'm not going to the chair." He grinned insanely. "As a tribute to Ike's memory and genius I'm going to continue his career."

Hazzard dropped the useless piece of mirror and strained against the cord. "You can't get away with this. You'll be suspected."

"Of what?" the other man jeered. "Insanity? Certainly I'm mad. Ike was mad. All great genius is mad." The match burned his fingers and he blew it out. "But I'm not too insane to clear the skirts of the man whom I propose to be. While you were still unconscious I went out to the guards at the gate and told them you and Natcha and Postoff were staging a drunken party. They know the police are looking for you. Maybe they've called them by now. Ike Master was disgusted. He went home. They saw me go. So—" he smiled farewell.

The cord on Hazzard's wrists broke.

"So," he said quietly. "So." He lunged.

THE killer screamed and tried to back away, his hands clawing a gun from his pocket. Hazzard's numbed hands dug like claws into his flesh.

He had only one object in mind. That was to kill as quickly as he could and go get a doctor for Natcha.

The other man threw himself backwards, arched his body and tore free.

"Damn you! Damn you!" he panted. "I can't lose now! I won't lose now!"

He fought with insane fury, smashing the barrel of his gun into Hazzard's face. The Marine grunted but held on, waiting for his head to clear.

The killer's breath was coming in tortured gasps. He staggered to the door, dragging Hazzard with him. Then he tore loose and ran—into Pop Murphy's arms.

"Get a doctor," Hazzard gasped. "I don't think she's dead."

"I'll doctor you!" Owen bellowed. "Now you've done it, you crazy fool! We've got you dead to rights!"

Murphy brushed past him into the dressing room and stooped down. "Gee whiz!" he breathed. He knelt by Natcha's side, then bellowed for a doctor at the top of his voice.

Hazzard tried to re-enter the dressing room and fell. Inspector Owen saw for the first time that the big Marine's ankles were tied. He cuffed the squirming man that Murphy had thrust at him. The truth was dawning slowly.

"You mean," he demanded, incredulous, "that Ike Master was our killer all along?"

Hazzard ignored him to ask Murphy: "She'll live? You think she'll live?"

The detective felt her pulse and nodded. "I do that," he said quietly. He looked at the unconscious Russian. "Which one stabbed her?"

"Postoff or Master?" Owen asked.

Hazzard sat down on the couch with his bride and cut at the rope on his ankles with Pop Murphy's knife. "Neither," he said grimly.

Inspector Owen stared, puzzled, at the slaver man he held, then at the dead

director on the floor. "What the hell?" he demanded.

"You knew him as Anson, Blyth's valet," Hazzard told him curtly. "But his name isn't Anson either. His real name is John Able."

"Able. John Able!" Owen gasped.

Hazzard looked at the man with pity. "Right. John Able, the old silent picture star. Blyth stole his job and left him to die in China. But he didn't die."

He watched Inspector Owen lead the gibbering figure away then turned back to his wife. A faint flush had come into her cheeks. Her eyes were open.

"Don't try to talk, hon," he told her. "Everything's going to be just swell. There's a doctor on his way."

Hazzard held his wife's hand in silence, listening to the scraps of conversation that floated in through the open doorway.

Inspector Owen was talking now. "And so," he told the reporters who had trailed them, "you may say that by clever police work we got here just in time."

A hearty Bronx cheer put a period to the statement.

"Says you!" the cab driver snorted. "I knew something's wrong right away when the Colonel gives me his Congressional Medal of Honor for a one buck and four bit bill and tells me to keep the change. So I sees my duty—and I done it. I highball for the cops."

Pop Murphy cleared his throat and laid a hand on Hazzard's shoulder. "Don't worry, son." A siren wailed in the distance. "Here's the ambulance coming now. She's going to be all right."

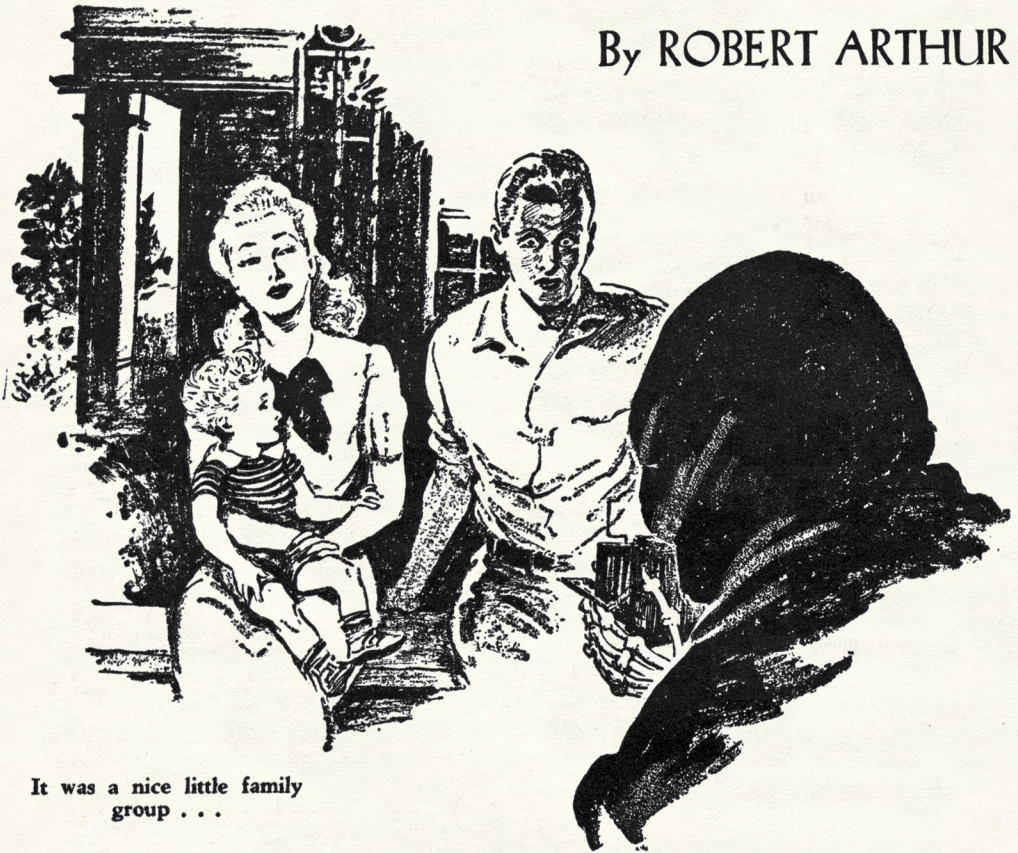
The girl on the couch moved uneasily, her eyes fixed on her husband's face. Her words, so softly spoken he had to put his ear down to her lips to hear, were:

"I lov' you, Lee. I neva' lov' any other man. You still like I should be your girl?"

"I like," her husband told her.

SATAN'S CAMERA

By ROBERT ARTHUR



It was a nice little family group . . .

Helplessly Joe Phillips watched the old man crawl around on hands and knees, frantically trying to escape from the film—while over them both stood the Devil, rubbing his hands in glee!

“OH, IT will take pictures,” the tall man said. “Extraordinary ones.” His smile was curious, but Joe Phillips, turning the shabby old camera around in his hands, did not notice. “I’ll guarantee that. Just pay a five-dollar deposit and sign an agreement to pay the other twenty in four monthly installments and it’s yours. Then if you don’t like it, bring it back, I’ll refund your money, and we’ll call the whole deal off.”

“Hmm. That seems fair enough.” Joe Phillips squinted down his nose at the camera, which did not even carry a maker’s

nameplate. The tall man with the sleek dark hair lit a cigarette and waited for him to finish his examination. The hotel room to which Joe had come in answer to the advertising circular that had been in his morning mail was hot and stuffy, and the fumes of the cigarette were pungent and choking. Joe coughed, and the tall man threw up a window, letting in warm, fresh air.

There was nothing extraordinary about the camera Joe Phillips was examining, but the lens did look like a good one. If it was, the price was cheap. It was the

price which had attracted his attention to the listing in that circular, which he had read on the train coming in to work that morning:

From the estate of N. M. Payne. Small graflex type camera, 3x4. Possibly Swiss, but contains no maker's name. Old but in good condition. Lens about 3.5, shutter speed up to 1/500. Only \$25. Terms.

There were other items listed but Joe was interested only in the camera.

Joe didn't have twenty-five dollars to spare—you didn't, on the salary of a junior accountant, with a wife and baby to support—but he'd been wanting a camera for a long time, so that Nell could take pictures of Joe, junior. So curiosity had brought him to the hotel address given in the circular, a good Times Square hotel, and now, looking at the old camera, he felt temptation tugging at him like some persistent hand.

"If it's such a good buy," he asked gaily, "why hasn't someone bought it already? I'm not the first to look at it, am I?"

"As a matter of fact, you're the third," the tall man told him. "The other two bought other items. But this one is a bargain, take my word for it. I bought up all of Payne's stuff after he died so suddenly—I knew him rather well—and all I want is to get the stuff off my hands. As I say, I'll sell it on terms, and throw in a couple of rolls of special film to boot. If you're curious, here's a sample of the kind of work that lens will do."

From a briefcase of well-worn leather the tall man took out a print of a young girl in her teens, wide-eyed, smiling. It was remarkably fresh and alive, the highlights in the hair showing golden, the girl's face bright with budding youth and loveliness.

"Payne caught something there you don't usually get in a photograph," the tall man remarked. "And here's another—a self-portrait Payne took the very day

he died, poor devil. Unusual, isn't it?"

Joe took the second print. It was a three-quarter view of Payne's face as Joe remembered it from having met him once at a prize exhibition. Dark, saturnine, heavy-featured, amazingly life-like.

"Really has caught him the way he was, hasn't it?" the tall man asked.

Joe nodded agreement and rubbed his jaw. He was struggling with himself. He did have five dollars on him—Nell had saved it a little at a time, given it to him to make the first payment on a summer suit. He needed one, Lord knew. But his fingers itched to try that camera. For only an instant he struggled against temptation. Then he drew in a deep breath.

"It's a deal," he said. He took out the carefully hoarded five and passed it over. "The rest in monthly installments, you say? Okay, what do I sign?"

The other handed him a stiff, heavy sheet of paper. As Joe took it, his reaching hand brushed against the old camera, sending it with a crash to the floor.

JOE gulped, and paled. You couldn't do that to a good camera without ruining it. Now he was out twenty-five dollars! That was a lot of money.

But the tall, dark man stooped lithely, whipped the camera up, and handed it to him.

"Not hurt a bit," he chuckled. "This box is built to give service under any conditions. You couldn't hurt it with an axe, even if you wanted to."

Joe Phillips gave a relieved sigh and grinned at the exaggeration. It was true, the camera was uninjured. He put it to one side and read over the sales contract. It seemed straight-forward enough. . . . *do hereby agree in case of failure for any reason to make payments as stipulated . . . ownership of said camera reverts to party of the first part . . . together with all film negatives taken by it . . . all prints*

from said negatives . . . party of second part having no recourse in case payments are not made upon due date. . . .

"That gives me absolute ownership of any film you expose and any prints you make, if you don't keep up the payments," the tall man explained. "Gives you an incentive, you see, to finish the payments even if you're hard up. Just a little extra protection for me."

Joe Phillips nodded, and signed. The tall man signed beneath him, with a flourish, folded the contract and put it away.

"I'll take the camera with me unwrapped," Joe told him. "Might see something on the way to the office I want to shoot."

The other nodded.

"Here's the couple of rolls of special film I said I'd throw in," he said, and handed them over. "If you like it, come back. I have plenty more I can sell you cheap. I'll be here for quite a stay. Just send your payments to this address."

He walked with an imperceptible limp across to the door and held it open. As Joe went out he was smiling that curious smile, but Joe Phillips didn't notice. He was busy putting the first roll of film into the camera.

He had used all but twenty minutes of his lunch hour, so he had to hurry to get back and punch in on time. But Bryant Park, behind the library, was on his way, and cutting through it he managed, using a newspaper to conceal the camera, to get a nice close-up of an old bum with ragged whiskers patiently coaxing a pigeon to eat out of his grimy palm.

Then, further on, he was able to take a nicely composed shot of a school girl with horn-rimmed spectacles and earnest features sitting on one of the concrete benches, absorbed in a large book. Joe grinned to himself as he thought of her surprise if she'd looked up to see him taking her picture.

They were both nice, informal portraits

and, if they came out right, either of them might win him the price of the camera in some newspaper snapshot competition. Pleased, and already forgetting the suit Nell had wanted him to buy, he presently ducked into his office building and checked in with only seconds to spare.

That evening, though, riding the local back to Bayside, he remembered about the suit and grimaced. It was a good thing Nell was a swell girl. She'd fuss at him, then to show him she really did love him and didn't want to nag, she'd make him some lemonade.

So, over the lemonade, he made a virtue out of his impulse.

"See, hon," he said, drawing Nell down beside him onto the swing at the end of their tiny lawn, close to the low, rose-covered rock wall he'd built. "I got the camera for you, really. It'll be easy to handle. You can take close-ups or long shots—just turn this knob in or out. Besides, the prints are three by four, a nice size for an album."

Nell grinned at him, frankly and gaily. She was tall and graceful, with straw-colored hair and a dust of freckles across her nose. They were very fond of each other.

"You bought it for me?" she said. "Phooie! Next Christmas you'll see. I'll give you silk stockings!"

Then he kissed her and they settled back to enjoy the sunset while they drank their lemonade, happily forgetful of unbought new suits and necessary economies. If the kid hadn't been sound asleep, Joe would have tried a few snaps of him then and there. But tomorrow was Saturday and he'd only work half the day. They'd take a whole roll of her and Joe, Junior, he told her, on Saturday afternoon.

SATURDAY, however, did not work out as Joe had planned. Instead of getting off at one, the whole force had to stay until the semi-monthly bal-

ance sheets were out, so it was almost four by the time he got home.

On the train he read the afternoon paper—he'd skipped the morning paper, being absorbed in a new technical magazine that had come in the mail—and it left him feeling a little gloomy. Yesterday had been hot, and several people had keeled over from the heat. Two had died, both of them in Bryant Park, shortly after noon. An old derelict, name unknown, had toppled over while feeding the pigeons, and almost at the same time a schoolgirl had collapsed while boarding a bus at Sixth Avenue and Forty-second street. Both had been dead by the time the ambulance got there.

Joe Phillips folded the paper and tucked it into his pocket. He'd taken pictures of an old bum and a schoolgirl in Bryant Park about that time, and it was quite possible either of them might be one of the two who had succumbed to the heat. The coincidence upset him a little, and he put it out of his mind by planning how he'd pose Nell and the baby that afternoon.

But when he got home, it turned out that Joe, junior, had a cold and his eyes were puffy. Nell had been cleaning house in the heat; her hair was uncurled, her face flushed and damp. She was averse to having either her picture or her baby's taken under such conditions. So while she took a bath and rested, Joe wandered out with the box to finish off the pack of films so he could develop the pictures that night.

Before the light faded too much, he exposed the rest of his pack of film, mostly

on beach and water shots, getting in some old fishing docks and ancient boats bobbing at their moorings in the placid water. Then, with only one exposure left, he came across a subject that was a natural.

A boy and a girl sitting on the edge of a rickety old wharf, their feet dangling above the sun-flecked water. Nineteen or twenty, nice looking, lost in each other. In fact, when Joe clicked the shutter, they were kissing each other.

Feeling pleased, Joe Phillips turned and left them to their solitude again, strolling back to the little bungalow a couple of blocks from the shore. The heat was fading as the sun set. A cool breeze was coming in off the water, and by the time he reached home, his spirits were revived.

So much so that instead of staying in to develop film that night, he put the chore off until Sunday morning and he and Nell went to the movies; the girl from next door coming over to mind Joe, junior, who was fretful from the heat.

He and Nell held hands in the movies, had a soda afterwards, walked through the moonlit night homeward in silence, and were well content.

In the morning, Joe Phillips went down to his darkroom immediately after breakfast, leaving the papers to Nell.

He hadn't slept well. Nightmares had ridden him. He couldn't remember them now, but the feeling of heaviness and horror they had inspired still lingered.

He felt depressed and nervous, unusual for him, as he got his developer and fixer prepared, started the water running through his washing pans, and began with skillful fingers to develop his pack of film.

General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell

**needs fighter planes and bombers. You can help him get 'em—
by topping that 10% in WAR BONDS!**

The feeling passed somewhat as he took his negatives from the fixer and held them briefly up to the dim red bulb he was working by. In the uncertain light, they looked good. He washed and dried them and ran off a print of each.

It took only a few minutes. Presently he was able to turn on the overhead bulb and examine what he'd gotten.

And as he shuffled through the handful of prints, pleasure glowed in him. They were good. They were damned good! The old bum, the schoolgirl, the two kids kissing on the dock, even the water scenes and the boats were all potential prize winners. They had a vividness and clarity you almost never caught. Life breathed in them.



Whistling, his gloomy spirits dissipated, he made another print of each of the three having human subjects, figuring he'd send them off that day to the *Herald's* weekly contest. It would be pretty tough if he didn't win at least five bucks with one of them.

Then, having squeezed the second set of prints dry, he turned on the light and examined them.

And something like a constricting hand clamped around his chest.

In between the first and second prints, the negatives had changed!

JOE PHILLIPS' lips were dry as he snatched up the original prints and compared them with the second batch. Yes, they were different. It was not just a trick of his imagination. . . .

In the second print of the old bum who

had been feeding the pigeon, the man was looking up, his whiskered face bewildered. In the second print of the schoolgirl, the girl had half closed her book and was staring straight out at Joe, fear dawning on her face. The two kids on the dock were not kissing in the second print. They'd drawn slightly apart and were staring toward the camera as if startled.

Joe Phillips, licking his lips nervously, looked from one to another of the pictures and tried to draw in a deep breath, without being able to. This was—was—

But he couldn't find the word. He didn't know what it was!

His hand shook as he took up the negatives and held them one after another to the light. They *had* changed since the first print. And even as he looked at them now they seemed to be changing more!

Making each move with an effort, Joe Phillips drew off a third set of prints.

It took almost fifteen minutes. He was working with exaggerated care, and his fingers were stiff and wooden. But at last he had the new prints washed. Without waiting to dry them he turned on the light.

This time he made a little, involuntary sound, and mechanically wiped his wet hand across his face without even being aware of it.

In the third print, the figures had moved still more!

The old derelict was standing up, his mouth open as if to yell, bleary eyes terror-stricken. The schoolgirl had dropped her book. One hand was pressed to her mouth, the other outstretched, as if to ward off something out of the camera's range. Joe Phillips could almost hear her soundless cry.

And the boy and the girl on the dock had started to rise. On one knee, the boy was helping the girl up. Terror was stamped on their young faces. One of the boy's arms was around the girl's shoulders, as if to protect her from something.

Joe Phillips swallowed, and swallowed again, but could not clear his throat. He licked his lips, and they remained dry. Numbly he took up one of the negatives and held it to the light. It was the one of the old derelict. As he stared at it he saw the figure on the film move!

It slipped with horrible slowness toward the edge of the film, one hand stretched out. The hand reached the white band around the scene, pushed, as if trying to push out of the picture, and could not. In the reversed black and white it was difficult to read the emotion on the old fellow's face accurately. But Joe Phillips could tell that it was one of dazed terror, infinitely dreadful in the distortion of the negative.

For a moment the figure pushed desperately at the white margin. Then, the lights and shadows slowly shifting, forming and reforming, the old bum dropped to his knees and began to crawl with aw-

ful, desperate slowness around the whole perimeter of the film.

Trying to find a way out of it, and not finding one . . .

After a long time, Joe Phillips put down that negative and with shaking hand and fingers that had no sense of touch in them, took up the one of the schoolgirl. She was standing now, hand over her eyes, and she was screaming . . .

He dropped the film quickly. The third, of the boy and girl together, he did not pick up again. Instead, he gathered all three together and lit a match, with trembling fingers touched it to the corners of the negatives.

Then he waited for the celluloid to catch and burst into cleansing flame . . .

But it did not catch!

The match burned out. Feverishly Joe lit another, held it to the films. They did not even char. Joe dropped the match from shaking fingers and snatched up his

Tip for Crime-Fiction Fans: Ride Your Dough on . . .

THE PROFITABLE CORPSE

. . . and watch Inspector Allhoff, the coffee-swilling Satan of Centre Street, cash in on the cadaver of Sammy Slade. Also present, of course, are Battersly and Sergeant Simmonds—clay-pigeons-in-uniform to the Commissioner's ace-in-the-hole—to make this the best yet in that perennially popular series.

By D. L. CHAMPION

Step up to the bar and meet the . . .

LEG MAN

. . . who, from a corner booth in Mike's Tavern, sorted out the glass-ware clues and put the bee on the killer of the joint's much-hated host. Brain-Guy could be an alternative title for the news-hound hero of this gripping and unusual novelette

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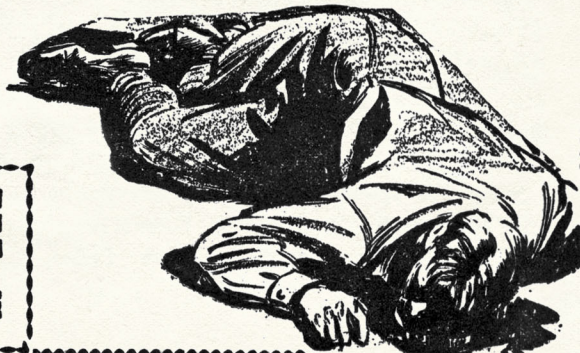
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Take time out for . . .

A SLIGHT PAUSE FOR MURDER

. . . and meet Edward Asa Scott, an artist who couldn't help getting blood on his palette where the crimson lake ought to be. Artist Scott, appearing in this first novelette of a great new series, is introduced

By LAWRENCE TREAT



**DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE**

film-cutting scissors. He closed the blades upon the film—and the blades refused to bite! It was as if they were trying to cut glass. He could not destroy the negatives!

JOE PHILLIPS dropped the scissors, wrenched open the door, and stumbled up the stairs. He had to think! Had to think! In the kitchen he paused to wipe his face. Then he went into the living room. Joe, junior, in his buggy riding outfit, was cooing on the sofa beside Nell as she read the papers.

"Joe," Nell said, her eyes shadowed, "Mary Nevins called up a little while ago with some dreadful news. Her cousin Elsie, and Elsie's boy friend, were drowned yesterday. They were sitting on the old fishing pier, and somehow Elsie slipped and fell in. Bill jumped in after her, and the current took them both out and down toward the bay. They—they haven't been found yet. An old lady walking her dog saw it happen and reported to the police."

Joe stared at her.

"I know," he said hoarsely, reaching for his handkerchief to wipe his face again.

"You know?" Nell frowned at him. "But Mary just called—"

"I mean," he told her with an effort, "I knew something had happened. The—the doors were open and I heard you talking. I knew from your voice it was—was something bad. Excuse me. I'm going outside, sit in the swing. Cool off."

He went out the front door on wooden legs, crossed the lawn, sank down onto the glider. He tried to think, and his thoughts wouldn't come straight. They seemed to chase each other around and around, making no sense.

Presently Nell come out, carrying little Joe. The baby's cold was better, and Nell had never looked prettier. Joe looked up, and got his throat clear with an effort.

"Sit down, hon," he said.

Nell put the baby down beside him.

"In just a sec, Joe," she answered, and went over to pick a rambler rose from the bush that covered the low wall around their tiny lot.

She came quickly back with the rose, gave it to Joe, junior, and sat down with him on her lap.

"Now smile at us, Joe," she said.

Joe twisted his lips, and little Joe caroled up at him.

"It wasn't very good," Nell said critically. "But it'll have to do. Don't you feel well, Joe? Or is it that news about those two poor kids? You look rather—rather—"

"Nell," Joe said through stiff lips. "That camera. I'm going to smash it. It's something hellish. Something—"

Nell's brows drew together.

"You mean it doesn't work?" she asked, uncomprehending. Her gaze turned ruefully toward the rose-covered wall. "Just when I was going to surprise you by showing you how smart I was, too. All my work gone for nothing, shucks!"

Joe stared at her. A queer dizziness was in his head, and his body felt numb and distant.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why," Nell told him, lifting the baby so that it gurgled and tried to reach him, "I put some film in it while you were down in the dark room, and I attached that little spring doodad that lets you take your own picture. Then I hid it over there on the wall, among the roses, where you wouldn't notice it.

"When I picked the rose just now, I made the little doodad work, and hurried back to be in the picture before it clicked the shutter. I thought I'd have a nice family group to surprise you with. But if it doesn't work . . . Joe, what is it?"

ON HIS feet, Joe Phillips struggled to get his breath. The dizziness was whirling in his brain now, sickeningly. His body felt a long ways



BIGGER . . .

The editors of ADVENTURE MAGAZINE have finally been able to heed, with something more concrete than mere wishful thinking, the pleas of so many of you that we increase the size of your magazine "even if the price has to go up a little, too." So, beginning with the August issue, you'll find a hundred and sixty-two pages instead of the hundred and thirty you've had to be content with for a good many years. That means an additional thirty thousand words of copy, approximately, plus many more illustrations. The price of the magazine will be a quarter in the future. And now—as a partial preview of the issue next to appear—here's why we think it will be . . .

BETTER THAN EVER

"THE FLEET IN THE FOREST"

By Carl D. Lane

—opens the August issue. In the first of four gripping installments we meet Chid Alwyn, apprentice shipwright, whose personal code was "profits first and the devil take the country." Oliver Hazard Perry, recruiting men to help construct a fleet with which to fight the British on Lake Erie, tries to win Chid over. But instead of heading north with Perry, Chid slips aboard the schooner *Blessed Cause*, half privateer, half pirate, lured by the promise of quick riches. It's crimson gold he garners, however, for the schooner proves a blood-ship, and Alwyn—before he sights land again—is a wanted man with a charge of participating in murder and mutiny hanging over his head.

"TEMPORARY STARS"

By E. Hoffmann Price

American-led guerilla bands in the Philippines still surge forth from their jungle bases in the mountains of Moro-land to raid the Japs with *kris* and *kampilan*. Kane, Datu Ryan and Bishop Jackson—that fabulous trio born in "Last Boat from Zamboanga"—are all present to help pin the temporary stars of general on Kane's shoulders as he leads his ragged commandos through the bloody cogon grass.

"THE FORGE OF OLVIR BIGMOUTH"

By DeWitt Newbury

In which the clock turns back to the heyday of the Viking rovers when their long-boats cleaved the waves from the Skagerrak to Iceland, and every warrior's code had but one law—"It is better to die like a man than live like a thrall."

On the short story roster HUGH WILEY gives us "Steamboat Man," an amusing yarn of the Turkey Slough country in floodtime. . . . PEIRSON RICKS, in "Caissons in the Sky," illustrates the military maxim—"There's always a back door to the enemy's camp." . . . RAY MILLHOLLAND takes us to a foxhole on a South Pacific island to watch a couple of Leatherneck sharpshooters match "Shot for Shot" with a Nip sniper. . . . WILLIAM MARSHALL RUSH, WALTER ALDRICH TENNEY, PAUL EMILE MILLER, LESLIE T. WHITE also join the ranks of our Writers' Brigade with fiction, facts and verse. . . . Plus the usual departments and features you've grown to look forward to each month only in—

160
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Adventure

25c

The August issue will be out July 9th.

off. His arms and legs seemed not to belong to him. There was a fog swirling before his eyes.

With a tremendous effort he took a step toward the roses. Two. Three. Four. Now the world was swirling around him in tremendous circles, and his body felt miles and miles away. Something was pulling at him, as if trying to separate him from his body altogether. He took a sixth step. A seventh . . .

There the camera was, where Nell had innocently placed it among the roses. He reached for it, picked it up with numb fingers. He fumbled at the loading plate, and could not get it off. Could not get the film out . . .

Desperately clutching the carrying strap, Joe Phillips swung the camera against the stone wall. It rebounded, uninjured. He smashed it again. This time it slipped from his fingers and bounced away, coming to rest in the middle of the lawn, still uninjured. *'Couldn't hurt it with an axe'*—the words echoed from somewhere in his mind—*'even if you wanted to.'*

Joe stared at it. Then, still fighting, he tried to take a step toward it. His feet would not obey him. He stumbled, and knew he was falling. In the brief time it took him to strike the ground, a picture came unbidden into his mind—the dark, sardonic face of the man in the hotel room, smiling curiously, expectantly. Then swirling grayness closed around him. He heard Nell scream, somewhere far distant. Then he struck the ground and did not even feel it.

"You can't go wrong on the deal," the tall dark man said, and his smile was curious. "Five dollars down now, and you have a month to try the camera out. If you don't like it, bring it back, get your money back, and we call the whole thing off."

The lanky customer who had called in answer to the advertising circular that had come in his morning mail chewed his lip

and stared at the old camera. It was battered, with a few fresh scratches on it, but it seemed in good working order.

"It's a real buy," the tall man said, and handed the potential customer a glossy print. "Here's a snap the last owner took with it."

The lanky, knobby caller scrutinized the picture.

"It's a fellow named Phillips," the tall, dark man informed him. "And his wife and child. Took it with an automatic release. Poor chap. Something happened to them all the same day, automobile accident, I think. He hadn't finished paying for the camera, so I had to take it back, along with the prints and negatives. All according to the terms of the contract, you know."

The customer nodded.

"Too bad," he commented. "He's a nice looking chap. Pretty girl. Pretty kid, too. Swell picture, though."

"I'm very pleased with it," the tall, dark man told him. "I'm making something of a—collection. Well, do you want to try the camera out?"

The other nodded.

"I'll give it a whirl." He dug out his wallet. "Five now, right? And you say you're throwing in some film? Good. I'll take a few snaps of the wife and kids, let my oldest boy try his skill taking a few of me, stuff like that . . . Where do I sign? Here?"

He signed. The tall, dark man signed underneath, with a flourish: *H. Stn. Majesty*. The customer looked at the signature curiously.

"S-t-n," he remarked. "I suppose that's some kind of contraction for Saint?"

"No." The dark man chuckled as, limping imperceptibly, he crossed the room and opened the door. "No, quite the contrary, I'm afraid."

He was still chuckling long after the other had gone. It was really quite a good joke.

Terror swept through
him . . .



DIE, DAMN YOU!

By C. WILLIAM HARRISON

The grim destiny of the Hannons was to kill the thing they loved.

DOWN where Cotter Creek cuts across the corner of Jeb Winters' north forty you can still find the old Hannon place. It used to be the show place of Shelbyville, but there's not much left of it today. Ten years empty, the

shingles have curled on the roof, and the windows are the empty eyes of a house without a soul. It takes life and warmth and laughter to give a house a soul. But even when the Hannons lived there that house had no soul. At least that's what

some folks in town will say, if you ask.

"Go ahead," they'll tell you. "Move in and fix the place up. It's still a fine house, but you'll be sorry you ever saw it if you do. The place is cursed. I don't care what argument you put up, that's what it is—cursed!"

"What about old Seth Hannon? He built the house just after the Civil War—and he killed his wife, didn't he? Sure, the court house records show it was proved that some other woman who was crazy jealous, killed Hannon's wife, then murdered Hannon by pushing him into an open well. But those records don't explain what happened to the axe that killed Hannon's wife. It wasn't in the well with Hannon."

And if you become friendly with some folks in town, they'll loosen up and tell you more about the old Hannon place. They'll tell you how the son of old Seth Hannon died from poison when his wife cooked him some wild parsnips by mistake. Mistake? Some town folks don't think so. Matt Hannon died from eating wild parsnips twenty years ago, and some folks will swear it was that jealous woman's curse working.

"May every Hannon living in this house kill the thing he loves most!"

Sounds crazy, doesn't it? So did France falling, so did Pearl Harbor, but they happened, didn't they? Sure, it sounds crazy. But Seth Hannon loved his wife, and she was murdered. Sara Hannon loved her husband, and she didn't mean to cook wild parsnips for him. But she did, and he died. Accident? Well, maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. . . .

* * *

IT was ten years ago that Sara Hannon died, and her only son didn't get home until after she was buried. He tried to get home sooner, but it took time to fly down from Alaska, and Johnny

Hannon didn't get the news until the day after his mother was buried. Johnny was running a sort of air freight line at the time, delivering supplies from Nome to the outlying settlements and mining camps.

Johnny Hannon brought his plane down on the old carnival grounds a couple miles south of town. He was just past twenty then, as tall as his father had been but not so heavy. The scar he had got when he cracked up landing medical supplies the winter before at an epidemic-ridden town in Alaska was only a few months old on his forehead.

Irna Dunn was there on the field waiting for him, a tall girl with leaf brown hair and warm blue eyes.

"Johnny, I've waited here every day for the past week."

"How is she?" he asked.

She caught his hand as they walked toward the dusty sedan parked on the dirt road at the entrance to the field. It was a warm day, and the earthy odor of fresh-plowed fields was in the air.

"Johnny, you're too late!"

He didn't look at her, but his fingers tightened around Irna's hand. His weather-darkened face gave no hint of what he was thinking.

"Your mother died a week ago," Irna said. "She was buried last Tuesday."

Johnny said, "Oh!" He kept looking straight ahead of him, toward Charley Tackett who was seated behind the wheel of the town's only cab. Charley nodded, and Johnny said, "Hi, Charley."

As Irna was climbing into the back seat of the sedan he said, "I came as quickly as I could, Irna."

"I know."

They didn't talk as they drove back to town. Several times Johnny felt Irna's eyes on him, and he knew that she was thinking that he was taking his mother's death very calmly.

Well, maybe he was. After all—and

there was a stab of bitterness in his thought—what emotion should he feel? His mother hadn't made life very pleasant for him after his father died ten years ago. He still remembered the biting acid of some of the things she had said to him, cutting things that were without reason or excuse, things that had chilled and hurt.

"Do you want to go to the cemetery, Johnny?"

"No." He quickly tried to soften that word. "Not now, Irna."

"Johnny! After all, she was your mother!"

"I know that," he answered. "I'm not forgetting she was my mother. But for ten years she beat me and nagged me until I had to leave home. I'm not forgetting that either. I'm trying to be fair about this, but it's something I'll have to work out for myself. I can't have any help on it, Irna."

Without asking, Charley Tackett drove them to Johnny's house, pulled in behind the coupe that was parked in the driveway.

"Doc Fordyce's car," Charley said. "He said he'd come here and wait when he heard you fly over."

Irna got out of the car and started toward the house, but Johnny was stopped by the touch of Charley's hand on his sleeve.

Charley's seamed face held an expression of reserved concern. He said in a low voice, "Johnny, you ain't asked for advice, but I'm givin' some just the same. Everybody in town knows that your mother kept you from marrying Irna up to now. You're going to hear some talk about your family, and it's a wonder you ain't heard it before. I've heard it since I was a kid, but personal I never believed it even if there was a time when I almost—" He broke off. "Johnny, was I you I wouldn't believe too much of what you'll be hearing."

HE backed out of the drive, and left Johnny standing there.

Harry Fordyce was waiting inside the house. He was a tall, fine-featured man just a year out of medical school, and his father had been the Hannon's family doctor for years.

Fordyce was standing close to Irna when Johnny Hannon entered the room, and he turned with a quick smile.

"Hello, Johnny," he said, hand out.

Hannon nodded. Fordyce had loved Irna since the three of them had been kids in school, and Johnny tried now to hide the stab of jealousy he felt by glancing quickly around the room.

Everything was in its familiar place. There was the picture of his father and mother, taken the day of their marriage, still hanging over the piano. There were the catalogues of his mother's music, untouched since the day her husband had died. There was his father's rack of pipes, with their flame-charred bowls and tooth-chewed bits.

Without looking around, Johnny said, "Thanks for what you did, Harry."

"Any doctor would have done the same."

"Thanks anyhow." Johnny pulled a sheet of music out of the catalogue. It was Mozart, and it brought back a forgotten picture of his mother seated at the piano, playing for his father. She had been a fine pianist. He pushed the music back into the file. "What caused it—mother's death, I mean?"

"Nothing in particular," Doctor Fordyce said. "Heart failure as much as anything, I suppose. It just wore out and stopped beating."

A thread of bitterness worked through Johnny Hannon's voice. "She wasn't old, and no one had an easier life than my mother. Dad left her money. You ought to know that, Harry; you handled it for her after your father died."

"Work isn't the only thing that can

wear out the human heart," Fordyce said quietly.

Johnny Hannon swung around sharply, facing Irna and the doctor. The feeling that something was being held back from him pulled on his nerves.

"Let's have it! You've got something to tell me," he said. "Get it over with, Harry."

"Sit down and I will," Fordyce said. "It's something you should have been told when you were a kid."

Fordyce began talking. Seated opposite him, Johnny listened. A cat that was half blind with age came into the room, and Johnny pulled it into his lap while Fordyce talked. While he listened, one corner of his mind remembered the day when he had brought that cat home. He had been only twelve at the time, and his mother had let him keep it. He had not expected her to, and he had been frightened at the fight he had expected to have with her about the cat. The cat, Sluffy he had named it, had somehow helped replace something his mother had taken away from him with her biting tongue and temper.

"That's all there is," Harry Fordyce finished. "Your mother was mean to you because she loved you. She tried to destroy her love because she was afraid she might be the cause of something happening to you, just as she blamed herself for what happened to your father. She was afraid of what she might do to you if she let herself love you too much, because of that curse."

Johnny Hannon said nothing. A warmth was rolling the cold bitterness out of him; understanding softened him.

"Another thing," Doctor Fordyce went on. "She wanted to make you hate all women because of her. She wanted you never to suffer as she had, by marrying some girl and. . . ." Fordyce stopped talking.

"And perhaps killing the wife I love?"

There was a thin, raw edge in Johnny Hannon's tone, something defensively ironic. He wanted to look at Irna, but was afraid to.

Doctor Fordyce said, "That's what your mother tried to protect you from."

Irna Dunn spoke up in a small, tight voice. "Your mother was too imaginative. She brooded over your father's death too much. There's no such thing as a curse that works."

Harry Fordyce nodded slowly, "As a doctor I agree. But there are some things that happen—" He paused, turned and looked out the window. "Johnny, remember the time we slipped your father's shotgun out of the house to go hunting? You were hardly big enough to carry the gun, and you decided to take your dog Hoppy with us. You were crazy about that dog. When we got in the woods you saw something moving behind a bush, and turned the shotgun loose. Well, it was Hoppy you killed."

SOMETHING close to fear crawled through the roots of Johnny Hannon's hair. He heard himself say hollowly, "It was an accident any kid could make."

Harry Fordyce was looking at him, and Irna was looking at him. Irna's face was white, and her eyes were on the cat in Johnny's lap.

Harry's eyes were on the cat too, and he said softly, "Johnny, you're hurting that cat."

Johnny Hannon's eyes jerked down to the cat in his lap, and horror pounded through him. His hands were around the neck of the cat, tense, half clenched!

He opened his hands with a suddenness that startled the struggling cat. He said harshly, "Listening to what you've been telling got me on edge. I didn't realize what I was doing."

He stood up quickly. "Harry, you always loved Irna. You still do. Why don't

you marry her?" He didn't give Fordyce a chance to answer. He looked at the girl, made a sharp, impatient gesture with his hand. "Forget everything we planned, Irna. Harry's the man for you. He's got a real future ahead of him."

Irna's smile was gentle. "It's you I want to marry, Johnny. And I will if you'll take me. Do you want me, Johnny?"

"Want you? Good God, I—" He broke off.

Irna laughed the strain out of her voice. "Then I won't give you time to change your mind. We'll get married tomorrow. I'm not afraid of any old curse.

back the feeling of companionship Johnny had clung to those years after he had brought the cat home. A cat can get to mean everything to a lonesome person.

He went to sleep listening to Sluffy's soft purring. He was startled awake by something heavy striking his chest, something alive and moving. The room was black and thunder was smashing outside, and in that waking instant everything was violently confused. Half awake, he grabbed the thing on his chest automatically, felt needle points slash the back of his hand. Then the thing went still in his grip, and he twisted around in the bed, groping until he found the light cord.

If you are enjoying this story by C. William Harrison, you will like the stories in our brother magazine, DETECTIVE TALES. You will find an especially poignant and human yarn by Robert Turner, called "Midnight Is For Murder," in the August issue, on sale at all newsstands NOW!

We'll stay here until you've settled all your mother's affairs, then I'll go wherever you want to take me."

After Irna and Harry were gone, the night closed in, and seemed to increase the feeling of emptiness in the old house. Irna had food sent to him, but he didn't eat it. He paced from room to room, restless and frightened by his own thoughts. Such a thing as a curse by a woman long dead was silly superstition, he told himself. But he couldn't stop remembering and thinking.

A wind came up, and he could hear it rolling through the high tops of the pines outside the house. It was hot and a storm was grumbling far off in the north.

Sluffy padded after him in a cat's silent way when he went to his bedroom on the second floor. He undressed, doused the lights, and crawled into bed. He could hear the cat purring on the floor at the foot of the bed, and the soft sound brought

It was Sluffy in his hand, quite still and lax. He lowered the cat to the floor, but it didn't move. The cat was dead. Johnny stared dully at the back of his hand where the cat's frantic claws had cut crimson furrows through his skin. He sat there on the edge of the bed, sweating cold, fighting against a rising flood of terror. . . .

* * *

THEY were married the next afternoon at three. Irna wore a dress that was cornflower blue, and Johnny Hannon stood there close beside her while the minister read the ceremony. After it was over and the few witnesses had left, after Harry Fordyce had wished them luck and gone his way, Johnny led his bride down the lane beside Cotter Creek. It was cool there beneath the high-thrown limbs of the cottonwoods and

elms, and they paused beside a mossy rock on the creek bank. A catfish rolled below the quiet surface of the creek, showing a yellow-white flash of his belly.

"It's not much of a honeymoon," Johnny said.

"Darling, I'll always remember this walk," she said.

He turned on her, quick and almost savagely. "That's not what I want! I want you to forget it! You've *got* to forget it, understand?"

"Johnny!"

Looking at her released every bitter emotion in him. He tried to keep the harshness out of his voice, tried hard and failed.

"I shouldn't have gone through with it, Irna. I told myself that all morning, but I couldn't stop. I wanted to give you my name, even if that was all the wedding could mean. I wanted you for my wife for a few hours at least."

"Darling, I'll always be your wife!" And then as though suddenly frightened, "Johnny, what do you mean?"

He looked at her through haunted eyes. "I'm leaving just as soon as I can."

"Because—because of what Harry Fordyce told you yesterday?"

He didn't answer that. He started to turn away, but she pulled him back. She caught his right hand, turned it over, looked at the fresh bandage.

"That wasn't there yesterday," Irna said evenly. "Something happened last night, Johnny." She tore the bandage off with a quick jerk of her hand, saw the scars the claws had left.

"Sluffy?" she asked. "Your cat?"

He answered, dry and tonelessly, "Last night I killed Sluffy. I didn't mean to. Sluffy was frightened by the thunder and jumped on me while I was asleep. I never knew Sluffy to do that before. I must have grabbed her in my sleep, and she scratched me just before she died. She was dead when I came awake and

got the light on. I loved that cat and killed her, Irna . . . So I can't—"

She looked at him, white-faced but unafraid. "Johnny Hannon, I'm married to you now," she said quietly. "That's something I've wanted since I first met you, and I'm not going to let a foolish family myth keep me from being your wife."

* * *

LATE that night, Johnny came suddenly awake with his body tense and cold with sweat. He lay quietly a moment, straining for a sound he was afraid he would not hear. But he heard it, the soft murmur of Irna's breathing.

He turned his eyes, weak with a nameless relief, and the moonlight falling through the window slanted across his wife's sleeping face. Then he saw his hand on the pillow beside her head, and he saw the pale glitter of the knife in his hand, its blade near her throat.

Terror swept through him, and he fought down a swift, unreasoning desire to hurl the knife away from him. It was his own knife, his pocket knife! But he didn't remember getting it.

Horror cut an icy track through him. He might have killed her with no more knowledge than he had of getting that knife! He might have killed her just as town folks said every Hannon killed those they loved, just as he had killed Sluffy.

Then he heard the faint mew of a cat, and he knew it was that sound that had wakened him. He sat up slowly in bed, careful not to waken his wife. He heard the cat mew again, a soft, weird cry in the night's dark silence. It came from downstairs. He thought of Sluffy. No, Sluffy was dead. But there was no other cat around the house.

He got out of bed, and crossed the room soundlessly. The door was slightly ajar, and he was certain Irna had closed it before they went to bed. He moved out into the hall, to the head of the stairs,

silent in his bare feet. He heard the cat cry again, a small and distinct sound.

He was moving down the last step when he saw the front door open and the dark shadow of a man start out into the night. A cat bounded after the man, and Johnny went down the hall, running.

He caught the man in the thick darkness beneath the pines in the front yard, and they fought with soundless savagery. And when the man sank down under Johnny's bruising fists, Johnny dragged him out of the shadows into the moonlight. A cat followed, pulling and tugging at the pocket of the man's coat.

Johnny said tightly, "All right, Harry, you can get up now."

There was dark hatred in Harry Fordyce's face. "Damned cat—"

"He seems to want something in your pocket," Johnny said. He reached into the doctor's pocket, brought out several crumpled leaves. He sniffed them, and contempt filtered into his voice. "You must have forgot you had this in your pocket, Harry. Catnip. That's why this alley cat was following you. That's why Sluffy jumped up on my bed last night. You must have slipped into the house last night, just as you did tonight. I suppose you stole a key while you were treating mother, or you had one made. You must have put catnip on my blanket while I slept, knowing Sluffy would jump up there to get to it and that I'd naturally grab anything that wakened me."

He paused, watching Harry Fordyce narrowly. Johnny said, "You always did try to do everything the smart way, Harry. What kind of poison did you use to kill Sluffy? I don't think I could have killed the cat. She must have died just after I grabbed her. What did you—"

"You find out!"

"It shouldn't be hard if I have an autopsy made," Johnny said. He studied the doctor through the moonlight. They

had been pals when they were kids, but now there was sullen hatred in Fordyce's eyes.

"Do you love her this much, Harry—Irna, I mean?" He could read nothing in the doctor's stare. Johnny shrugged. "You knew I would have left her if I'd wakened to find the knife in my hand without knowing that you'd put it there. If Irna was the reason, I don't blame you much. If you've misused the money you were handling for mother, I'll know it soon enough. I wouldn't try to leave town, Harry."

Irna was sitting up in bed when Johnny entered the room, and she smiled with quick relief. "Darling, you frightened me. When I found you gone, I was afraid—"

Johnny said quickly, "It's all right now, honey."

* * *

YES, the old Hannon place still stands down there by Cotter Crëek. Get some of the town folk to talk about it, and they'll tell of the Hannon curse from beginning to end, down to the day the curse made Johnny Hannon beat up on his best friend, Doctor Harry Fordyce.

Folks seem to like to gossip about things they don't know anything about. Like people nowadays telling you American planes are inferior to Axis planes. There's no truth in that, and Johnny Hannon ought to know because his job is to ferry planes across.

And there's no truth in the Hannon curse, either. Nothing ever happened to Johnny Hannon's wife. She's sitting across the room from him now, watching him and smiling in her soft warm way while he writes these last words.

He'll go to her when this is finished. A man's furlough never seems long enough when he has so many things to do. . .

SORCERY IN THE DEATH HOUSE

An Eerie Crime Novelette

By CURTISS T. GARDNER

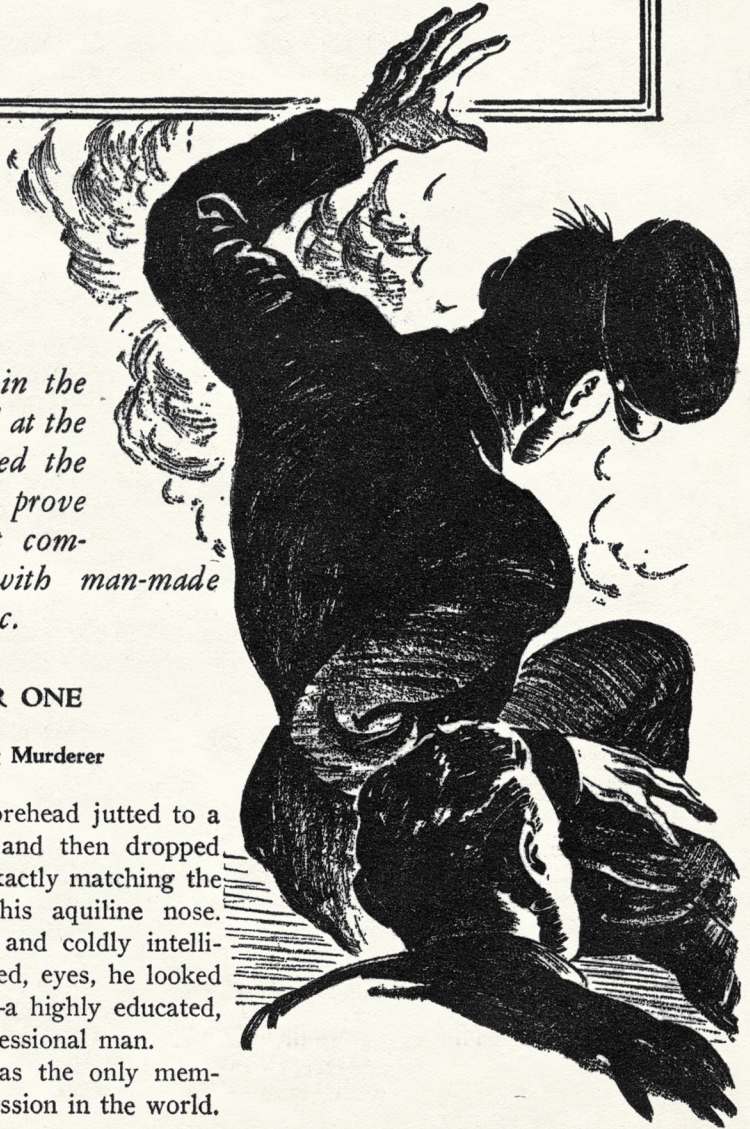
"He who sits in the electric chair will eventually die there!" the Warden warned. But Val Vickers, Specialist in the Impossible, laughed at the warning—and pulled the switch himself to prove that Matter cannot compete, after all, with man-made Magic.

CHAPTER ONE

The Vanishing Murderer

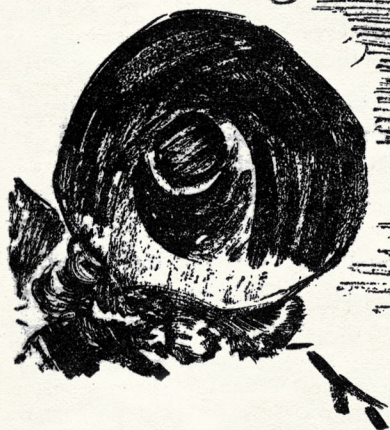
HIS very high forehead jutted to a distinct ledge and then dropped at an angle, exactly matching the hawk-beak angle of his aquiline nose. With his square face and coldly intelligent, although mismated, eyes, he looked exactly what he was—a highly educated, unusually capable professional man.

But Val Vickers was the only member of his unique profession in the world.





A flash of fire puffed up in front of the death chair. . . .



He was the one and only *Specialist in the Impossible*.

Problems which apparently defied all solution were the only ones which interested him. Because these were the kind which gave him opportunity to indulge his beloved hobby of study and research in abstruse subjects.

In earlier days Vickers had taken an unprecedented number of degrees from world famous institutions of higher learning. Now he was gaining an equally unique practical experience applying his

enormous fund of learning to bizarre and incredible situations.

The present unbelievable happenings for instance.

His hyperophthalmic eyes flicked across the cold concrete floor of the execution chamber to the official witnesses on the four short, wooden benches facing the electric chair.

The usual white-lipped expression of restrained horror was absent from the faces of these people. Instead, they were all eagerly expectant. They were, if the prediction of that inconceivable being who called himself Merlin the Magician proved as reliable as in the past, about to witness not the legal slaying of a condemned murderer, but a visual demonstration of supernatural powers.

Vickers turned back to the tall, thin-faced man who was still fussing with instruments on the switchboard.

"So you think Merlin can get away with it, do you, Harris?"

Harris Fargo, one time classmate of Vickers at Tech, raised his black eyebrows.

"He's done it *twice* before. I was here both times and saw it myself. It's contrary to reason. It upsets the laws of nature, but it has happened before. So it can happen again!"

Vickers shrugged. "It's my guess that whatever laws Merlin may have broken, the laws of nature aren't among them."

The State Executioner grunted skeptically.

Vickers said, "I'm surprised that a man of your scientific training could even suggest such a theory, Harris. But it isn't any more incredible to me than finding you holding down the ghoulish job of State Executioner!"

"What's wrong with my job?" Fargo asked. "I'm rendering a public service. My *clients*," his eyes moved from the switchboard to Vickers briefly and he smiled sardonically, "my *clients* are all

persons whom the world is better off without."

Val Vickers' eyebrows moved upward slightly. "True enough. But still—"

Fargo said, "You may remember, Val, that even back in school my main interest was research electricity. It still is. But research takes time, Val, and money. As State Executioner I get a hundred and fifty dollars for each condemned prisoner electrocuted. It's a rare week that I don't make a hundred and fifty. Some weeks a lot more. I have most of my time for my research and I have few *social* obligations."

Vickers grinned. "I can well understand *that!* Well, my camera will trap Mr. Merlin if he tries his tricks this time."

"I hope it does," Fargo complained. "Two men have escaped so far, which means I've lost two fees."

Vickers felt a slight shudder of revulsion as he nodded and turned away. One hundred and fifty dollars! The fee for an expert job of legal killing.

No matter in what grim dead-end a human might find himself, Vickers thought as he strode across the bare stone room, some skilled technician is always ready and waiting to live by the other man's tragedy. The jailer, the hangman, the undertaker. Experienced men, all of them!

He swerved away from the witness benches and took his stand against the wall. For a single instant his eyes lifted toward two small black objects dimly visible through a grillwork of radiator pipes on the far wall—his concealed photographic apparatus. From behind the closed door to the death house cell-block came the muffled clank of metal.

Val looked around the execution chamber once more. The room was about fifty feet square, unfurnished except for the benches for the witnesses and the squat ugly chair itself on its thick rubber mat.

There were three doors, all of them watched by prison guards. Overhead, electric bulbs glared pitilessly. A grim, silent place. One from which even a fly could not escape.

VAL VICKERS focused his attention on the one incongruous note in this room of death—a strikingly beautiful girl on the very front row among the official witnesses.

What, Vickers found himself wondering, was a girl doing in a place like this? She didn't look like a newspaper woman. What paper, anyhow, would send a girl reporter to describe the death of a criminal like Pete Audia? Death by electrocution is a sight to unnerve the most callous newspaperman.

But Merlin the Magician had promised that Pete Audia was not going to die. Perhaps that was the answer.

Vickers noted the girl's long, silky, golden hair under her tiny black hat. Her eyes were soft, the color of violets, and they surveyed the execution chamber with calm interest from beneath long, sweeping lashes.

Val Vickers snapped back to the business at hand as the door of the cell block opened and the black-robed prison chaplain appeared, his lips moving in mumbled prayer.

Vickers' long, spatulate fingers closed, behind his back, on the end of a thin tube which hung from a wire on the wall behind him. His forefinger poised upon the plunger which controlled the shutter of his hidden camera.

Behind the chaplain came the condemned man, Pete Audia, a guard on either side and two behind him. Audia's dark face showed no fear. His glittering black eyes, which should have been terror-haunted, were gleaming expectantly. An expectancy which sent a thrill of excitement pounding through Vickers. There was no doubt in Vickers' mind that Audia

knew he was not marching to his death!

The two guards standing near the chair stepped forward and took Audia's arms. The killer's rat-like eyes flickered swiftly around the room, came to rest a brief instant on the huge, loose-faced warden, Stetson Reynolds. White teeth flashed in the criminal's dark face.

Vickers was amazed at the man's obvious self-assurance. Nothing could have proven more clearly how the legend of infallibility was growing about Merlin the Magician, in criminal minds.

The husky, impassive guard on Audia's right, oblivious to anything unusual in the situation, lifted the heavy leather strap which was to be fastened across the condemned man's chest.

And then what Vickers was waiting for happened.

The glaring death house lights went black. There was a yell, a muffled thud. A flash of fire puffed up from in front of the death chair. Acrid fumes stung Vickers' nostrils.

He pressed the plunger in his hand. A lightning stroke of blinding intensity made Vickers blink as hidden magnesium bulbs let go. After that, it was like the fall of a sable curtain, cloaking the swift rising turmoil.

Even as men swore and jostled one another in the darkness, the overhead bulbs flared on again. Vickers' dazzled eyes squinted instinctively toward the chair, but only a curtain of grey smoke was visible, drifting slowly ceiling-ward.

Then Vickers saw the guards. One was stretched on the floor, with a nasty bruise on his forehead, from which blood drops slowly oozed. The other guard reeled from the smoke cloud, both hands clamped to his jaw.

A shrill, hysterical yell burst from one of the witnesses.

"Audia—he's gone!"

Vickers shot another glance toward the chair. The smoke had risen so the legs

and seat of the ugly contraption could now be seen, topped with a plume of smoke, like the cone of an active volcano. Vickers didn't waste another look. He knew Audia was not there.

He noticed that the pretty girl among the witnesses sat as calm and unmoved as if she were watching a conjuror's act upon a stage. It flashed through Vickers' mind that she looked as if she were about to applaud.

The execution chamber was cold blank concrete. There wasn't space in the entire room to conceal a broomstick. Yet, like two others before him, Audia had vanished!

Vickers bounded across to the far wall. His only thought now was his camera and the precious plate. He grinned as he turned to Warden Reynolds.

"As soon as I develop these," he said confidently, "we'll know exactly what happened."

CHAPTER TWO

Attack In the Darkroom

THE motion of Vickers' hands made blobs of shadow swoop bat-like back and forth across the narrow band of dim, red light in the prison darkroom.

How fortunate, Vickers thought as he worked, that Garnet Blackburns' Wall Street bank had been robbed by Merlin. Without Blackburn's influence the Governor would not have appointed the one and only *Specialist in the Impossible* to bring the whole incredible *modus operandi* of Merlin the Magician into the light of reason.

And Merlin was incredible, no doubt about that. The crimes undertaken by his highly organized band of criminals were always spectacular, always brilliant in their strategy. Such as the cunning disruption of the alarm system in Blackburn's bank before the robbery.

Maybe it was pride in his accomplishments which made Merlin always label his work by leaving a note for the law. In this respect Merlin was like a real estate agent who posts signs announcing the sale of a new house.

Encouraged by scareheads in the newspapers and by burning public interest in his exploits, Merlin had even announced in advance, this time, his intention to recruit his criminal organization from the very seat of the electric chair.

Yes, Vickers was very glad Blackburn's bank had been robbed. Because matching wits with a sorcerer who could snatch a man from the threshold of his tomb was the kind of mental exercise which was breath of life to Val Vickers.

Perhaps it was association of ideas which brought the thought suddenly to Vickers' mind that there was something oddly tomb-like about this cramped little prison darkroom, shut away as it was from the light of day by a miniature maze of partitions and by windowless stone walls.

Like a crypt also was the dead air, heavy with the reek of chemicals. And the crowding blackness, soundless except for the faint *swish* of developer in the tray which he rocked monotonously back and forth.

Val Vickers shook off the feeling of oppression with impatience. Certainly, he told himself almost angrily, this business of murderers who dissolved into a puff of smoke must be getting on his nerves.

Which was absurd, since the solution to the whole mystery was right in his hands this very moment. As soon as this plate was finished, the illusion would be plainly exposed. And, it *was* illusion, of course, even though there were no mirrors in the execution chamber for Merlin to have used.

As he poured used developing fluid down the drain, refilled the tray with tap

water, Vickers began to whistle. He stopped abruptly as he realized that his tune was *Danse Macabre*.

The strong scent of hypo filled his nostrils as he transferred the plate to another tray. He held his wrist watch close to the masked light, watched the second hand go around redly.

Done!

Vickers lifted the finished negative gingerly, fingers at the edge of the glass. He heard the door to the outer room close softly.

"Who's that?" he called.

There was no answer.

Vickers laid the plate carefully in a rack at his left. There was no further sound, but primitive instinct warned Vickers that the darkroom shadows were no longer empty.

His fingers slid toward the light switch. But before they reached it, something hard smacked him squarely on the forehead, driving him back, half stunned, against the wall.

It seemed to Vickers that the red glow of the darkroom light had receded to a pin-point. It was a dull crimson star, incredibly far away.

But only for an instant. Then he snapped back to reality. His eyes focused on a new shadow moving on the wall above the bench—the shadow of an arm!

A hand reached for the plate Vickers had just put into the drying rack. Vickers' muscles drew taut, but his quick, calculating brain controlled his impulse to move. The emulsion on his plate was wet, jelly-like. A fingerprint would be even better than the picture.

The groping hand seized the plate, started to withdraw. Vickers' arm shot out, his fingers locked about a slender wrist, twisted. The plate dropped upon the work bench with a sound of breaking glass.

The arm wrenched free from Vickers' grip with a swift jerk. Vickers lashed out

in the dark with his other fist. It thudded against soft, yielding flesh, but the person Vickers had hit made no sound.

Vickers took a quick step forward. For the second time something crashed against his skull. He wavered on ankles gone suddenly limp, as his attacker scrambled out through the enveloping maze, banging against partitions on the way.

WHEN Vickers finally located the light switch, the intruder was gone. And so was the broken plate. Vickers dashed to the door of the outer room, tore it open.

The corridor outside was dark, but as Vickers lunged forward he collided with someone in the corridor with a jolt that almost knocked the breath from his body.

Instinctively, his arms clutched at the other person, circled and gathered a body roughly against his chest.

There was a gasp, hands pushed against him frantically and a feminine voice implored shakily, "Let me go! You're hurting me!"

At the same time Vickers became aware that the body in his arms was small and soft and yielding.

He dragged his captive into the lighted room. It was the pretty girl he had noticed among the witnesses in the execution chamber.

The small, black hat had been knocked askew; golden hair of gossamer fineness streamed down now, unconfined, over her shoulders. Her violet eyes stared up at him defiantly.

"Let me go!" she protested. "What do you think you're doing, you—you conceited fourflusher!"

Vickers released her, all except one slender wrist, which he continued to hold with fingers of steel despite her efforts to twist away.

"Fine business!" he said sternly. "Very fine indeed for a girl! Skulking around in the dark hitting people over the head.

Suppose you tell me why you did it—and quickly!”

Her hostile eyes were so angry they fairly glowed. “You tell *me*,” she blazed. “You’re supposed to know everything in the world, aren’t you? You’re the great and only *Specialist in the Impossible*.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll tell you. You’re one of Merlin’s helpers or maybe you *are* Merlin, yourself. Rather a neat idea at that, a woman master criminal! No one would be apt to think of a woman behind all this hocus-pocus.”

She eyed him sullenly. “That’s about as bright a thought as might have been expected from you. You certainly should know plenty about hocus-pocus since it’s your stock in trade.”

Swiftly, before she knew what he intended to do, Val searched the girl.

She retreated, bristling with indignation. “Don’t you dare paw me!”

“I’m not interested in your feminine allure,” he told her tartly. “What I want is the broken plate you stole from me.”

“I know nothing about any plate.”

“That’s what I’m going to find out.”

And while she sputtered in futile rage, he took the big black handbag from her resisting hand and clicked it open. A small pearl-handled revolver nestled among a litter of the usual womanly trifles.

Vickers broke open the gun and dumped the shells into his coat pocket. He replaced the empty gun in the bag and handed it back to the girl.

“Since the plate isn’t on you, you’ve hidden it,” he said coldly. “You’ve had time for that. And you’ll have some explaining to do about carrying that gun. And about why you wander around the State Penn where you have no business to be, you’ll have a lot of explaining to do.”

She didn’t appear at all frightened, but her anger had evaporated.

“All right,” she said. “I was coming

along this corridor and all of a sudden the lights went out. I groped along in the dark. Just as I reached the darkroom someone ducked out and went past me. And that’s all there was to it, until you came tearing out and acted so rudely.”

“What business did you have down here?” Vickers demanded.

“Suppose you find out. You’re the big, infallible investigator.”

“I’ll find out all right,” he promised. He took her by the wrist again. “Come on. We’re going to the warden’s office.”

The room was crowded as he herded the girl inside. It seemed to Vickers that anyone even remotely connected with the attempted execution was there. Warden Reynolds himself, of course. And Vickers’ friend Harris Fargo, the State Executioner. And the chaplain, Father Burke; the prison doctor, Hawkes; the guards, and the official witnesses, most of them newspaper men.

“What does the picture show, Vickers?” Reynolds asked quickly.

“It doesn’t,” Vickers said. “This girl fixed the picture for us. I found her skulking in the dark, packing a gun, and—”

“The girl’s quite okay,” the warden snapped. “What’s this about the picture?”

Vickers said, “Suppose you tell me why you’re so sure about the girl. I say either she broke it and concealed it, or else she passed it along to an accomplice.”

Faint pink crept into Reynolds’ massive face. “She works for me,” he said. “In a confidential capacity. She’s Miss Marylee Church and I’ll vouch for her.”

“Then just to make sure, I’m going to search everyone in this room,” Vickers announced coolly.

The warden’s broad face grew redder. “I told you Miss Church was in my employ. That should be sufficient.”

Vickers’ tone was below zero. “The only thing that’s sufficient is that another murderer has escaped from the death

house. And that the evidence which would have shown how it was accomplished has been destroyed. Until I find out exactly what happened, everyone is under suspicion. Even *you*, Warden."

The big man growled something unintelligible in his throat. But he did not offer to challenge Vickers' authority.

Nor did anyone else demur when Vickers stepped over to each in turn and ran his hands over their clothing to make certain no photographic plate was concealed in pockets or coats.

He found nothing.

"I'm going back to the execution chamber," Vickers stated. "I want to go over the place with a fine-toothed comb. I'd like you to come with me, Warden. And you, Fargo, and you, Dr. Hawkes, and the guards who were on duty in there tonight."

He turned toward Marylee Church and bowed ironically. "It would give me great pleasure, Miss Church, if you also will consent to be my guest."

CHAPTER THREE

The Dead Convict

VAL VICKERS stood in the center of the bleak, stone room and looked around slowly. He walked over to the death chair and deliberately seated himself.

He noted the tense expression on the face of Marylee Church. The girl's attitude of angry defiance was gone and in its place was something closely akin to horror. She attempted to cover it with a wisecrack.

"If I knew how to turn on the juice I'd do it right this minute," she said. But Vickers noticed she swallowed hard before she said it.

The warden said, "There's an old superstition that anyone who sits in the electric chair will die there, later." There was the suggestion of a threat in his tone.

Val Vickers fingered the bulldog line of his jaw. One of his eyes was gray-green, the other was blue with yellow specks. From his seat in the lethal chair he looked upward.

The guard who had been struck on the forehead when Audia disappeared followed the direction of Vickers' stare.

"Maybe he was yanked out through the skylight," the man offered.

Reynolds said, "We've been on the roof after the other escapes. The skylight glass is set in metal and nothing has been disturbed."

"We'll go up later on and take another look," Vickers said. "I don't expect to find anything on the roof. That would be too obvious. Too easy and at the same time too difficult."

The guard tried again. "Maybe these guys have got away by crawling through the ventilator."

"Shut up, Johnson," Reynolds exploded irritably. "You're talking nonsense. The ventilator isn't big enough for a cat to crawl through."

"And it's covered with a steel grating screwed to the wall," Marylee Church added. "I noticed that."

Fargo said, "Well, I've been all over the wiring again to see if I could find how the lights went out. I haven't learned a thing."

Vickers got up slowly from his deadly seat. He pushed back the rubber mat with his foot and stooped to examine the floor minutely.

Finally he straightened and pushed the mat back again. "Thought there might be a trap door rigged in the floor," he observed as if to himself. "It isn't that."

He went to each of the three doors in turn, opening each briefly.

"This one leads to the death house cell block. It would be hopeless for anyone to try getting out that way. And this door connects with the administration wing. That's where the witnesses came

in. But there was a guard at each door at the time of the escape."

At the third door, which opened from the corner of the room at the left rear of the chair, Vickers paused.

"After execution the body of the condemned man goes through here to the autopsy room. But this door was guarded too. Are there any connections with the autopsy room?"

Dr. Hawkes said, "Yes. It connects with the morgue and a corridor runs from the morgue to the prison hospital. But the connecting doors are kept locked, particularly when an execution is scheduled."

Vickers pushed the door wide and went into the small room adjoining the death chamber. It was furnished with a slate-topped table on a hinged pedestal, a sink, with hot and cold water operated by a pedal valve, and a white enameled cabinet filled with an awesome assortment of bone saws, elevators, and other gleaming surgical instruments. A long wicker basket stood on the floor at the side of the room opposite the sink.

A fragment of glass on the floor near a loaded trash receptacle caught Vickers' eye. He stepped forward swiftly, stooped and began to rummage in the trash. In a moment he stood up with three jagged glass strips in his hand.

"My broken negative!" he exclaimed.

Eagerly he fitted the transverse fragments together and held them toward the light. Small pieces were missing, but not enough to prevent the picture from being clear and distinct.

The fingerprints on the still moist surface were plain enough, too. Vickers bent closer. The splotches made by the fingers were smooth and unmarked except for a series of dotted lines like a string of Morse code dashes.

Vickers knew what that meant. The person who had attacked him had worn gloves.

REYNOLDS had crowded up close to Vickers' shoulder, Harris Fargo and Dr. Hawkes were behind the warden. Marylee Church stood where she was, near the doorway.

"Why it doesn't show a damn thing," Reynolds said. There was something in his voice which seemed to imply, "Just what I expected."

Vickers said, "That's right. There's nothing helpful here. A perfect picture of you, Warden, and of the end of the execution chamber. But that cloud of smoke has completely blanketed the chair and everything behind it. This rectangular shadow is about where the switchboard is located."

Harris Fargo said, "Looks like we're right back where we started from."

"I can't understand how that negative could get into the autopsy room," Dr. Hawkes blurted, puzzled.

Val Vickers put the broken glass on the shelf of the cabinet.

"A study of timing might be very interesting," he began. He was interrupted by the rattle of a key in the lock of the door at the far side of the autopsy room.

The door opened and a uniformed guard appeared. Behind him were two men in dark street clothes.

The guard said, "Excuse me, Warden. Didn't know you were in here. Just the undertaker's men, come to take Burnham away."

The two men behind the guard stepped forward and picked up the wicker basket near the sidewall.

Val Vickers said, "Just a moment, please. Who is Burnham?"

"A convict who died in the prison hospital yesterday," Dr. Hawkes explained. "I did the autopsy on him earlier tonight."

Val Vickers stepped up beside the wicker basket. At a sign from him, the two bearers set it down again.

Vickers raised the hinged wicker lid. A gray, shrunken face stared up at him from the basket. The eyes were open, but opaque.

Around the dead head was a deep incision where the top of the skull had been removed. On the emaciated, stark-naked body other ragged lines showed were surgical instruments had probed inexorably.

Marylee Church said, "Oh!" and then again, more faintly, "Oh!"

She turned away. Vickers grinned.

"The undertaker will have a job making a thing of beauty out of Burnham after what I did," Dr. Hawkes observed with a dry, callous chuckle.

Val Vickers put a hand against the dead man's flesh. It was cold, plastic, the consistency of wax.

Vickers grunted, "Okay," and the undertaker's men picked up the basket again. It creaked under the weight of the dead man as they carried it out.

"Well, how about it, Vickers?" Reynolds demanded irritably. "What're you going to do next? Doesn't seem to me like you're accomplishing a thing."

"The Chinese have a saying you would do well to ponder," Vickers replied evenly. "It goes like this: 'The journey of a thousand miles commences with a single step.'"

Reynolds' huge bulk shrugged impatiently. "To hell with proverbs. What's that got to do with finding out how Pete Audia got away tonight?"

"It's just Mr. Vickers' devious way of saying that he doesn't know anything," Marylee Church observed sweetly. "He

has not yet taken his first step."

When they left the execution chamber later, Vickers dropped behind the others for a private word with Harris Fargo.

"What about this Church girl?" he asked his friend. "One of the first things I want to get straight is just where *she* comes into the picture."

Fargo hunched his lean shoulders. "She's supposed to be a private investigator Reynolds has hired," he said. "I said *supposed* to be. That's what Reynolds told me. But I think she's a relative of his. Frankly, I don't know."

"What's your own opinion of this affair now?" Vickers asked curiously.

Fargo hesitated. "I took a trip to India once, Val, and I saw the famous Hindoo rope trick. You know—the magician takes a coil of rope, throws it into the air and the rope remains standing upright. Then the magician's assistant climbs up the rope and when he gets to the top he vanishes. I saw that with my own eyes. And since then, Val, I've been convinced that either there are occult forces in this world that few men understand, or there's such a thing as mass hypnotism. One or the other."

Vickers said, "I don't agree with you, Harry. I think things of this kind are all illusions. And I think what we saw happen tonight is just an illusion also."

"But how *could* it have been? What. . . ."

Vickers said, "I don't know . . . yet. It wasn't the usual stage magic of mirrors or trapdoors or cabinets with concealed compartments. But it was just a very clever and daring illusion, I feel certain.

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Fargo said, "I'll believe you, Val, when you show me. Until then I'm going to stick with my own theory."

CHAPTER FOUR

Another Execution

VAL VICKERS' long, spatulate fingers drummed restlessly against the top of Dr. Hawkes' desk.

"Then I understand, Doctor, that it's the invariable practice to make an autopsy on every prisoner who dies in this institution."

The doctor nodded assent.

"And when a convict dies, the body is taken from the prison hospital to the morgue and kept there until you perform the autopsy."

The doctor's black eyes regarded Vickers sharply from beneath his bushy brows. "That is correct."

"Now tell me, Doctor," Vickers went on, "why was it that, although Burnham died before noon yesterday, you did not perform the autopsy until tonight?"

Dr. Hawkes frowned. "Entirely a matter of personal convenience," he said evenly. "I expected to do the autopsy on Audia tonight. It's easier to do two at the same time. So I told them to keep Burnham in the ice box until an hour before the execution."

"Has the same situation ever occurred before?"

Dr. Hawkes hesitated. "Why—yes, I suppose it has. I don't particularly remember."

Val Vickers consulted his pocket notebook. "I would appreciate it, Doctor, if you'd look up your records and tell me if anyone died in the prison hospital on either January nineteenth this year or on

April seventh. Can you do that, Doctor?"

The doctor looked mystified, but he reached for a cloth-covered book like a ledger on the back of his desk. He thumbed pages, then paused.

"Yes. Convict No. 187692 died of coronary thrombosis on January *eighteenth*," he said finally.

"How about the other date?"

Dr. Hawkes thumbed more pages. "Convict No. 49203, a lifer, died of lobar pneumonia on April sixth."

There was a gleam of excitement in Vickers' hyperopthalmic eyes. But no trace of it entered his voice as he said:

"That's exactly what I expected. Now, one more thing, Doctor—is there anyone dangerously ill at the present time in the prison hospital?"

The doctor's dark countenance reflected his amazement. "There are usually some cases at all times in an institution this size. As a matter of fact, I have three cases right now that aren't responding to treatment the way they should. One is a general peritonitis that—"

Vickers interrupted. "Thanks, Doctor. I don't care about the professional details. Any one of the three might die?"

"Any or all. It's impossible for me to make an exact prognosis. Why do you ask?"

"Just inquisitive." There was a smile of satisfaction on Vicker's face as he got to his feet. "Much obliged, Doctor. You've been a real help."

A few minutes later, Val Vickers seated himself in a battered oak armchair beside Warden Reynolds' desk. The warden, chewing an unlighted cigar, faced him with an air of veiled hostility.

Vickers said, "You have a killer named Piotr Rinski who is sentenced to die in the chair two days from now. Right?"

Reynolds shifted his cigar to the other corner of his mouth. "Right. What of it?"

"I want the execution postponed,"

Vickers said calmly, without blinking.

The warden looked as if he might explode. "You have one hell of a crust!" he snarled. "The date of Rinski's execution was set by the court. How do you expect me to do anything about it?"

Vickers grinned. "You can. It's within your discretion to set the exact time within the week. Beyond that, if I want it delayed longer, I'll have the Governor's authority."

"What the hell's the big idea?"

Vickers leaned closer across the scarred desk. "I'll tell you. But I want you to keep this strictly under your own hat, understand. *Don't mention it to a soul.* I've discovered that each time one of these murderous gentry of yours does a disappearing act, the stunt has been preceded by a death in the prison hospital. It happened on January eighteenth and again on April sixth. In each case, the day before a killer vanished."

Reynolds said, "Well, I'll be. . . ."

Vickers sat back and studied the play of expression on the warden's heavy face. Bewilderment, suspicion, and then a glimmer of understanding.

"You mean the Doc's in on this?" Reynolds said, finally. "Some kind of a switch of bodies." He reached for the telephone on his desk. "I'll get that saw-bones in here and—"

Vickers said, "No. That isn't exactly what I meant. Don't bother Dr. Hawkes. Remember, I told you to keep this to yourself."

Reynolds' flood of anger turned again to bewilderment. He sat cursing slowly, fluently. Finally he faced Vickers squarely.

"All right. I'll play it your way. What do you want me to do?"

Vickers told him. . . .

FROM the warden's office, Vickers went back to the death house wing and the cell which caged young Piotr Rinski.

Vickers had familiarized himself with Rinski's case. The boy was not a hardened criminal, but more a victim of environment and bad associates. He had been with four other Polish youths in an attempted stick-up which ended with a fatal shooting. According to law, Piotr was equally guilty of murder and must pay for his crime with his life forfeited in the death chamber.

Vickers' deep understanding of psychology, however, made him certain that Rinski could be trusted to help him spring the trap he was now planning for Merlin the Magician.

The strained lines in the young convict's face relaxed a trifle as he listened to Vickers.

There was a light of hope in his sunken eyes as he said, "Okay, Mr. Vickers—and thanks. I'll do just as you say." Then the strained expression reappeared. "You're sure you'll be able to—to stay the execution. There is no question or doubt about it?"

Val Vickers laid a firm, encouraging hand on the thin, grey-clad shoulder. "If you break this thing for me, Rinski, I'll definitely promise that the Governor will commute your sentence."

It was five days later when one of the sick men in the prison hospital died. And acting on orders from Vickers, the execution of Piotr Rinski was scheduled at once by Warden Reynolds for midnight of the following day.

Vickers checked to make sure Dr. Hawkes intended to postpone his autopsy, as usual, for the evening of the electrocution. The doctor had so arranged it, he learned.

At seven o'clock on the night of the execution, a guard told Vickers that Rinski had asked to see him.

When they were alone in the condemned man's cell, Rinski handed Vickers a note. It was typed on a nondescript piece of scratch paper.

"Merlin the Magician is going to rescue you. Be prepared for the lights to go out as you sit in the chair. Someone in the dark will lead you to a hiding place. Follow quickly and remain absolutely silent. Merlin will come to release you when it is safe. If you don't obey instructions to the letter, you will die."

Rinski said, "I found this on the pillow of my bunk after they came to shave my head this afternoon."

"Fine, Rinski. You're doing your part. I shan't fail you in doing mine."

At ten o'clock Vickers was watching Fargo as the State Executioner tested his switchboard. Fargo spun the control wheel and Vickers' eyes were on the needle of the ammeter as it moved across its dial.

"Tests okay," Fargo remarked. "I'm still trying to figure how those lights went out when Audia sat in the chair. I must have been over this wiring a dozen times."

Vickers shrugged. "Maybe we'll find out tonight."

"I think we're up against something beyond our understanding," Fargo said seriously. "Something that's cheated me out of three fees. There are forces of Nature with which mankind cannot cope."

Vickers grinned. "That's true, but I don't believe Merlin knows about them either."

"How about the Great Pyramid of Egypt?" Fargo suggested. "Its builders were able to prophesy the history of the world in the angles and measurements of its subterranean galleries."

"I've made quite a study of Egyptology," Vickers said. "And I've found there's a lot of superstition and imaginative nonsense connected with ancient civilizations."

The clatter of steel against concrete came from behind the closed door leading to the autopsy room.

Vickers interrupted himself. "There's Dr. Hawkes. I wanted to see him."

He stepped to the door and flung it open.

Dr. Hawkes was not there. But Marylee Church was in the room, in the act of picking up a surgical instrument from the floor.

There was a man in the autopsy room also. A man with a coarse, fat face pitted with acne. He lay on the slate-topped dissecting table, covered, except for his head, by a sheet. He was the convict who had died in the prison hospital.

Vickers eyed the girl coldly. "And what, please, are *you* doing here?"

"I'm minding my own business," she said pertly. "Why don't you try doing the same?"

Vickers shrugged. "If you don't want to cooperate, it's your own funeral. I hardly think Reynolds would appreciate having to appear before a legislative investigating committee on your account."

THE girl's hostile eyes turned toward Harris Fargo, who appeared in the doorway. For a moment it seemed as if she were about to appeal to him. She hesitated, then abruptly capitulated.

"Mr. Vickers I think you're—you're unbearable! Can't I look around, as you have done? You're so darn sure you're going to get all the answers tonight from Rinski! Suppose you're wrong? I know you can't imagine such a thing, but it is possible! Suppose Rinski were to double-cross you? Suppose, instead of helping you, he were to keep his mouth shut and disappear like those other men?"

Vickers' jaw was grim. But Fargo's astonishment was almost comical.

"What's all this, Val? Are you working some kind of a deal with Rinski? Say, am I going to lose another fee tonight?"

Vickers said, "Forget it, Harris. This girl has a too vivid imagination."

He turned on his heel abruptly. "Come, Miss Church. You're going to sit right on that witness bench where I can keep an eye on you from now until they bring

in Rinski. I'm taking no chances."

She obeyed meekly. Vickers seated himself stiffly beside her.

Still muttering about his fee, Fargo went back to his deadly contraption. He checked the connections to the head electrode, moistened the leg electrode with brine solution.

A clock on a distant tower was booming the midnight hour when they led Piotr Rinski into the execution chamber.

Forty-five minutes of questioning had failed to give Vickers any additional information. Marylee Church sullenly refused to tell how she had learned about the note Rinski had received. To Vickers' insistence she merely stuck to her story that she was engaged in the same investigation that he was.

Finally, disgusted, Vickers had gone back to the autopsy room for a brief conversation with Dr. Hawkes, who by that time was engaged in making his autopsy on the fat-faced, acne-pitted dead man.

Val Vickers was standing with his back against the wall in the same position he had occupied at the time of Audia's escape, when Rinski came in flanked by guards. This time, however, Vickers had no camera to bother with.

Without benefit of photography, he felt sure that in another few seconds he would be able to tear the veil of mystery from these elusive death house disappearances.

But it was evident that Rinski was terrified in spite of his hope that the unknown Merlin was going to intervene to save him. And with his own muscles tense with expectancy, Val Vickers could not escape a cold premonition.

Too many people knew of his arrangement with Rinski. The warden knew, of course. And Marylee Church. How had she learned? Had Reynolds told her in spite of the warning to say nothing to anyone?

If Marylee Church knew, how many

others were in on the secret? Perhaps Merlin knew all about it too, by this time.

Vickers' jaw muscles clenched. Young Piotr Rinski had reached the chair now. Rinski hesitated, looked around wildly. He stared straight at Vickers, but his eyes did not seem to focus.

Unconsciously, Vickers' fingers were pressing into his own palms as he waited. The first guard stepped forward with the chest strap.

Automatically Vickers' eyes flicked upward to the ceiling lights. He strained, as if by sheer power of will he would be able to pierce the blanket of darkness about to engulf the room.

The voice of Father Burke could be heard muttering tonelessly. "I am the Resurrection and the Life. . . ."

The lights burned brightly, without a flicker. It came to Vickers with a sudden, icy shock that seconds were flying past. He dropped his eyes again to the chair.

Rinski's arms had been strapped. One guard was adjusting the leg electrode, while the other placed the deadly head electrode with its concealing black mask.

Vickers had one last flash of the young convict's fear-contorted features as the mask settled into place.

The official witnesses sat rigid and white-faced, not even drawing breath. Then, even as sickening comprehension dawned in Vickers' mind, the two guards had finished their deadly task and stepped back from the chair.

Vickers saw Warden Reynolds' arm go up, a handkerchief held between his fingers.

Reynolds' arm flashed the handkerchief downward swiftly. And, at that precise instant, Rinski's body thrust forward against his straps with such force that the stiff leather creaked.

The dying youth's hands bowed inward and the muscles of his arms writhed like corded serpents. The exposed flesh of his leg at the electrode became angry red in

color. It was a terrible sight to see.

Vickers turned away as the odor of burning flesh reached his nostrils.

He glanced at Marylee Church, sitting among the witnesses. The girl was facing the chair. Her face was perfectly white, and quite devoid of expression.

They found the second note a few minutes after Rinski's body had been removed to the autopsy room. It was on Warden Stetson Reynolds' desk. It read:

I could have saved Rinski, but he attempted to betray me, so he had to die.

It was signed, *Merlin the Magician.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Merlin's Illusion

VAL VICKERS picked up a small can of talcum powder and dusted the inside of his rubber gloves carefully before he pulled them on. Among the long string of degrees which he was privileged to wear after his signature was one in electrical engineering. Vickers hadn't earned that degree without a thorough understanding of the dangers to be encountered when playing with wires containing enough amperage to kill a man.

Before bending again beside the squat ugly frame of the electric chair, he glanced at his watch.

Four o'clock in the morning. Two hours of work alone in the execution chamber had convinced him of the complete feasibility of his new plan. This time he would say nothing to anyone, not even the warden. By virtue of the authority conferred on him by the governor, he would spend more time in here, alone, before the next execution which was preceded by a death in the prison hospital.

The equipment needed would not be elaborate. And he could install it himself in an hour or two. A complete new set

of lights on a different circuit and a powerful fan properly placed to blow away any smoke screen set to conceal another disappearance.

Vickers fussed with the cables which connected the chair with the switchboard.

He was stooping when the lights suddenly went out. The stealthy footsteps behind him were almost inaudible but incredibly swift. And even as he jerked upright and whirled, the person behind him struck.

The blow was a glancing one on the side of his head. It did not knock consciousness from Vickers. But the solid stone floor under his feet was suddenly shifting and insecure, like the deck of a ship in heavy seas.

Nausea rode in Vickers' stomach, clutched at his throat. His arms, raised to defend himself against the hard hands grasping at him, were feeble, lacking coordination.

Powerless to resist, he felt himself being pushed in front of his unseen attacker. Pushed down, into a hard seat. Then something broad and flat was crowding against his chest, forcing him backward until he was sitting bolt upright against a hard chair back.

A chair! Understanding flooded Vickers' paralyzed mind.

He was being strapped into the electric chair!

Oddly, what Warden Reynolds had said came back to him: "There's an old superstition that anyone who sits in the electric chair will die there."

The hard hands were fumbling now at his leg adjusting the leg electrode. He kicked out with all his failing strength, but it was futile. The electrode straps were pulled tight. The hands moved upward to his arms.

The effects of the blow were beginning to wear off. Vickers felt responsiveness creeping back into his impotent muscles. He jerked his arms back

with all the strength he could muster, lashing out with them toward the invisible man beside him.

The chest strap pinioned him so that his range was only a few inches, but he managed to keep the groping hands from securing his arms.

Something clamped down suddenly over his head. Cloth brushed against his face. The head electrode and the black cap! Vickers could hear his unseen attacker darting behind the chair to the switchboard.

Vickers leaned forward, putting all his weight against the chest strap and at the same time frantically tugging his arms upward and to his side. They loosened and came free.

At the same time there was a blinding electric flash which Vickers could see even through the black cloth hanging across his face.

Swift, stealthy steps crossed the floor to the door and were gone.

Sweat was clammy on Vickers' face. If he hadn't disconnected the chair from the switchboard just before he was attacked, he would be dead by now! Or, if the man who had assaulted him in the dark had only lingered to make sure. . .

Vickers fumbled blindly at the strap across his chest. He got it loose, tore the helmet from his head and the electrode from his leg.

Above the faint humming sound which came from the switchboard, the door clicked again. Vickers heard stealthy footsteps coming back:

He poised himself, plunged forward. His arms circled like a football player making a tackle. They closed on flesh, clung and squeezed tightly. There was a shrill, feminine scream.

Val Vickers got a match from his pocket and flicked it alight with his thumbnail. On the floor at his feet, gasping, disheveled, golden hair streaming unrestrained, was Marylee Church.

Vickers exclaimed, "What! *You again!*"

At the same instant Marylee Church said, weakly, "What! *You!* Don't you ever do anything but sneak up on people in the dark?"

Vickers said, "Yes. I'm doing something different right now. I'm checking out of this place. You can tell your friend Stetson Reynolds and anyone else who's interested that I've had enough! It's one thing to match wits with a self-styled sorcerer, and it's another nearly to get fried in the electric chair. I'm *through!*"

"The great *Specialist in the Impossible,*" Marylee said softly. She sounded disappointed. "They told me you were infallible! You and Hitler! I'm really surprised!"

* * *

IT WAS very hot in the cramped space where Val Vickers crouched. He had been there more than two hours and he ached all over from holding the same position. With someone moving about in front of his hiding place, he was even unable to breathe normally for fear he would be discovered.

Weeks had passed since the night young Piotr Rinski died in the chair. Weeks of clamor from the press and rising pressure on the Governor for removal of Warden Reynolds. Someone was needed as a public scapegoat. During these weeks, only the influence of Garnet Blackburn, behind the scenes, prevented changes that would have spoiled Val Vickers' plans.

Vickers had studiously avoided the State Penitentiary. Until finally came the telephone call for which he had been impatiently waiting. The call which informed him that another prisoner had died in the prison hospital and that an execution was scheduled for the next day.

Only one person knew Vickers was in the execution chamber tonight—the person who had phoned him. The person who had seen to it that he came into the Death House unobserved and was securely planted in his hiding place well in advance of the hour of execution.

It was nearly time now. Light came from the tiny crack in front of Vickers' eye, but he couldn't see what was going on. Sounds from the other side of the partition which concealed him, told the story, however, to his attentive ear.

First came the shuffle of many feet. That would be the official witnesses being herded to their benches. Vickers wondered if the violet-eyed, golden-haired Marylee Church was there, waiting again expectantly for the vanishing act which had so fascinated her at the time of Audia's disappearance.

After the witnesses had been seated, Vickers could hear the low hum of their talk as they waited for the condemned man to appear. Then, there was a distant clank of metal, the cell door in the Death House opening for the prisoner.

Next Vickers heard the monotonous monotone of Father Burke as the death march which the chaplain headed entered the execution chamber.

The witnesses sat silent now. It was so still that the shuffle of the prisoner's feet in his felt slippers was audible as he passed in front of Vickers on his way to the chair.

Vickers could picture the scene being enacted a few feet from him. Fargo ready at his switchboard, Reynolds posted where he could give the signal for the current to be turned on, Dr. Hawkes in the autopsy room with surgical instruments waiting near his hand.

Then the thing for which Val Vickers had been waiting happened.

The chink of light from the crack near his eyes went suddenly black. And almost instantly the protective covering

which shielded Vickers from observation was removed.

Vickers eased swiftly from his cramped hiding place into the pitch black room, which was rumbling already with rising confusion.

Someone stumbled against him in the blackness. Vickers' hand shot out and grasped loose clothing. The sound of ripping cloth followed as the owner of the clothing jerked backward. Vickers clung tightly.

The person he was holding made a frenzied attempt to tear free. Fists flailed against Vickers like the sticks of an insane drummer trying to perform a triple paradiddle. But the very frequency of the blows robbed them of power to damage. Vickers kept his head down to protect his face from the blows and hung on grimly.

The whole thing lasted less than half a minute. Just long enough for Vickers to make certain of the second man he had expected to encounter in the darkness. As soon as this second man closed in to attack, Vickers plunged forward dragging both men with him to the concrete floor.

"Let's have it, Reynolds," he cried as he fell. "The light!"

A flashlight beam made a puddle of brilliance on writhing figures. Hands reached down to secure both men Vickers had knocked over.

Vickers sprang up. He was directly in front of the switchboard and he reached over to flip a small knife-switch. The ceiling lights glared again in the execution chamber.

Warden Reynolds' massive, horse-like face was contorted into a triumphant grin. "Got 'em!" he said.

Vickers' mismatched eyes glanced briefly at the two men now pinioned by prison guards. One was the slipper-clad condemned murderer. The other was the beefy guard named Johnson.

THE witnesses, most of them reporters, were jamming forward, eager for the whole story. But Marylee Church sat quietly where she had been on the witness bench. Her eyes were intent on Vickers.

Val Vickers swung to Harris Fargo, standing beside his switch panel. Vickers pointed to the wall.

Just at the side of the switchboard, a hinged plate of steel, like a door, stood open, revealing a narrow recess in the wall.

"That," said Vickers, "is the shadow that showed on the broken negative that was stolen from me. I didn't recognize it for what it was, at first, although I realized immediately it wasn't quite the right shape to be the switchboard panel itself. It wasn't until I came in here alone that I found it."

There was astonishment on Fargo's face. The Executioner said:

"Amazing! Who would have imagined such a thing!"

Vickers said, "Just as I thought, this whole affair of vanishing murderers has been an illusion so simple it's almost disappointing when understood. The lights are doused at precisely the right instant. Johnson tosses a smoke bomb in front of the chair, slugs the other guard and leads the escaping man quickly to this hiding place. Later, the escaping man is taken to the autopsy room and placed in a false bottom of the wicker hamper containing another convict who died in the prison hospital. The undertaker's men, who are accessories in the plot, remove the escaping murderer right under the noses of everyone. At the time Audia disappeared, I might easily have caught him if I'd had the thought in time. I even noticed that the basket seemed awfully heavy for such a skinny little corpse as Burnham."

Warden Reynolds added, "The police



There was a man who would not believe that ...

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**DETECTIVE
TALES**

will have rounded up the whole staff at the undertakers' place by this time."

"Val," said Harris Fargo admiringly, "you're a genius. I'll have to take my hat off to you. Imagine this man Johnson getting away with a thing as big as this."

For once, both of Vickers' eyes seemed the same color, the cold grey of ice.

"It's *you* who are the genius," he said flatly. "A misguided one. This hole in the wall is nothing more than a space for conduits and wiring to your switchboard, Fargo. But you had the imagination and the daring to make it into black magic. You knew you'd have power of life or death over the men you snatched from the death chair. They would be your slaves. With their criminal help and your knowledge of electricity you could unlock the bank vaults of the world, help yourself to their contents. But you made your first mistake when you tackled Garnet Blackburn's bank and he told me to find Merlin *or else*."

Fargo's thin face was saturnine. "I don't know what you're talking about now, Val," he said steadily.

"Don't try to bluff it out," Vickers advised. "You can't. I learned the identity of Merlin the night you attacked me in here and tried to electrocute me. It had to be you. No one else could have had the opportunity to make a connection from the switchboard to the lighting circuit. You were too smart to leave it connected permanently, but I know enough about electricity myself to see where you could tap in the circuit with a few minutes work before any execution when you intended to pull off the vanishing stunt. I knew then that my suspicion of Dr. Hawkes was not correct. I pretended to quit the investigation. And Warden Reynolds has helped me to throw you off the track. He phoned me when things were right for you to pull another disappear-

ance, and smuggled me in here so we could catch you in the very act."

Fargo said, "You haven't caught me. You can't prove a thing."

Warden Reynolds chuckled deep in his throat. "Johnson, would you prefer to take the rap all by yourself, or do you want to get off easy by turning State's evidence?"

The big guard's face was ashen. "I'll talk," he muttered. "I ain't going to be the goat for him."

"And the undertaker will have a word to say too, I imagine," Vickers added. "And Audia and the other murderers, when we nab them, as we will very soon."

Fargo wore a frozen smile.

"I forgot," he said, "that you were an electrical engineer, Val. You've got too many degrees for me to keep up with. I'll have to remedy my forgetfulness."

The Executioner turned toward the switchboard. Before anyone realized what he intended, he reached up and grasped the massive copper terminals of the main switch. A huge spark crackled. Fargo's body stood rigid, frozen across the contact points.

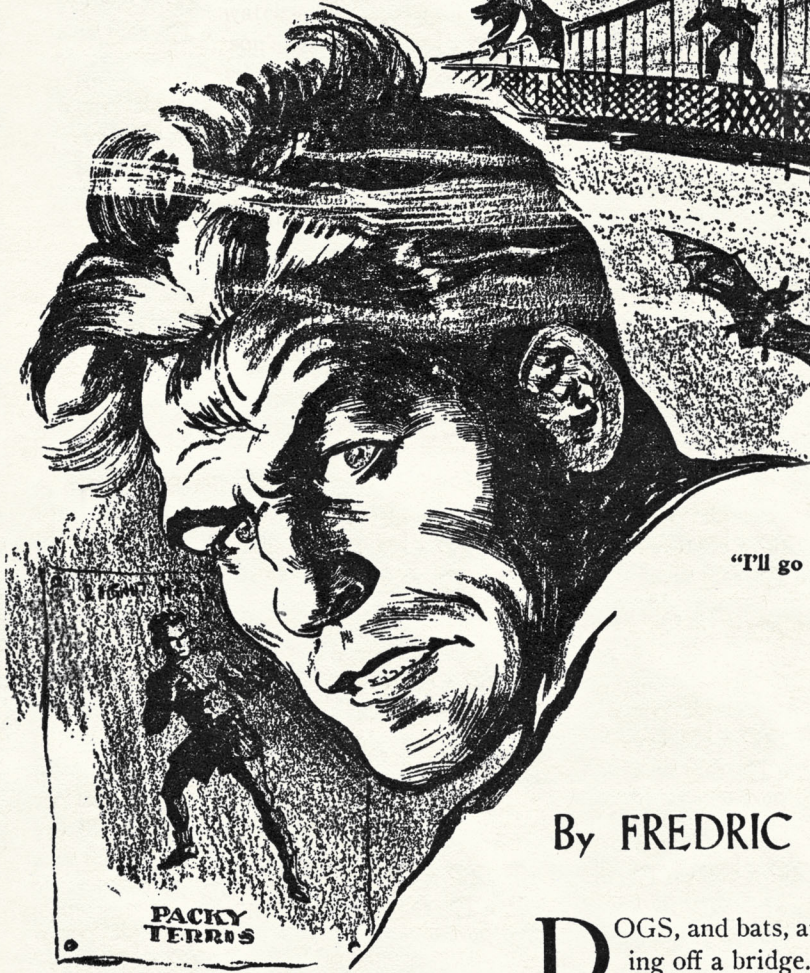
Afterward, in the warden's office, Marylee Church said, "I'm really frightfully jealous, Mr. Vickers. I thought you were all bluff and self-advertisement, but I'll have to admit—"

Val Vickers interrupted. "I owe you my thanks, Miss Church. You were a great help."

There was surprise in the violet eyes. "A help?"

Val Vickers grinned. "Sure. You had me worried at first, until I checked and found you were just Reynolds' niece, with a yen to rival me as a sort of female *Specialist in the Impossible*. But after that, you helped me keep my temper. Each time Merlin scored a point against me I ended up in the dark with you in my arms. You know . . . that was nice!"

WHISPERING DEATH



PACKY
TERRIS

"I'll go jump off the bridge!"

By FREDRIC BROWN

The voice kept whispering, "Jump! Jump! Jump!" and the bats cried mournfully and endlessly. . . . But only Packy Terris could hear their call!

DOGS, and bats, and death by jumping off a bridge.

You wouldn't think that things like that could tie up together in one evening, but they did. You wouldn't think that the presence of bats in a dirty attic in the slums could transmute a whisper of death into money for Packy's cure, either. But it did. . . .

My part in it started late that afternoon when I saw Packy Terris' dog killed by an automobile. I like dogs, and hated to see one killed, but what worried me the most

was that, to a certain extent, this one's death was my fault. I mean, if I hadn't tried to catch it for Packy, it wouldn't have run out into the street in front of the car.

My intentions had been good. I knew how much poor Packy loved that mutt, and there it was miles from home and pretty obviously lost. It looked gaunt and hungry, too. But it growled at me when I whistled to it, and when I came closer it whirled and ran—right in front of that damn automobile!

And that was that, except of course that I'd have to tell Packy what had happened.

I had Packy's address somewhere among some notebooks in my room, so I went there to get it. Anyway, going to see Packy was one more thing to do to help me kill that gosh-awful last week before I'd enter the army.

I'd made the mistake—the big mistake—of quitting my job on the *Post* ten days before my induction date. I thought I had a lot of loose ends to wind up, but I'd been wrong, and two days out of the ten had taken care of everything I could possibly do until the last day when I'd have to pack and store my clothes and the things I still had in my room.

Now I had a long week of nothing ahead of me. It was going to be boring, except for seeing Margaret in the evenings. I'd tried my darndest to talk Margaret into making it more than evenings; I wanted her to marry me so we could spend that last week together.

But she was too sensible for that. She said—Well, no use telling you exactly what she said. You know that line of gaff about it being so much more sensible for us to wait until after I came back. It's right, I suppose, but there are times when a fellow would rather be wrong.

Back at my room, I hunted for the old notebook that had Packy's address in it, but the notebook wasn't there. I'd probably thrown it away in clearing out stuff.

So I phoned Harry Beck. Beck used to be Packy's manager when Packy was going after the light-heavy title. Packy and Beck had made heavy sugar in those days. Packy's was gone now, but Beck still had money and a string of scrappers. And Beck, I understood, was doleing out a few bucks a week to keep Packy going.

"Slim?" Harry Beck said, as soon as I'd told him who I was. "Listen, I got a story for you. A new boy from Fargo, a welter—"

"They all come from Fargo," I said.

"This one really did. From a farm in the country about twenty miles from there, anyway. Listen, Slim, he's what you dream about—a boxer *and* a slugger, all in one chunk, and—"

"Whoa," I said, "don't waste it on me. I don't work for the *Post* any more. They've got a new sports reporter, and I've got a new job."

"The hell you say. Where?"

I said, "They wouldn't tell me. Military secret. Say, Harry, I called up to ask you where Packy Terris is staying. You've got his address, haven't you?"

"Sure. He's still at that rooming house on Ninth Street, forty-eighteen's the number. He'll be glad to see you. I'm afraid he's getting worse, Slim."

"Drink?"

"He still laps it up—not that I blame him for that. But the last few times I saw him, he talks like his mind is slipping fast. You know what I mean. I hate to see it. Packy was a swell guy."

"He *is* a swell guy," I said. "Drunk and punchy, I'd rather trust him than the board of aldermen. Say, Harry, off the record how go things in the fight game?"

"The only fight game," Beck said, "is the one you're going into. Nobody left for the ring. A few guys old enough to have had kids before Pearl Harbor. Slim, it's awful. I ain't got one good fighter left."

"How about the boy from Fargo?"

"He stinks. Even in what passes for

competition now, I can't get him past a prelim spot. The fight game's shot to hell. Look, you haven't got a consumptive aunt who wants to box in the ring, have you?"

I chuckled. "I'll check them over," I told him. "If I've got one, I'll send her to you, Harry. Well, so long if I don't get to see you before I go to camp."

"Good luck, Slim. Give 'em the old one-two. And drop in to see me sometime before you leave, if you got time."

"I'll do that," I said.

AFTER I'd hung up, I took a look at my wrist watch and a mental squint at the address Beck had given me, and decided I'd better phone Margaret at the *Post*. I gave the operator the old familiar number and then asked for the society desk. Margaret's cool voice answered.

"An announcement for tomorrow's paper," I said. "Miss Margaret Andeville, former society editor of the *Post*, and Mr. Warren (Slim) Wilson, former star sports reporter of the *Post*, were married last night—that's tonight, of course, but it'll read that way in tomorrow's paper—at the home of the Reverend—"

"Warren, *please!* It's almost quitting time, and I've got half a dozen things to do besides. What do you really want?"

"I just told you what I want," I said. "But if the answer to that is still no, then I'll settle for telling you I might be a little late calling for you tonight. I've got to see a man about a dog—"

I grinned at my crack. I said: "Literally, honey. I saw Packy Terris' dog get run over and killed half an hour ago and I want to see him and tell him about it. Might make me half an hour or so late picking you up, but I'd rather see him first and get it off my mind. Okay?"

"Of course it's all right, Warren. But who is Packy Terris?"

"You kidding?" I asked. Once she'd asked me who Dempsey was, but it turned

out she *was* kidding that time. She'd known there was a boxer by that name. In fact, she thought he was still champ.

"Of course I'm not kidding. Is he someone I'm supposed to know?"

I said, "Five years ago Packy was the best light-heavy in the East. He was heading for a title bout and he'd have won it if he'd got there soon enough. But he took too much—he never was one for covering up. He was the kind of a guy who'd take three blows to give one, and that doesn't work forever."

"Oh," Margaret said, and from the tone of her voice I knew she didn't know what I was talking about.

"He went punch-drunk and down the toboggan," I told her. "He went back to the tanks because he'd never saved any money. So now he's walking on his heels. He's blind in one eye and got a tin ear. Ear-drum's busted or something. And sometimes he doesn't know what day of the week it is, but—"

"Warren, I *must* get back to work. If you must tell me about people like that, you can do it tonight."

"Okay, honey. Be seeing you tonight, and every night till I go."

"Every night but Friday. I explained about that."

"Okay. I'll phone you again if I'm going to be later than half an hour. 'Bye.'"

I took a quick shower and dressed for the evening—which means I put on my other suit—and then headed for the address Harry Beck had given me.

It was the kind of place I expected it to be.

A landlady who could have stood in for the Witch of Endor told me Packy's room was the third floor back but she didn't know whether he was in or not.

I walked up and knocked, and there wasn't any answer. I tried again, louder, because he might be asleep and a guy who's punchy sleeps pretty sound, generally.

When there still wasn't any answer, I tried the knob and the door wasn't locked. I pushed it open and looked in.

There was nothing in the room but a cot and a rickety dresser and some photographs stuck on the walls, pictures of fighters. And in one corner leaned a battered guitar.

But Packy wasn't there, so I closed the door again.

I pulled the door shut and was just about to start for the stairs when a voice said, "Looking for Packy?"

I turned around, and it was Gus Maxon, who used to be a handler. Not Packy's handler, though. I hadn't seen Gus for a long time, either.

I said, "Hi, Gus. Yeah, I was. Know where he is?"

His eyes widened a little. "I'll be damned! It's Mr. Wilson. No, I haven't seen Packy for a couple of days."

"You mean he's been away?"

Gus grinned. "Where'd he be away to? Naw, he's around, I guess. But you know how it is in a rooming house. Sometimes you don't see the guy next door to you for weeks, if you happen to go in and out different times. Come in and have a drink."

I'D HAVE turned it down, except that he assumed I was coming and popped back inside the door before I could answer, so there was nothing left for me to do but follow him.

"Just a short one," I said. He chuckled. "Ain't a glass in the place, so the length's up to you."

I took a short sip out of the bottle he handed me, and then while he took a long one, I glanced around the room. It was a bit better than Packy's, but not much. There was a table in here, and a chair, and a cheap little portable phonograph and a stack of records. The pictures on the wall were mostly ponies, both kinds.

Gus said, "Packy ought to be back pretty soon. Guess he's eating about now.

How about another drink, chum?"

"No, thanks," I told him. "What are you doing now, Gus?"

"Not much. Get a few jobs at the Pelham A.C., enough to pay room rent and eats. The fight game is shot, what with the war. But hell, you're a sports reporter. You know that."

I nodded. "Where does Packy usually eat? Could I catch him there?"

"Could be, if you want to try. He buys meal tickets at the little restaurant half a block south—Chet's place."

I said, "Thanks. I'll try it." I'd never cared much for Gus, and I was glad to make a getaway.

I found the restaurant and looked in through the window. Packy wasn't inside, but I went in anyway. Whenever I had a dinner date with Margaret, I always found it a good idea to fortify myself first with a sandwich or two. Food, at the places she liked, was quality but not in quantity.

I sat down at the front end of the counter, with my back toward the door. There were only two other customers in the place, both down at the other end of the counter.

The waitress wasn't busy and brought me a glass of water and the menu right away. She was pretty without being beautiful. She had red hair and eyes that looked as though she could laugh.

"Pie and coffee," I said. "Apple pie, if you've got it. Do you know Packy Ter-ris?"

She nodded. "He hasn't been in today. I think he's—" she stopped and I saw she wasn't going on.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing. Skip it." She went away and came back with my order.

I said, "I'd like to find Packy. Got any idea where I could look for him?"

She hesitated, and I said, "I'm a friend of his."

"You a bill collector?"

I shook my head, grinned. "A friend,"

I said. "Just a friend, that's all."
"You aren't a manager?"

"I'm a sports reporter. Or I was. Why? Have managers been looking for Packy?"

"One was a few weeks ago. Wanted to give him a job as sparring partner for Lefty Doyle. You know what Lefty does to his sparring partners. That's all Packy would need to— Well, it'd probably kill him. What paper you work for?"

"The *Post*."

"Then you're Slim Wilson. I thought your face looked familiar."

I grinned. "Don't tell me you read the sports pages?"

"I cut my eye teeth on them, mister. Killer Hogan—only his real name was Evans—was my dad. He wasn't a killer, either. He was a swell guy."

"And a pretty good fighter," I said. "What's he doing now?"

"He's dead. Momentarily, her voice was hard and flat. She hesitated again. "The same route Packy's going to take, unless somebody can pull him out of it."

I hated to ask it, but it was the obvious question. "Booze?"

She nodded.

"You know where he is now?"

"He's probably at the place in the middle of the next block, on the other side. It's a bums' hangout, rotgut at a nickel a glass. How good a friend of his are you, Slim?"

I said, "I'll try it. Where does he get the money for drinks?"

"Doesn't take much, at a place like that. His manager—his former manager—gives him a few bucks a week. He can afford it, I guess. He made thousands out of Packy once."

I said, "I should have looked up Packy sooner, but you know how it is when you're a reporter. You know so many people you can't keep track of them. Even the good ones. I wouldn't be here now if it hadn't been for seeing Packy's dog run over today."

"His dog?" Her eyes clouded. "You mean Uppercut?"

"Yeah. I couldn't think of his name, but that's the one."

She leaned forward. "Don't tell him, Slim. Look, that mutt ran away a month ago, and it nearly broke Packy's heart. He'd had Uppercut for years. But he talked himself into thinking Uppercut found a good home somewhere. You'll break his heart all over again telling him the dog's dead. He's—he's been talking a lot lately about committing suicide. Don't tell him."

I said, "Okay, sister. You really like Packy, don't you?"

"He's a swell guy. I remember when I was a kid, seeing him fight a couple of times. Dad used to take me to the good matches. I thought Packy Terris was a sort of a god, then. Like I thought about my father."

I nodded understandingly. I'd seen those fights, too. They'd be fun to talk about. I almost wished I was taking this girl to dinner tonight instead of Margaret. But dammit, I was in love with Margaret.

But I said, "Be seeing you," to the red-head and walked out and to the saloon where Packy hung out.

HE WAS there, sitting across the table from a bleary-eyed wreck of a man. Packy's own eyes didn't look so good, either.

But they lighted up when I came in. He said, "Slim! I'll be damned, Slim Wilson." He tried to stand up, but apparently decided it was the better part of valor to remain seated.

I said, "Let's go up to your room, Packy. I want to talk to you."

"Let's talk here, Slim. Have drink, huh?"

His eyes got funny. It took me a minute to recognize what was there. It was fear.

I said, "Okay, I'll order 'em," and walked up to the bar. Not loud enough for Packy to hear, I said, "Mix us two highballs—ginger ale spiked with ginger ale. Get me?"

The bartender had a thin, pinched face with eyes like marbles. He said, "I get you but I don't like it. Packy's a good customer and who the hell do you think you are, Carrie Nation?"

I asked, "Are those your own teeth or store ones?"

He looked at me a minute longer and I looked back. Then he mumbled something it was probably just as well I couldn't understand and reached for the ginger ale bottle.

I turned around and caught the eye of the panhandler who was sitting across from Packy. I pulled out my wallet and motioned to him with it. He got up and came over to me, walking steadier than I'd expected him to.

I held out a dollar bill so Packy wouldn't see it if he happened to be looking. I said, "Tell Packy you got to blow. Spend this somewhere else."

He was out of the place by the time I went over to the table with the highballs.

I said, "How are things, Packy?"

"I'm not so drunk, Slim. It's got my legs a little but not my head. I can't get drunk, and I've got to."

"Why?"

"If I don't, I'll go jump off the bridge. I'll do what it tells me to do."

"What tells you to do that?"

"The thing that whispers."

I looked at him a minute, and then I said, "Wait for me a minute, Packy."

I went to the phone on the wall down at the other end of the room, and dialed Margaret's number.

I said, "Honey, I'm going to be later than I thought. I might not get there at all. I'm sorry as the devil."

"That's all right, Warren. I have plenty of food in the kitchenette, and I'll go ahead

and eat here. But—is something wrong?"

"Not with me," I told her. "With—the fellow I told you about. The prize-fighter. He's in a jam."

She said, "Oh," a bit distantly.

I knew what that meant. I said, "Listen, honey, you're as beautiful as an angel and I love you, but there are some things I can't explain to you because you can't understand them. There are other things in life besides dancing and tea parties."

It was the wrong thing to say, of course. Which is probably why I said it.

"I understand, Warren," she said, in a voice just a bit too sweet. "You needn't explain."

I hadn't intended to, not until afterwards, anyway, until she said that.

I said, "Listen, Margaret. Suppose you saw a beautiful racehorse, a thoroughbred, a derby winner, one of the most beautiful things in the world, being mistreated because it couldn't run any more. Wouldn't you feel something had to be done about it? Well, Packy's like that, Margaret."

She laughed a little. "You mean he's beautiful?"

"He's the ugliest thing you ever saw. He's got a broken nose and ears like you'd imagine he'd have, and he's deaf in one of them, and he walks on his heels. But I saw him fight when he was good and *that* was beautiful. Beautiful like a tiger, he was."

"Warren, you needn't explain. It's quite all right."

It wasn't, quite, of course. So I made it worse. I said, "He's drunk. And he wants to commit suicide, and I've got to find out why. Now do you understand?"

"Of course, Warren."

You can't argue with Margaret any more than you can fight a puff of wind. I sighed and said, "Okay, honey. Look, as soon as everything's all right, I'll phone you again. And if it's not too late for us to go out, I'll take you anywhere you want to go. 'Bye.'"

I WENT back to Packy Terris. I said, "Tell me about the thing that whispers."

He shrugged. "It just whispers in my ear, Slim. Sometimes loud and sometimes not so loud. It keeps telling me to kill myself. Lately it's been saying, 'Jump off the bridge.' Over and over until I almost go nuts."

He took a sip of the ginger ale in front of him and looked up at me in surprise. "There ain't no licker in this."

I nodded. "You're sobering up, Packy."

He took a longer drink and said, "This tastes better. I hate whiskey, but I got to

"Jessie Evans? Yeah, she's a swell kid, Slim. I knew her father. He was a better fighter than I ever was."

That wasn't true, but I let it pass. I said, "She doesn't like to see you drink, Packy."

"I lost my best friend, Slim. Uppercut. He didn't like me drunk, I guess. He ran away. But I *had* to drink, Slim, on account of that—that whispering thing. Maybe it ain't a thing, though. Maybe it's me; I mean some part of me telling the rest of me—

"I ain't drunk now, Slim. Just my legs a little. They went rubber, you know what

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get drunk so I don't do what that whisper tells me to do. I—I don't *want* to die."

"You're not going to die. Not for a long time. Where do you hear this whisper stuff?"

"Mostly in my room. Once in a while somewhere else. Mostly at night when I'm trying to go to sleep in my room."

"What kind of a voice is it?"

"It ain't a voice at all. It's something just sort of clicks in my brain and says 'Jump off the bridge. Jump off the bridge. Jump off the—'"

He'd have gone on if I hadn't stopped him.

He said, "Maybe that thing is right, Slim. I mean, what good am I anyhow? Why shouldn't I jump off the bridge like the thing that whispers tells me to? Except that I'm afraid to."

"Don't be foolish," I told him. "There's plenty to live for, and I don't mean rotgut liquor. You've got friends, haven't you? Like that girl at the restaurant."

I mean, and they feel it first when I've had just a few. I don't like to drink but—"

I said, "Think you can navigate okay now, to go up to your room?"

"Guess so." He stood up and lurched toward the door. I took his arm and found that he could walk all right as long as I did the steering.

It was getting dark outside. I said, "Maybe you'd feel better if you had another dog, Packy. I know a guy with a terrier he wants to find a home for. Should I fix it for you to take it off his hands?"

"It wouldn't do no good, Slim. It'd run away like the others. That's one thing makes me think—"

"What others? You mean since Upper-cut?"

"Yeah. He run away a month ago. Jessie give me a dog and it run away in three days. Then I found one, a pup, and brought it home. It run away too. Then it wasn't so bad, because I hadn't time to get much attached to them, but Uppercut

—I hope he found a good home somewhere. He was a swell dog.”

“A smart dog, too,” I said. “He could take care of himself all right. Don’t worry about Uppercut. Maybe he’s sleeping on silk cushions in a penthouse.”

The fresh air was doing Packy good. He needed less steering now.

I said, “You go on up to your room, Packy. I’m going to stop here for some black coffee and sandwiches for us, and I’ll bring them up.”

“Okay. Let me pay for ’em. I got a little—”

“Nuts,” I said and gave him a gentle push in the direction of his rooming house.

Jessie Evans wasn’t busy. She said, “Find him? How is he?”

I said, “Not so bad, from drinking. There’s something else wrong.”

“What?”

“I mean to find out. Got a pail I can get some black coffee in? And can you make up some sandwiches? Lots of ’em. I’m getting hungry, too.”

“Sure. You go on up with Packy. I’m off work in ten minutes, and it’ll take that long for the sandwiches. I’ll bring them up.”

“Swell,” I said. “Bring three cups. Listen, has Packy got any enemies? Anybody who’d be glad to see him do a Brodie?”

“No. Why?”

IT TOOK only a minute to tell her, and then I caught up with Packy on the stairs of the rooming house. At the second floor landing, the Witch of Endor opened a door and gave us the fishy eye. But she didn’t say anything.

Jessie Evans must have worked fast on those sandwiches. She got there almost as soon as we did. We didn’t talk about anything in particular until I had two cups of coffee and a couple of sandwiches into Packy and he admitted he was feeling better.

Then I took a cup for myself, and wondered what questions I’d better ask first.

Packy was sitting on the bed, leaning back against the wall, his eyes closed. But I knew he wasn’t asleep because he had one hand on the end of the bed and was tapping nervously with his forefinger. I stood leaning against the opposite wall, watching him. The red-headed girl was sitting on the window-ledge, watching Packy too, and I knew she was thinking over what I’d told her about the whispers.

I found myself listening for them too, but there wasn’t a sound except the distant rumble of a street car and somebody playing chords on a guitar in some far part of the house.

Packy opened his eyes and said, “Those damn bats! Listen, Slim, I been thinking about that terrier pup you said somebody wanted to find a home for. Maybe—maybe it wouldn’t run away like the others did.”

I said, “Sure, Packy. I’ll bring it around tomorrow. But, what was that you said about bats?”

“Up in the attic. Don’t you hear ’em? They always start making a fuss about this time of night.”

“Oh,” I said, and tried to make it casual. I could see Jessie’s face and it looked like I felt but had to hide because Packy was looking at me. She shook her head slightly, and the corners of her mouth went down a little.

I don’t know just what I’d been hoping for, but whatever it was that sort of put the kibosh on it. But I had to be sure.

“About that voice, Packy—”

“It ain’t a voice exactly, Slim. Like I told you. It’s more like this.”

I saw he was looking at the finger with which he was tapping on the foot of the bed. I didn’t get what he was driving at. Then I frowned. “You mean—uh—Morse code?”

“Like a telegraph tapping in my head, yeah. My dad was a telegrapher and

started me out to be one and I had a job at it while I was still a kid, but then I got into fighting. I was a pretty good fighter, Slim. Never lost a fight until thirty-eight. That's when I fought Kid McCoy and he put me in the hospital. He licked me in three rounds but I went all ten because I thought I might land one lucky one. Harry wanted to throw in the towel but I wouldn't let him. And then—"

He was looking at me, but his eyes weren't seeing me. I knew he was thinking over the downhill path of fighting for the three years after that, before the doctors had forbidden him to fight again. The grubby little fight clubs and the beatings he'd taken because his timing and co-ordination were gone.

He said, "Maybe it's right, Slim."

"What's right?"

"That I should go there and jump. The thing that whispers, only it ain't whispering now."

"Packy, when did you hear it last?"

"Hear it last? Just now. It just stopped. You didn't think you'd hear it, did you? Because other people have been around and they never hear it either. It's just to me, Slim, and maybe I better get it over with and—"

"Shut up, Packy," I said sharply. "Don't even think about doing that. Listen, I'll talk to you some more about it tomorrow morning when I bring the dog around. Think you can go to sleep now if we leave?"

"Sure. Go right ahead, and thanks a lot for everything."

I MOTIONED to Jessie and we went out into the hallway, down to the second-floor landing, and stopped there. I took a long, deep breath.

I said, "Can you think of anything we can do for him?"

She shook her head slowly. "I'm—I'm afraid not. Maybe your giving him a dog will help. He was crazy about Uppercut

and if he could get attached to another one. . . . Was that straight about your knowing somebody who wanted a home for one?"

"I know a guy who owns a kennels. I can get one cheap. But, darn it, why did Uppercut run away? Packy'd had him for years. I don't see—"

Jessie said, "I read something about a treatment they've been experimenting with, that's supposed to help punch-drunkenness. You know anything about it, Slim?"

"Uh-huh. It's plenty expensive. Maybe his manager, Harry Beck, would— Nope, I'm afraid not. Harry was just telling me he's in the soup financially, not doing so well."

Jessie said, "I'd started to hope for something when you asked me if Packy had any enemies. That you had a line on something, I mean. But now, since watching him in there, talking about the voice we couldn't hear—and that remark about the bats. . . . Slim, do you suppose we could—"

"Shut up," I said.

Her eyes went wide, but she quit talking and she didn't get mad. She just looked at me.

After a minute, I said, "Sorry, Jessie. But an idea just hit me. It's screwy, so screwy I don't believe it. Wait a minute."

I turned around and knocked on the door through which the Witch of Endor landlady had looked out when Packy and I were going up the stairs.

It opened right away, as though she'd been standing inside it listening.

I said, "Where's the door to the attic?"

"At the end of the—Why?"

"Is it locked?"

"Yes. What are you trying to get at?"

"The key," I said. "I want to borrow the key for five minutes."

"What for?"

"For this." I slipped a bill from my wallet and held it out to her.

She frowned and looked bewildered, but she took it. She shuffled away from the door and came back with the key.

I said, "You wait here, Jessie. I'll be right back."

I went up to the third floor again and to the door at the end of the corridor. When I got up to the attic, I lighted a match. There was sudden movement in the darkness. Something gray went past my ear with a faint leathery sound. I ducked, and the match went out.

I groped my way back down the stairs, and handed the key to the Witch of Endor. I said, "Lady, you've got bats in your attic. There's a broken window they use."

Jessie said, "Slim, what on earth—?"

"Wait here, kid," I told her. "I'm going back upstairs."

I knocked on Gus Maxon's door, and it opened. I said, "Hello, Gus. Can I come in?" And by that time I was inside the room and had the door closed behind me. He retreated until his back was against the far wall and his face looked like he was trying not to be afraid.

He said, "What's the matter with you, Slim?"

"It's a beautiful evening, Gus," I told him. "And I'm in the mood for music. But did you know you had bats in your attic?"

"Bats in—Are you crazy?"

I said, "I'll know pretty soon. I'm going to play a few records on that portable phono of yours. With your permission—I hope."

"Dammit, you can't barge in a guy's room and—"

"But I did. Want to make something of it?"

He licked his lips. "You're crazy. But go ahead and play it if you got to."

I PICKED up the records one at a time and looked at the labels. Mostly hill-billy stuff. Then I came to one with a paper label that didn't look pasted

down quite as flat and smooth and straight as the others. The label said it was the Washboard Blues.

I put it on the phonograph and started it. The needle scratched into the first groove.

I watched it as it got five grooves over, and then a dozen, and pretty soon it was a fourth way through the record and still there wasn't any sound except the needle scratch. I bent over to put my ear near the sound-outlet slots and still couldn't hear anything except the scratching, rasping noise.

I don't know whether I heard or sensed that Gus had moved and was standing behind me. But I ducked just in time.

The blackjack caught my left shoulder instead of my head, and it hurt like hell, but didn't do any damage. He had it raised again by the time I got turned around to face him and straightened up, but I pushed in a fast left jab under it, hard and vicious.

It pushed him off balance and I could have finished him off with a right, but I didn't want to kayo him until I'd found out something. I caught his right arm and twisted it behind him until the blackjack fell out of his hand.

I kept on twisting and said, "Talk," and twisted some more.

He moaned and then yelled, "Stop! It was Harry Beck. He paid me to do it. I don't know why."

I let go of his wrist, spinning him around as I let go. I let him have a right to the chops and he fell across the bed and didn't get up.

I stopped the phonograph and then went out into the hall and called, "Jessie," from the head of the stairs.

"Packy's here, Slim. He was going out. I had to stop him from—you know."

I called, "Come on up, both of you."

I took them into Gus' room, and started that record again. Packy jumped, and his eyes got wide and staring.

I said, "That's your thing that whispers, Packy," and shut it off again.

Jessie gasped. "But Slim, I didn't hear anything. I don't understand."

"Your ears are normal," I told her. "One of Packy's is, too, but not the one he's deaf in—deaf to the ordinary range of sounds. But there are sounds too high for normal ears, and the nerve-ends or something in Packy's tin ear happened to get lined up so he can hear them.

"Harry Beck hired Gus to play that record evenings, and maybe to pull other funny stuff too, so Packy would kill himself.

"I got that idea from the bats. Bats do a lot of screaming, but it's too high for normal ears to hear. Packy could hear those bats up in the attic and we couldn't. And then other things began to fit in. The dogs running away. Dogs hear sounds in that range, too, and the stuff on this record could be of a pitch that hurt their ears. And I've got an idea how Harry found out about this. Packy, remember when Harry Beck had a police dog last year?"

"Sure, Slim. He had a whistle he called it with. He showed me the whistle once."

"That was a 'silent' dog whistle, Packy," I interrupted. "Ordinary ears can't hear it. But Beck found out you could hear the whistle."

The girl said: "But why—" I broke in on her.

"Listen, Packy, Jessie. You two stay here while I go have a talk with Harry. I'm going to take this record along. And we might need Gus for evidence so don't kill him. Just keep him here if he wakes up."

"Slim, but *why* would Harry—?"

I said, "I aim to ask him," and left.

I went to see Harry and I came back. Gus was still out cold, but he was lying with his head the other way on the bed. Apparently he'd tried to get away again. I whistled softly. "Hope you didn't kill him, Packy. He isn't your weight, and

you still got a wallop that would knock down a—"

"Packy didn't hit him," Jessie said. She grinned at me. "I did. Dad showed me how to use a right cross and I never had a chance till—Slim, what about Harry?"

I said, "Harry needed money. He had a five-thousand buck insurance policy on Packy, taken out five years ago when Packy was going good. Maybe I compounded a felony, but I swapped him that record for the policy. He signed over rights as beneficiary to Packy, and it's got a cash surrender value of around eight hundred bucks."

Jessie's eyes got wide. "Slim, is that enough for that treatment we were talking about?"

"It's plenty. And you're going to manage the money for him, because you'll be around longer than I will. Is that all right by you, Packy?"

"Anything you say, Slim."

"Then you turn in now. I'll take Jessie home."

We got a cab, and I had it stop at a drug store. I said, "Wait in the cab, will you? I got to put in a phone call right away."

I dialed Margaret's number, and she answered after a while. "Oh, it's you, Warren. I was asleep."

I said, "I told you I'd call when I got things straightened out. It's still early, for a night-club."

"Not tonight, Warren. I have to work tomorrow."

"Margaret, are we engaged or aren't we?"

"I've told you, Warren—" Her voice had a slight edge to it now. "—that I don't want to be married at all, not now, anyway. We can write to each other while you're away and—"

"That's swell," I said, and I meant it. "That's all I wanted to know. That's marvelous, wonderful."

And I was whistling as I went back out to the taxi.

SIDE DOOR TO HELL

By CYRIL PLUNKETT

*In marriage, Jan Nelson
learned about love and laughter
—and murder!*



THE medical examiner paused to talk a moment, despite the rain. "A shot through the heart, Nelson," the M. E. said. "I've placed the time of death two hours ago, at eight or thereabouts."

Jan Nelson's throat was tight and aching. "Any clues?"

"Well," the M. E. said, "one or two things that look promising. Inspector Cray has all the dope. He's waiting for you, Nelson."

"Thanks, I'll go right in." Nelson turned away.

There was a terraced lawn, and deep within it a massive stone building, gray and shapeless in the darkness. The lights on either side of the doorway seemed strangely dim.

"Be very sure," he'd said. "*Cris, don't gamble with our lives, our happiness.*" Nelson's mind was filled with Cris, the wonder of her—and the doubt he'd known for months.

He walked stiffly, like a fighter after listening to the count of ten. Tall, with the leanness of a man high-strung, he was stooped a very little, as though the weighty problems of his office—District Attorney—were, indeed, pounds upon his back.

He went inside, then, into the tension of official business, past uniformed police, and reporters pressing for a statement. Naturally, Sordell's murder was big. Sordell had been big-time, an artist whose cover girls were internationally known.

Inspector Cray was in the studio living room, a broadly built man, massive. He

was busy with dictation. He waved and said, "Hello, Mr. Nelson. Be with you in a minute." And then, to the patrolman taking notes: "According to the statement of employees, Sordell furnished keys to the side street door, at the bottom of the stairway, allegedly that certain people, female, could come and go at any time, unseen." He turned back to Nelson. "We're good till morning on this one. You know Sordell?"

"By reputation," Nelson said.

Cray's stare was long and irritating. "Well, I can take that word either way and still be right. That's the pattern. Too many girls. Anyway, one of them was here tonight. The switchboard operator and elevator boy both tagged her."

"They know her? They know her name?" Nelson interrupted, queerly.

"That's right," said Cray. "It's Shaw. Catherine Shaw—we've found her address scrawled in Sordell's phone book. Here's the way we reconstruct it: Sordell was seated at his desk, being threatened, maybe. He got up fast, because the chair legs made deep scars in the carpet. He came around the desk, and that's when the bullet got him."

Cray pointed to the chalked outline on the floor, marking where the body had fallen. And then Jan Nelson saw beyond the outline. Nelson saw the drawing, and his heart started thumping in his breast. The pastel upon the desk was a mauve monochrome on illustration board, and recently finished, for no fixative had been applied. The study was of a girl, and her hair was partly smudged, as though the artist's hand had smeared it. And the girl wore a mask, but little else. Behind the mask her eyes smiled archly, invitingly.

"Worries me, that picture." Cray slowly thumbed up and down his jaw. "I've a hunch it's important. Maybe the smear—I don't know. Maybe those erased particles lying on the floor. An artist wouldn't smear his own work, brushing it off. An artist wouldn't do a thing like *that*."

The muscles tightened in Nelson's jaw. "About this girl, Inspector?"

For a moment Cray didn't answer. Then he said, "She was up here about five minutes. She left in a hurry—looking scared, according to the witnesses. I've already sent a man to watch her address. Care to run out there with me?"

"Yes," Nelson said. "I'll be glad to."

They rode a police car, in the back seat, with a detective named Simms at the wheel. Cray and Simms got to talking of the war, but Nelson was silent and frowning. He was thinking of a curious thing, a lipstick. He was thinking of Cris. . . .

They'd met at a party, a year back, in midsummer. She was like someone da Vinci might have painted, or like the girl you dream of. You looked at her and it was like listening to Wagnerian opera. She was the girl millions saw on billboards and the pages of the magazines.

Looking back, the amazing thing was that she had found him at all worthy of her interest. He was thirty-eight, and the war had passed him by; but he was a man

whose name was repeatedly appearing in the newspapers—and so. . . .

"Cris, be sure," he'd said, that night, weeks later. "Be so very sure first. I can't be intense tonight, a month—and then casual afterward. I'm not that way. It's all or nothing, Cris. I won't share you. You can't go on with your career. I won't pick up a magazine and see you there. It's got to be the way *I* want it, Cris—for life."

The police car made a sudden turn and Cray's voice broke into Nelson's thoughts abruptly. "By the way," Cray said, "how is *Mrs. Nelson*?"

Nelson stiffened. "Thanks, she's fine."

A moment passed. Cray seemed to be considering. "Model, wasn't she?"

They were passing beneath a street lamp, and Nelson saw Cray's eyes. Cray was looking at him, and he felt helpless, very small like a mouse in a dusty corner. From the distance a bell tolled, deep toned and dismal.

THEY left Simms outside. They talked to the buxom landlady at Catherine Shaw's address. The landlady said, "Miss Shaw? I don't believe she's in. Is it—business?"

"Police business," said Cray.

"Not—not Cathy!"

Cray said, "We'll take a little look at her room."

So they saw Cathy Shaw's room, and it was cretonne and white linen; not at all the velvet that had been Sordell's. The note was crumpled in a wastebasket. Cray found it and handed it to Nelson.

"*Dear Mr. Sordell,*" Nelson read. "*I've argued with myself whether to see or write you, but in either case the answer is the same. I hate you—*" That was all that had been written.

Cray reclaimed the note, put it in his pocket and began questioning the landlady. Nelson went into the hall, went downstairs. There was a phone just below

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the stairs. He stood before it, one hand in his coat pocket; and then he removed the hand and the small bright object clasped in it—a lipstick, gold and initialed with tiny jewels. For a moment he stared at the lipstick blankly. He sighed as he dialed Erie-7700.

The whispered ringing on the other end seemed within his brain. He counted with the rings, and with the breathless spaces. But Cris didn't answer. A foot-fall sounded behind him suddenly. Nelson put the receiver back on its hook, shoved his clenched hand in his pocket.

Cray said from the stairs, "We're going two blocks up the street. To see a lad named Farraday."

They drove the two blocks, and the bell was tolling dismally again, the quarter hour, fifteen after eleven. The door to Farraday's room cracked open slowly at Cray's knock.

He was young, thin. Nineteen, perhaps. He wore slacks and a polo shirt, and he was smoking a cigarette. The room was blue with smoke. Farraday, all right. He looked frightened.

Cray said, "You'd better let us in."

"Police?"

"That's right."

Cray pushed the door, and there she was, behind it. Cretonne and white linen. She wasn't wearing that, but she was in her teens, with eyes that were great blue pools, and she was blonde, her slender body beautiful. Catherine Shaw.

Nelson closed the door and sat down as Cray crossed the room. Cray stood facing into the room.

"Let's put the cards down," Cray said.

"Just what happened tonight, Miss Shaw?"

She looked at Farraday, and then at Nelson, and her whole body trembled. Cray sighed and swung around a little. "Well, how about you, Farraday? Been here all evening?"

SIDE DOOR TO HELL

Farraday flung himself into a chair. He was watching Cray warily, but the overflowing ash tray on the end table occupied him a moment. He brushed the loose ash to the floor. "Yes, of course," he said. "Why?"

"Nothing to hide, either of you?"

Farraday laughed shortly. "That's a good one."

Cray didn't smile. He said, "We've found the letter Miss Shaw began to Sordell."

SHE gasped and put both hands to her face. Farraday's cheeks were chalk-white and he seemed scarcely to be breathing. He shot out of the chair. Cray made a motion to check him, but Farraday straight-armed Cray, spun away from him and darted for the door. He reached the door ahead of Nelson, slammed it in Nelson's face. They heard him running down the stairs.

Cathy Shaw moaned. Cray said, "Get your coat, girlie, and come along with us."

"But—" she began. Cray had turned his back to her. He was saying reproachfully, "You might have been a little quicker, Mr. Nelson. Won't matter though. Won't matter. I expected something like this. Simms will nab him." He turned around again. "Ready, girlie?"

When they reached the front door the detective, Simms, was sitting on the steps with Farraday, handcuffed to him.

"We'll take 'em both in for questioning," Cray said. Simms walked with Miss Shaw and Farraday, between them, down the walk to the squad car.

"Coming, Mr. Nelson?" Cray said.

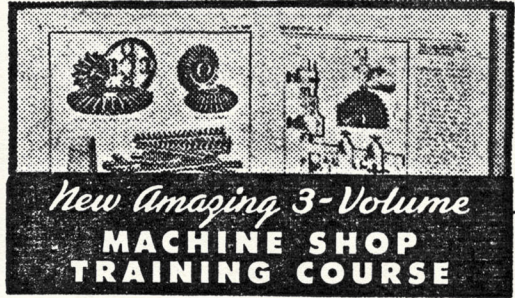
Nelson shrugged off his preoccupation, shook his head. "I'll catch a cab," he said.

But he walked, to compromise with time, in fear of time. Twice he stopped to phone, at a drugstore, at a restaurant. Erie-7700 . . . Erie-7700. There was no

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answer either time, and therefore Cris was not at home. Nelson sat a long while in the restaurant, thinking, staring into the past.

At first he hadn't believed there could be such happiness, in the plans he made with Cris, in their marriage, in living with her afterward. Their suite had a broad, revealing view of the rivers meeting to conceive the sea, it was a very special suite, high above the city and well beyond Nelson's means, but one always set a jewel in gold and that's the way he felt about it. He'd awaken each day and look at her—her eyes closed still, in sleep; or at her photograph in the double frame with his, smiling at his own stern expression, her dark head tilted back in a pose altogether glamorous. And he'd sigh and think: *Jan, boy, you've won her.*

But the job, he knew from the beginning, was going to be to *keep* her.

It had been purely accidental that his cab arrived home one night as hers was ready to depart. She was wearing black, something very slim and modish. This was back a few weeks, in cool September, the anniversary month of their marriage. His first thought had been to try to head her off—she'd expected him to return quite late that night—but within a block or two his mind had clouded. He'd followed her uptown. Presently her cab stopped before an imposing building; a side entrance—and she had a key.

"Drive around the block," Nelson told the cabbie.

He'd stared, unseeing. Numb and cold, yet burning, knowing now the ugly, moving plan of things. "Keep driving," he'd said to the cabbie. Anywhere—"

NELSON looked up, now, at the counterman standing before him, and he took a deep breath. He ordered coffee—and drank it black, and then he rose from the counter stool. He left the restaurant. The time was nearing

SIDE DOOR TO HELL

two A. M. when he reached home.

The door was unlocked, and his heart quickened. He opened the door—to stop short and stiffen. Inspector Cray sat there in the living room. Alone. Cray's eyes were very keen. Nelson saw this keenness and momentarily hated it.

"I thought you'd be along soon," Cray said. He was opening a fresh pack of cigarettes. "You know how it is with homicide. A good officer must have an answer for everything. Well, an answer's been missing."

"Indeed?" said Nelson.

Cray offered the pack. "Smoke?"

Nelson shook his head. He sat down.

"I had a talk with your wife tonight," Cray said. "At headquarters."

The smoke was drifting past Cray's watchful eyes. Nelson saw the smoke apart. He wet his lips but didn't speak.

"I've got a photographic mind," Cray said. "That drawing on Sordell's desk worried me. I had a feeling I knew who the model was, and it wasn't Catherine Shaw. It wasn't naive—you know?"

Still Nelson did not answer and Cray smiled a very little.

"Funny thing. I thought you'd say, 'Hello Inspector. How about a drink?' . . ."

"Skip the small talk, Inspector."

Cray shrugged. "All right. You followed your wife to Sordell's tonight?"

"You raise your voice. Is that a question?"

Cray dropped ash in the tray. "Question mark or period—does it matter? We're not getting anywhere, Nelson. And it's late. I'm tired. I never intended to waste time in small talk. But you're in a black mood, and—"

"We can skip my mood too, Inspector."

Cray sighed and shook his head. "No, we can't. A cop can't overlook even a thing like that. But I will pass it by a minute and go on to the missing lipstick."

Nelson's gaze shot up. "Lipstick?" He

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met Cray's cold stare, and a moment passed, and then he said, "I see." His shoulders sagged, and he looked down at his hands. "Yes, Inspector, as a matter of fact, I did follow my wife tonight. I've followed her many nights, recently. But tonight—I smoked a cigaret, outside, after she went in. I was going in. I'd got an impression of the key she carried. I'd made a decision—but nevermind that, it's unimportant. Cris reappeared very soon, three or four minutes. She went away, and I went in, and Sordell—"

NELSON paused and came out of his chair and suddenly began pacing. "You're a cute one, Inspector. Suppose I say I found Sordell dead?"

"Did you?" Cray cut in softly.

Nelson ignored the interruption. "Suppose I do say that—the case against me switches to my wife. Well, damn you, Cray, I *could* confess to killing Sordell. I could do that and make it stick—to shield my wife. But I won't. You understand that Cray, I won't! I've gone through a hell of doubt tonight. I admit it. I found my wife's lipstick lying near Sordell's body. I picked up the lipstick. No question about it being hers; I'd bought it myself. Her initials were on it. But I picked up the lipstick, and the inference, finding it there, was—but to hell with the inference! I know Cris. I believe in her. I didn't kill Sordell, and Cris didn't, and I'll fight you all the way, Cray, to prove that—"

Nelson stopped, puzzled and wary, for Cray was chuckling.

"It's all right," Cray said. "That's all I wanted to know. Mrs. Nelson says she lost a lipstick; we found no lipstick. Did Farraday take it? Or someone else we hadn't tied into the case yet? You see how I had to know. Anyway, Farraday's our boy."

Cray put out his cigaret and rose. "He didn't like Sordell's propositions, or what he figured Sordell had demanded of his

girl friend. He lifted her key to get in, and she chose the same time—and without her key, necessarily the front entrance—to see Sordell and tell him where to get off at. Remember me pointing out that pastel crayon dust, and the smudge on Sordell's drawing? Maybe you saw Farraday brush ash from the end table up there in his room? Well, it looked like a nervous habit; you know, brushing things like lint and such to the floor. So I played the hunch and had Farraday's room searched. We picked up a pair of beige gloves and the left glove showed a crayon smear."

"Cris—?" Nelson prompted, unsteadily.

There was a small sound behind him. He turned. Cris was standing in the bedroom doorway. Her eyes were very bright, glistening.

She began speaking swiftly, as though his silence frightened her. "Jan, my first fear was for you. I—I guessed that you'd found out I was seeing Sordell, and—but I knew Inspector Cray would help us. I went to him. I didn't fear him." A knuckle cracked; the skin above her knuckles showed white. "I—I'd dropped my purse, at the shock of finding Sordell dead, and I didn't miss the lipstick until later. Then I went right down to see Inspector Cray—"

She seemed suddenly surprised to find that she was back where she had started from. Her pause was awkward, pleading. "But Jan, you—you believed in me—"

There were tears and she was in his arms, warm and wonderful. His lips were buried in her hair. The hall door had closed on Cray, but they hadn't noticed.

"Jan," came her muffled voice, "it's just that I was lonely. I've been working again. I've been modeling for Sordell, and nothing else—"

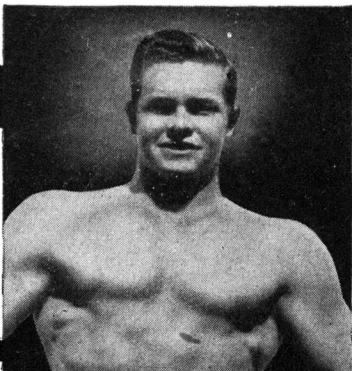
He said, "Don't worry. I suppose every man who marries beauty has to fight it out with doubt. But I'm glad I won, Cris."

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