

JANUARY



15¢

DIME

MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

COMBINED WITH 10 STORY MYSTERY

**SO SORRY
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by **DAY KEENE**

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READY, ACTION—*Murder!*

by **WILLIAM R. COX**



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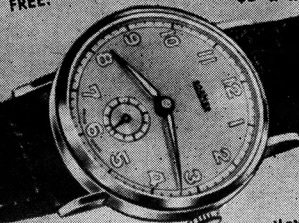
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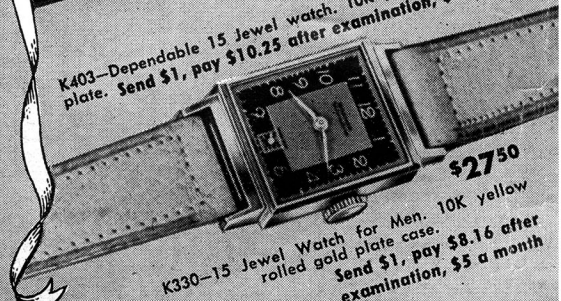
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COMBINED WITH 10 STORY MYSTERY

NEXT ISSUE OUT JANUARY 3rd!

Volume 31

January, 1945

Number 2

TWO FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELS OF EERIE MENACE

SO SORRY YOU DIE NOW!.....Day Keene 10

Matt Mercer had come back from the South Pacific, leaving his arm on some Jap-infested island . . . until, six-thousand miles away from that hell-hole, he found that the Little Yellow sons had returned—to claim not only his other arm, but his life, and those of his family, as well!

READY, ACTION—MURDER!.....William R. Cox 48

From the high-stake gambling club where a fabulous winning hand was tipped to Tom Kinkaid, to the show-place of a sinister Hollywood figure wasn't far—but for Tom, every inch of the way was measured in murder!

TWO NOVELETTES OF STARK, HUMAN DRAMA!

DEATH-WATCH.....Cyril Plunkett 30

"My wife," I told the detective, "is resting—nervously worn out. . ." And only that thin door at my back stood between him and the corpse that would send me to the chair!

HOMECOMING IN HELL!.....Ken Lewis 80

Instead of the warm welcome he'd expected from his girl, Nick's hackie took him on a real slay-ride—with the murder-car and the corpse thrown in free!

FOUR SPINE-TINGLING SHORT STORIES

BARGAIN IN BONES.....Steve Herrick 41

Mike and Diane discovered too late that the price of accommodations was payable in blood!

COFFINS FOR TWO.....Robert Turner 64

When the cops found Jumbo looking like one of his own hamburgers, they looked in vain for Beau. . .

THE FATAL FLOWER.....Larry Sternig and W. F. Kruger 71

Uncle Caleb collected antiques—with a sideline of getting a corner on corpses!

THE NIGHT THE WORLD ENDED.....Fredric Brown 76

—seemed like a good time for old Johnny Gin to pay off his debts—in fiery coin!

—AND—

MYSTERY'S DARK PORTALS.....A Department 6

When terror prowled by night. . .

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Published bi-monthly by Poplar Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive Offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 14, 1944, at the postoffice at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1944, by Poplar Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Six-issue subscription in U. S. A. 90 cents. Foreign postage 38 cents additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.

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Mystery's Dark Portals

FROM the earliest records of the human race, from crude carvings by the cave-dwellers, evidence shows that the brave deeds of the past were kept for the inspiration and entertainment of those who came after. Second only perhaps to recording heroic sagas of strength and personal prowess against rival tribesmen or prowling beasts of the forests, came tales of other exploits—accounts which would send a chill along the spine of those who heard them. These were tales of strange and weird encounters with enemies who inhabited a dark world no mortal had seen; yet a world somehow universally familiar, and dreaded.

From those legends have sprung some of the great classics of imaginative writing, such as Bram Stoker's fabulous novel, "Dracula," to mention but one. Occasionally, even at this later age, which demands—and we believe with thorough justification—crime-mystery stories of a more realistic nature, we do publish some off-trail fiction which seems to us to be sufficiently well-done to justify itself—stories that present convincing, colorful drama that sends prickles of terror, fear or what-you-will creeping along our spinal column.

While we're on the subject of such dark and mysterious things, we're glad to print the following inquiry from Frederick Hammill, of New York;

Dear Editor:

For a long time I've been interested in stories of demonology, homunculi, werewolves, and kindred subjects. Some time ago you ran a story called "Vengeance of the Staked Dead," which featured an homunculus. But can you tell me something about werewolves? While I have read several fiction stories in which they were mentioned, I'd like to know something more specific about them.

Our first-hand information is sketchy, to say the least! But perhaps the following in-

formative letter, sent to us by John Bly, of Washington, may help out:

From antiquity, the wolf has been one of the most dreaded beasts of prey, and in its various forms it roams the earth, adapting itself to both forest and plain. Small wonder then that from the steppes of Russia, the black forest of Germany, the mountain and brush country of Italy, France, Spain, and Britain, superstitions surrounding this carnivore have crystalized into one form: that of a man turning into a wolf and preying ravenously on humankind.

This man-turned-wolf, or werewolf, as he is called, was considered to be in league with the Devil; he was believed to have participated in the Witch's Sabbath presided over by a demon goat.

Typical of the stories seeping from Europe during the dark ages is this one from Sicily in the region of Palermo.

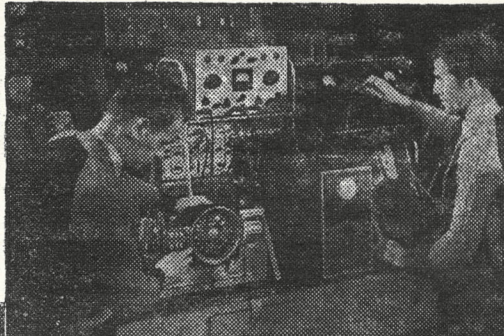
There was a distinguished nobleman whose birthday fell on Christmas night. The wise ones of the village predicted that upon reaching thirty-four, he would be metamorphosed into a werewolf. The nobleman scoffed. But on the night of his thirty-fourth birthday he retired early.

It happened that his eldest son was that night out hunting, and that he was attacked by a ferocious wolf. It was larger and more savage, he reported afterwards, than any wolf he had ever seen. Its eyes were like the witch-fires that glow in graveyards. Its front paws were curiously hand-like, with long claws which could tear the bark from the toughest tree. Its teeth were like knives mortised with in its skull.

A stout club thudded against the creature's head and body, causing no injury to the beast, but finally the son succeeded in wounding it with stabs of his knife. With horrible cries, the beast turned at last and crashed away through the forest, leaving the

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nobleman's son mauled and bitten. He recovered sufficiently, however to make his way home. In his game sack he carried one of the front paws of the monster, which a lucky slash of his knife had severed from the leg. With this incredible paw he thought to prove to those who might doubt him, that his story was, indeed, true.

To the priest of his village he related his story.

"With my knife," he said, "I half-severed his left ear, and I did cut him a gash on his left shoulder, and I did cut off his left paw. Look—"

He showed the holy father the paw from his sack. In the forest it had been dark. He had seen the paw obscurely. But now they were horrified to observe that the "thing" was as much hand as paw, with the long flinty forefinger characteristic of a werewolf.

Embedded on the loathsome forefinger was a gold ring bearing the seal of the nobleman's house! While they stared at each other, horrified, each remembering the prediction that the nobleman would turn into a werewolf on his thirty-fourth birthday, a group of mourners approached them.

Three of the men carried children in their arms—or the half-eaten, mutilated bodies of what had once been children.

"No wolf has done this," they protested in their grief. "See with what force the body has been broken. . . ."

An old woman, a devout Christian, testified to the fact that it was no ordinary wolf that had been abroad that night, scourging the land, slaving for human flesh.

"It came at me," she reported, "while I was on my way home from worship. A fearful thing, bigger by half than any wolf, howling and gnashing its teeth. I do think it would have devoured me in three bites, but the moon shined out at that moment, and I held my crucifix before the monster. He stopped in mid-bound as though stabbed through the vitals, and turned and slunk away into the forest. I tell you, it was no wolf, but a werewolf!"

They all went then to visit the nobleman in his chambers where their worst fears were shudderingly realized. There lay the nobleman in his great bed, dying, the bed linen drenched in blood that flowed from a knife slash on his left shoulder, his left ear which was half cut off, and from his left arm which was severed at the wrist.

"The very places where I wounded the wolf!" his son exclaimed in horror.

The nobleman lived long enough to inform them that he had, as they suspected, turned into a werewolf, and to beg their forgiveness. He could no more have resisted his cannibalistic impulses, he said, than he could have

stopped the sun. The Devil was in him and, perforce he had to do the Devil's will.

A man turned into a werewolf in one of several "legitimate" manners. He could don the skin of a wolf and mutter certain satanic incantations. He could don a belt fashioned from the skin of another werewolf. He could anoint himself with salves or unguents, hideous concoctions of poisonous herbs, snake scales, powdered toads, and such noisome medicaments.

While he was in the werewolf state, it was generally believed, a man thought as a man but acted as a wolf. His lust for blood was never quenched; he must go on killing. Sticks and stones could not harm him; but a knife could cut him. So satanically strong and huge was he, however, that only the boldest or the luckiest hunter dared challenge him.

The werewolf feared only one thing: to be faced with the crucifix or an image of the Madonna, or to be sprinkled with holy water. It behooved a man or woman then, in those days, to live the good life—and escape the werewolf!

Those who willingly assumed the character of the werewolf could at will change back again to their former state. But here was the catch—whatever wounds they suffered as werewolves they retained as men and women. Even the brambles that scratched their hides left similar marks on their skins.

It was in this manner that most of these men and women in wolves' clothing were discovered. Many an innocent wretch was condemned to death by church and state as the result of an eye-witness testimony that he had wounded a werewolf in the forearm, "and lo—on the anatomy of So-and-so this morning appears just such a forearm wound!" It was considered irrefutable evidence.

Also victims of the cruel superstitions were the idiots and the feeble-minded. Different to begin with from the rest of the human pack, they were oftentimes feared and despised. It was only natural that in dark and devious ways they should strike back at their merciless persecutors. It was said that they were possessed of the devil. Many a poor, weak-minded soul was made to believe this, men actually admitting to all the crimes of a werewolf. This of course, only served to fasten the superstition the more strongly in the minds of the "sane".

* * *

Don't miss the March issue of the new DIME MYSTERY, on sale January 3rd, including a novel of bizarre and exciting menace by Day Keene, a new novel by William R. Cox, and a host of spine-tingling novelettes and short stories.

—The Editor

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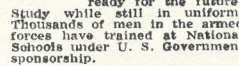
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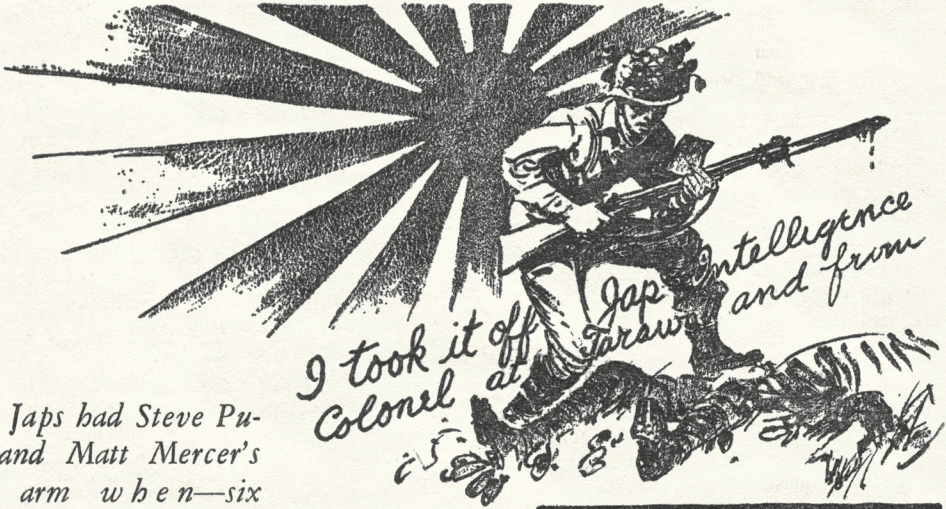
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SO SORRY YOU DIE NOW!

By DAY KEENE



The Japs had Steve Pulos and Matt Mercer's left arm when—six thousand miles from the South Pacific—three more of the little yellow men threatened to take Matt's kids if he didn't fork over the missing piece of rice paper which would bring death and wholesale slaughter to half a million Yankee fighting men—and cold, deadly terror to our biggest war-producing center. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Danger, Dead Man!

DAWN broke hot and dry. The wind was still from the west. Night had failed to dispel the heat. North Clark Street awakened sluggishly. Here and there a bum crawled from a dingy doorway to panhandle the early work-bound crowd for the price of breakfast and a shot of rotgut. Merchants appeared and began to take down their shutters. Porters opened the doors of the tawdry saloons and night clubs.

Still heavy-eyed with sleep, Irv unlocked the door of his pawnshop. He was glad that



Fast-paced Novel of Intrigue and Death

Jessie and the children were out of the heat. He was looking forward to Saturday night when he could join them in Benton Harbor.

"Morning, Irv." The passing mailman handed him a sheath of letters. He hesitated, added, "I see you got a letter from Steve Pulos. I thought Steve was dead."

The pawnbroker sorted his mail. "He is. Matt Mercer got the official notification over two weeks ago." He found the letter. The censor's stamp had almost obliterated the post date, but he could decipher the word May. The letter had been delayed three months in transit.

The postman sighed, "Like hearing from the dead, eh, Irv?"

"Yeah," Irv agreed.

He turned back into his pawnshop. It still seemed impossible that big, good-looking, hard-living, hard-drinking, skirt-chasing, Steve Pulos was gone. His kind didn't die. They lost an eye, or a leg, or an arm like Matt Mercer, but they came back to haunt their favorite bars and grow into local legends.

He slit the envelope. It contained a torn strip of rice paper covered with Japanese characters or symbols, and a brief note in Steve's own hand. Irv put on his glasses and read the note. It was like Steve. It was brief and to the point. It read:

Dear Irv:

We're starting another big push soon and I have a hunch I can't shake that I may cop mine this time. If so, and Matt should receive official notification, please show him the enclosed scrap of Japanese poetry. It means a lot to me. I took it off a Jap Intelligence Colonel at Tarawa, and from the way he objected to having a bayonet stuck into his guts, it must have meant a lot to him, too. If Matt doesn't hear, save it for me until I get back and we'll have a laugh and a drink together.

Your pal,
Steve

The pawnbroker studied the characters. He wondered what they said. They must have been important to Steve. The big Marine

He raised the piece of wood again. . . .



hadn't cared much for poetry. No-limit poker games, quart-sized jugs, and pint-sized blondes, brunettes, and red-heads had been more to his liking.

He looked at his watch. It was only a little after eight. He could still catch Matt at home. The phone was in the cage at the rear of the shop. Here the air was heavy with the smell of moth balls and musty leather.

Irv laid the two bits of paper on his ledger and dialed Mercer's number. The heat settled solidly around him. He mopped at his forehead with one hand, then reached up and jerked the hanging cord of the ceiling fan. The sudden gust of air swept the scrap of rice paper from the counter just as Magnolia, the Mercer's colored maid, answered.

Irv told her that he wished to speak with Mr. Mercer, and stooped to retrieve the scrap of paper that had fluttered in between two unredeemed suit cases. The paper evaded his fumbling fingers. He swore, then straightened suddenly as two men entered the front of the shop.

BOTH were black haired, well-dressed orientals. They claimed to be Filipinos. Seemingly well supplied with money, they had haunted the cheap bar next to the pawnshop for the last two months.

"You open for business?" one of them asked.

He unstrapped his wrist watch as he spoke and the pawnbroker smiled inwardly. No matter who they were, if they hung out in bars, sooner or later they wound up at Uncle Irv's. That was how he had met Matt, and Steve, and Harry.

He cupped one hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and nodded. "Yeah. I'll be with you in a minute, just as soon as I finish this phone call."

The larger of the two men slipped a gun from a shoulder holster. "Let's make it right now," he said crisply. "Hang up that receiver!"

The pawnbroker did as he was ordered just as Mercer's voice boomed, "Hello!"

"So. It's a stick-up," Irv said wryly. He raised his palms shoulder high. He had been stuck-up before. He was insured. His life was worth more than his money. "Okay. Go ahead. Take what you want. My wallet is in my left hip pocket."

The smaller of the pair walked back to the front of the store, locked the front door and pulled the shade. The man with the gun told Irv, "To hell with your wallet. Where's that letter you just got from Steve Pulos?"

The pawnbroker's eyes narrowed slightly but he made no reply.

The hood who had locked the door returned and walked into the cage beside him. "Here

it is," he told his partner. "Pulos told him to get in touch with Mercer. That must have been Mercer he was calling." He searched the desk, demanded, "Where's the poetry?"

About to nod at the scrap of paper wedged in between the cases, Irv suddenly changed his mind. His money was one thing. Steve's confidence was another. Friendship couldn't be insured. And Steve had wanted Matt to see that scrap of paper.

"I don't know," he lied. "I was just wondering that. I guess Steve must have forgot to put it in."

The little hood drew a gun and slapped him with the flat of the barrel. "*Where is that scrap of paper?*"

Irv shook his head stubbornly and the hoodlum struck him again. The pawnbroker crumpled to his knees, blood streaming from a broken nose. "I don't know," he insisted. "Why? What the hell is this all about?"

The second hood came into the cage and kicked him in the groin. "That's just a sample," he told him, "of what you're going to get unless you talk."

Writhing in pain on the floor, the pawnbroker still insisted, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Both men rained blows on his head. He attempted to cover his head with his arms. The smaller of the pair kicked him in the stomach. "Talk. And talk fast," he snarled.

Through a fog of pain, Irv heard, or thought that he heard, someone hammering on his front door. He opened his mouth to call, "Help!" and the flat side of an automatic blotted out all consciousness.

THE YOUNG carrier was new to the job. His parcel post delivered, at least in the Hooper Block, he breathed a deep sigh of relief. As he crossed the walk to his truck parked at the curb, a black-haired, hard-faced, little man stopped him.

"Pardon me, carrier," he smiled, "but my name is Mercer. I have an office on the tenth floor of the Hooper Block. Do you by any chance recall if I got a parcel this morning?"

Eager to please, the carrier opened his metal-backed book. "If it was registered or insured, I'll have a record, Mr. Mercer. Otherwise—" He ran his finger down the list of names, "Yes, you had a package, Mr. Mercer. Your girl signed for it."

The man thanked him and the carrier walked on to his truck. The man walked to a parked sedan and reported, "It came this morning. It's up there."

The cold-eyed Eurasian in the back seat warned him, "Don't take any chances with Mercer. He's tough. Kill him if you have to. But get that package, understand?"

The hood said that he did. A second hood climbed from the car and inclined his head toward the lobby of the building. "There's Mercer now."

The little hood lighted a cigarette and studied Mercer through the match-flare. The former first sergeant in the Marines was a big man, six-feet-two, in his middle forties. His hair was grizzled. His face had been tanned to the color and consistency of leather by years of tropical outpost duty. His left arm was cork and steel. He had lost the arm that it replaced in a so-called 'incident' on the Yangtze five years before Pearl Harbor.

"He looks tough," the little hood admitted.

"He is tough," the Eurasian told him.

Mercer bought a handful of cigars at the counter, lighted one, and stepped into an elevator. He felt like hell. He had been drinking too much, for one thing. He and Sherry had quarreled about it that morning. He made a mental note to phone and apologize. She was right as usual. He couldn't do Steve any good by staying drunk. Besides, as Sherry said, he was no longer a hell-raising first sergeant in the Marines. He was a married family man and it was up to him to set an example for his twins.

A plain, blunt man who believed in calling a spade a damned dirty shovel if need be, he disliked riddles. His phone call of that morning still annoyed him. He could think of no reason why anyone should call him to the phone, then fail to answer when he spoke.

Even the legend on his door, "Matt Mercer—Private Investigations" failed to lighten his mood. The whole thing had gone sour. While untrained punks were dying, he was sitting on his pratt.

He unlocked his door and went in. His girl did not arrive until ten. He didn't care if she ever came. He scooped a handful of mail from the floor and strode on into his office.

Steve's death had hit him hard. They had enlisted together as punks. They had gone through boot training together. Side by side, for twenty years, they had fought and drank their way through half a hundred jungles and a hundred water fronts. Now Steve was dead. The big, good-looking skirt-chaser was a mass of putrid flesh in a shallow grave scooped on the beach of one of the Gilbert islands.

He took a bottle of rye from his desk and half filled a water glass. Maybe now that Steve was dead, the Corps would take him back. Good first sergeants were hard to come by. He recapped the bottle with his artificial hand. The Corps' doctors were fools. He could do anything with his artificial hand and arm except feel. And he didn't want to 'feel' Japs. He wanted to kill them.

Not very hopefully, he dialed the local Marine Corps office. They might have received an answer to his latest appeal to Washington. They had. The Marine lieutenant in charge informed him regretfully that one armed men could not be inducted for combat service. However, in view of his past experience and the fact that he both spoke and read Japanese, if Mercer would care to consider an administrative commission and a desk job—

Mercer told him where he could put his desk job. As an after-thought, he told him to put the desk there, too. He banged the receiver back into its cradle and looked up to see a black-haired, unsmiling, little man standing in his doorway.

"SO WHO are you? And what the hell do you want?" Mercer asked him.

"I am Mr. Sarangani," the little hood introduced himself. "And this is Mr. Meangis," he introduced his partner.

Mercer scowled. The men looked like Filipinos. But the names that they had given were the names of islands south east of Mindanao. "So—?" Mercer demanded.

Sarangani continued, unsmiling, "So we know that you have it. You will please to give it to us and there will be no unpleasantness.

"Unpleasantness?" Mercer asked hopefully.

He started to open the top drawer of his desk and Meangis stopped him by flipping his gun from his holster. "You will keep your hands on your desk, Mercer. We know all about how tough you are. But a .45 is even tougher."

Sarangani closed the door. "Where is it?" he demanded.

Mercer exploded, "Where is what? What the hell are you talking about?"

Meangis smiled thinly. "I think you know. We want the parcel from Kansas City that the postman delivered this morning."

"One of us is crazy," Mercer said. Meangis bent as if to strike him with the gun and Mercer added, thinly, "I don't think I would if I were you."

The man's beady black eyes glitted. "I am going to count to three," he said, "then—"

Mercer stood up behind his desk. "Then what?"

Sarangani said, quickly, "Let us be sensible, gentlemen. We know you have it," he told Mercer. "You are the only man whom Sergeant Steve Pulos would trust. Pulos took the map from Colonel Osaki by force. In doing so he violated every tenet of international law. But, if you will please to return it to us, we will forget the matter."

Mercer's big shoulders squared. "Ring-tails, eh?" he said smiling. "I thought that they

had you boys all rounded up and tucked away in concentration camps. Hell. No wonder the Corps doesn't want me back. I'm getting old. I can't smell Jap like I used to."

Sarangani's black eyes grew opaque. "You just signed your death-warrant, Mercer." He flipped a quick shot as he spoke, then screamed.

A gun had appeared in Mercer's hand from nowhere. Sarangani's slug had clipped Mercer's ear lobe. But Mercer hadn't missed. Sarangani stood a moment, gaping incredulously at the gun, then took two quick steps forward clawing at the hole where his right eye had been.

Meangis ran screaming from the office, Mercer's gun yammering at his heels. There was no one in the hallway. The hood ran for the stairhead. Mercer started to follow, ran into the curious office girl who stepped out of Doctor Metzger's office, and went sprawling to the floor.

He picked himself up, cursing, and pounded on down the stairs. The sound of running feet had died away. Nine floors below a door opened into an alley that led to Dearborn Street. Mercer ran down the alley to the street. The hood was not in sight.

A woman shopper saw the gun and screamed. Mercer slipped it back into its holster, walked the few feet to the lobby of the building, and dialed Inspector Haig of Homicide.

"This is Matt Mercer, Haig," he told him. "I want to report a homicide. I just killed a Jap in my office."

"You what!" the Inspector demanded. He added, not unkindly, "Look, Matt. Why don't you sober up? I know how you felt about Steve, but—"

"I mean it," Mercer said coldly.

"No kidding?"

"No kidding," Mercer said grimly. "There were two, but one got away. I'll wait for you here in the lobby."

CHAPTER TWO

The Disappearing Corpse

INSPECTOR HAIG had been a detective for thirty years. He had been on Homicide for twenty. If man was made in God's image and likeness, most of those whom he met in the course of a day were counterfeit. He liked Matt Mercer as well as his slightly envenomed nature would permit him to like anyone.

Followed by his squad, he stepped into an elevator, eyeing Mercer's torn ear lobe. "And you had never seen either man before?"

"Not that I know of," Mercer told him.

Haig worried his soggy cigar from one

side of his mouth to the other. It gave him the appearance of an old gray wolf digesting a portion of his kill. "Then what did they want of you?" he demanded.

"It," Mercer told him. He realized the statement sounded silly and added quickly, "They said that they wanted a package that had been sent me from Kansas City. They said that Steve had taken it from a Colonel Osaki by force, but that if I would return it, they would forget all about the matter."

Haig looked at him sharply but said nothing.

Mercer had expected to find a morbidly curious crowd at his door. There was none. His office door stood ajar. He strode through it on into the inner office and stopped.

He had shot Sarangani through the eye. The bullet had entered the man's brain. But there was no corpse on the floor.

Lieutenant Carlson looked at Haig. Haig looked at the whiskey bottle on the desk, then told Carson quietly, "Check with his neighbors Jim."

Mercer flushed. "To tell with that. I'm not crazy. And I'm not drunk. Two Japs bust in and tried to put the heat on me. I shot one and chased the other down the stairs."

Haig asked him to describe them.

Mercer said, "They looked like Filipinos. They were short, black-haired, and wiry. But both of them were Japs." He described both men and the scene in detail.

Haig listened quietly. By the time that Mercer had finished, Carlson had returned. He shook his head at Haig's unspoken question.

"No one else saw them," he said. "I asked the elevator boys and the starter and the neighbors on both sides of the halls. The only one who even heard any shooting was the office girl next door. She said that Mercer bust out of his office wild-eyed, waving a gun around his head, and cursing. She tried to get out of his way and couldn't. She says that he knocked her down and the smell of whiskey was so strong that you could cut it with a knife."

"So—?" Haig asked Mercer.

The big former Marine's face had turned a dull brick red. "There were two Japs," he insisted. "I shot one, and one got away. I chased him down the stairs, then called you from the lobby."

"So, where's the body?" Haig demanded.

Mercer admitted, "I don't know. I—"

Haig interrupted, "Look, Matt. This isn't official. I should run you in, but I won't. Instead, I'm going to take your guns and give you a piece of advice. Cut it out, boy. Sure. Steve was your pal. But grief and rye don't mix. It's got you seeing things." He slipped Mercer's gun from its holster and located

a spare in a desk drawer. "When you sober up, drop around and I'll give these back again."

He strode out, followed by his squad. Mercer stood in the center of his office staring at the floor where the corpse should have been. There was something strange about it. Then he realized that the throw rug in front of his desk was gone. Whoever had removed the corpse had simply rolled it in the rug.

He turned to call after Haig, then changed his mind. To hell with homicide. He could handle this himself. He strode down the long hallway to the freight elevator and pushed the button savagely.

When the colored boy stopped the platform at the floor, Mercer took two half dollars from his pocket and handed them to him. "What," he asked, "did the man look like that took out a rug to be cleaned about fifteen minutes ago?"

The boy scratched his head and considered. "He ain't very big, Mister. He kinda little, an' black haired, an' squint eyed."

"That's all that I wanted to know," Mercer told him.

He walked back to his office swearing softly. That much of the puzzle was solved. The smaller of the two Japanese had not fled out the alley at all. He had merely turned off

several floors below, doubled back when Mercer had passed, rolled his partner in the rug and carried him down on the freight elevator.

"Drunk, am I? Crazy, am I?" Mercer snorted.

HIS girl had arrived when he returned and was sitting at her desk studying the inscription on a neatly-tied paper carton. "Doctor Metzger's girl just brought this in," she told him. "She said that there's a new carrier on, and she signed for it without even looking at the name."

Mercer took the package from her. The return address was—Army Effects Bureau, Quartermaster's Corp., Kansas City, Mo. It was the package the hoods had been after. He had an idea what it contained.

The girl continued, smiling, "She also said that you were roaring drunk and had been shooting up the building."

Mercer told her, "According to Haig, I'm also crazy. Get my house on the wire will you?"

He set the box on his desk and closed the inner office door. When his phone rang, he told his wife, "Look, hon. You're right, and I'm sorry as hell. Staying potzed won't help Steve. Now, let me talk to Magnolia, will you?"

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He asked the maid if she had tried to recall the voice. She told him that the more she thought about it, the more she thought that it might have been Mr. Irving calling.

He thanked her, hung up, and told his office girl to get him Irv's pawnshop on North Dearborn. Clancey of the East Chicago Avenue Station answered.

"No, you can't talk to Irv," he told Mercer. "A couple of hoods beat him up this morning. He's in the hospital now and I'm here checking with his clerk to find out what was stolen."

Mercer asked to speak to the clerk. He told him that the contents of Irv's wallet and the safe seemed to be intact. There seemed to be no reason for the beating. Mercer could call the hospital if he cared to but the ambulance surgeon had said that it would be twenty-four hours at least before the pawnbroker could talk. Besides multiple contusions, his jaw bone had been broken.

It had been Irv who had called him. Mercer was certain of that. The same two hoods had called on Irv before they had called on him.

He cut the strings on the box and unwrapped it. It contained Steve's dress uniform, his watch, a much-thumbed diary, a beautifully hilted sword, and a Japanese officer's automatic, patterned after a German Luger.

Mercer examined the clip. It was filled. He dropped it into his side coat pocket. Haig had taken his guns. Now Steve had sent him one from the grave. The big Marine was getting a bang, if the dead could know such things.

He forgot his promise to Sherry, poured himself a drink and thumbed through the diary. It had been started just before Guadalcanal. The going had been tough. Mercer knew war. He also knew Steve. And when Steve said things were tough, they were bad.

He looked up, annoyed, as his door opened. Mary, his office girl's eyes, were round as saucers. She told him, "A Mr. Morgan and a Miss Fariday want to see you." She added, "You know, the picture star."

Mercer knew Morgan, well. He was a high pressure publicity man. He didn't care to meet Miss Fariday. "Tell them I'm not taking cases," he growled.

Morgan pushed by the girl. His face was lined with strain. "I think you'll see us," he said.

The picture star followed him into the office. A pint-sized blonde with big blue eyes, the girl looked like she had been crying."

Mercer waved them to chairs. "Okay. Let's have it. Who's stolen the family jewels now and what do you want me to do about it?"

The actress didn't seem to hear him. Her blue eyes filled with tears. She was staring at the uniform in the box. "That—that is Steve's uniform?" she asked.

Mercer nodded curtly. "So what?"

Morgan lighted a cigarette with fingers that shook slightly. "So meet Mrs. Pulos," he told Mercer.

MERCER made a noise with his mouth and tongue. "Of all of the jackals," he told Morgan, "you press agent lads are the worst. You'd sell your mothers down the river for a column of black type."

The actress stroked the uniform.

"It's the McCoy," Morgan told Mercer. "You know that U.S.O. tour that Miss Fariday went on about eight months ago?"

Suspicious, Mercer asked, "So what?"

"So—that's when I met Steve." The actress began to sob softly. "It was in Brisbane, last January. Steve had a fourteen day leave." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "But—but we'd only been married for forty-eight hours when he had to return to duty."

Mercer said, "Baloney!"

The girl continued, "I asked him to keep it a secret. I—I wish now that I hadn't. I—I loved him so. And he's dead."

Mercer looked over her head at the door. "Where are the photographers?" he asked Morgan. "Boy. I can read the headlines now—*STARLET SECRETLY MARRIED TO DEAD HERO!*"

Morgan got up heavily. "Okay, wise guy. We'll prove it!"

The actress fumbled in her handbag. "You see, I had a letter from Steve this morning. It—it was three months old." She fought her sobs. "He—he asked me to give you this."

She laid a torn fragment of rice paper on his desk. He picked it up and studied the brush strokes. They read:

"By the great Walled City is a tree that sheds plum blossom petals like drifting purple snow down to the ancient bosom of the Pasig."

Mercer considered. The Pasig was a river that flowed from Leguna de Bay to Manila Bay. The old Walled City was on its south bank across from the commercial and the warehouse district of Manila.

"So what's this supposed to mean to me?" he asked the girl.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I don't read Chinese or Japanese, or whatever it's written in."

"And the letter from Steve—?"

She dried her eyes. "That's personal. Steve asked me to bring the enclosure to you. You have it." She walked to the door, calling over her shoulder in parting, "I don't give a damn what you or anyone thinks. But I was married to Steve."

Morgan followed her to the door.

"It was a good try and a good act," Mercer told him. "It could have meant headlines for your client."

Morgan didn't bother to answer.

Mercer chuckled as he slammed the door. Morgan seldom missed a trick. He knew that Steve had been partial to pint-sized blondes. He knew that—struck by a sudden thought, Mercer thumbed back through the diary to the month of January. On the 15th, Steve had written:

Proposed to Jennifer Fariday this morning, and believe it or not, she accepted me. The chaplain has agreed to marry us this afternoon. Oh, boy, I can see Matt's eyes popping out now. Imagine a lug like me married to a picture star. But this is for keeps. So help me!

Moving lightly for so big a man, Mercer crossed to his office door and yanked it open. "Miss Fariday and Morgan?" he demanded.

His office girl said, puzzled, "They went right on through." Mary added, "She was crying."

Mercer hurried out into the hall and up to the elevator bank. An elevator was just discharging a passenger. "Down!" he ordered the operator.

The boy protested, "But Mr. Mercer. This car is going up!"

Mercer rammed the gun in his pocket into the operator's back. "Down! And no stops!" he ordered.

Frightened, the boy obeyed.

Mercer reached the lobby in time to see the girl's blond head bobbing through the doorway. By the time he had reached the doorway, she and Morgan had reached the curb. A black sedan drew up beside them and the thug who had fled from his office stepped out and ordered them into the car at the point of a vicious-looking gun.

Morgan began a protest and a loungee loafing at the curb fanned him with a sap. The men worked deftly, swiftly, loading the limp body into the car.

Mercer ran toward the car shouting, "Stop!"

He caught a fleeting glimpse of Miss Fariday's face and that of a cold-eyed Eurasian. Then the car roared into motion. The sap swung a second time. It caught Mercer flush on the temple and stretched his full length in the gutter.

When he came to a patrolman was shaking him. The big man got slowly to his feet and brushed the dust from his clothes. "What," he asked tentatively, "would you say, if I told you that I wasn't drunk, that I was trying to save Jennifer Fariday the actress from being kidnapped by a slant-eyed Jap?"

"I wouldn't say a thing," the patrolman said frankly. "But I would call the wagon and have you taken to the psychopathic ward."

Mercer smiled without mirth. "Yeah. That's what I was afraid of."

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. Satan

THE patrolman dispersed the crowd. Mercer thought of the box and diary lying unguarded on his desk and returned to his office glumly. The whole affair failed to make sense. All that he really knew was that he was one hell of a detective. Whatever it was, this thing was big. He should have realized that when Sarangani and Meangis had first entered his office.

It hurt even to think of Steve. Steve had been married to the actress. The girl had leveled with him, and he had let her down. In the elevator, he considered calling Haig, and decided that it would do no good. The Inspector would never believe him. Haig thought he was on a binge. He would haul him down to the psych ward and make him play with blocks. Whatever was done for the girl and Morgan, he would have to do himself.

The box, the diary, and the scrap of rice paper, were still lying on his desk. He put the paper into his wallet, poured himself a drink, and thumbed through the diary again. There was nothing in it to give him the slightest clue as to why Steve had sent him the paper.

He called the local office of G-2, identified himself, and asked Colonel Meyers if he knew of a Japanese Colonel of Intelligence by the name of Osaki.

Meyers told him the name was common, but that he believed that a Colonel Osaki had been mentioned in dispatches as one of the principle looters of private business firms after the fall of Manila. He promised to check on the man and phone Mercer in a few hours. "Something in our line, Matt?" he asked in parting.

Mercer told him he wasn't certain and hung up thoughtfully. Manila had been a wealthy town. The Japanese puppet government had taken over the banks but there had been a lot of private money. He took the rice paper from his pocket and re-read the Japanese characters.

"By the great Walled City is a tree that sheds plum blossom petals like drifting purple snow down to the ancient bosom of the Pasig."

"The hell you say," he grunted.

The words did not make sense. In the first place, plum blossoms were white, not purple.

Still, Sarangani had mentioned a map. He had said that Steve had taken the map from Colonel Osaki by force. The scrap of rice paper was torn unevenly. It could be that joined with each other, the two pieces would have some meaning. It would have been like Steve to have torn the thing in half, each piece to be delivered to him separately.

Mercer reached for the bottle of rye, thought of the kidnapped girl, and returned the bottle unopened to his desk drawer. The girl had been married to Steve. Steve was depending on him.

He locked the box and the diary in his safe, told his office girl to take the rest of the day off, and took a cab to Irv's pawnshop.

Irv's clerk was gone, but Clancey was still on duty. "The captain thought it best," he told Mercer, "to keep the place locked until Irv is conscious at least. You know," he confided, "now-a-days, you don't know who to trust."

Mercer agreed with him and asked him his theory concerning the beating.

Flattered, the patrolman led the way to the rear of the shop.

"**N**OW mind you," he admitted, "I don't know why they beat up Irv the way they did, but 'tis just as plain as the nose on my face that it was an attempted stick-up."

Mercer doubted that very much. Irv had been stuck up before. He was insured. It was something more than a stick-up.

Clancey took a position in the cage. "Here is the way I think it happened. Irv was standing here going through his morning mail when the two hoods come in. One of them threw a gun on him through the grill. The other one stepped back here and sapped him. Then both of them beat him up."

Mercer asked, "How do you know there were two of them?"

Clancey confided, "The porter next door saw them. You see, he banged on Irv's door to borrow his window squeegee and the two of them took out the back." The patrolman dropped his voice even lower. "He said it was two Filipinos who've been hanging out in Burke's bar for a couple of months. Probably planning the job. And then his banging scared them off."

Mercer said, "Yeah." He knew at least a part of what he had wanted to know. The hoods had been Sarangani and Meangis. "You searched the place?" he asked Clancey.

"Every inch of it," Clancey boasted.

Mercer tried to reconstruct the scene in his mind. The morning mail had just arrived. There had been something in it to make Irv want to phone him. A vein in his temple began to throb. That something could have been a delayed letter from Steve containing the

other half of the torn rice paper. He took the scrap of paper from his wallet and laid it on the ledger convenient to the phone. Irv had dialed his number. It had been hot. Mercer looked up at the fan and demanded, "The ceiling fan was on or off when you got here?"

Clancey thought a moment. "It was on."

Mercer reached up and pulled the cord. The circular sweep of the air picked the rice paper from the ledger and fluttered it a few feet to a pile of unredeemed suitcases. Sweating with excitement, Mercer retrieved it and began to move the cases, over Clancey's protests. There was nothing between or behind them. If the other piece of rice paper had been wafted there by the fan, Sarangani or Meangis had found it. They weren't the type to run from porters. They had what they had come for when they left.

Clancey scowling after him, Mercer turned in to the bar next door. Burke reached for a bottle of rye.

"No," Mercer shook his head. "Make mine a short beer instead."

Burke drew the beer and continued discussing the affair next door with a white-haired customer. "Two months, they hung out in here," he told the man. "They seem like nice lads. They square all their tabs. They act like gentlemen. But then, right after the mailman comes this morning, they clip next door and try to stick up Irv. They'd been planning it for two months, see? And they'd have done it, too, if the porter hadn't wanted to borrow Irv's squeegee."

Mercer sipped his beer. "The mailman say anything?" he asked.

Burke stared at him, hard. "By God. I just thought of that. He did. He told me that Irv had got a letter from a dead guy, your old partner, Steve Pulos. You think it could have any connection?"

"Yeah," Mercer admitted. "I think that was what they were after. Now tell me this. During the two months that they hung out in here, did they mention where they were living?"

The saloon man thought a moment, shook his head. "If they did, I didn't hear 'em."

Mercer paid for his beer. On the sidewalk, he stopped to light a cigar and found that the white-haired customer had followed him out of the bar. "These two lads that Burke was speaking of," he said. "Did they look like Filipinos?" He described them.

"Those are the lads," Mercer said.

The other man said thoughtfully, "Well, of course I don't know for certain, but I saw the little guy come out of the Mavis several times, and it could be that they lived there."

Mercer thanked him and stared down the street at the Mavis Hotel sign. It was two blocks away, a short stone's throw from the

river. A former theatrical hotel, it asked its guests few questions. It was patronized chiefly by the riff-raff of the street and down-at-the-heel minor hoods and grifters.

He walked toward the hotel, debating. Every minute that he stalled increased Miss Fariday's and Morgan's danger. Once whoever was behind all this learned that the actress had turned over the torn scrap of rice paper to him, the logical thing for the unknown master-mind to do would be to slit Miss Fariday's and Morgan's throats.

It was too big for one man to handle. Still, if he called in Haig, Haig would swear that he was crazy and throw him in the psychopathic ward. And by the time they had run him through the mill and found that he was both sane and sober, it would be too late. The actress and the agent would be dead.

A CLEVER detective, like the ones that he read about in fiction, would stroll into his favorite bar, sit down and deduce a solution over a half dozen drinks of rye. But Mercer had never pretended to be clever. He solved his cases the hard way.

There was no one in the lobby of the Mavis. "You have a Mr. Sarangani and a Mr. Meangis living here?" he asked the clerk.

Thin-lipped, jaundice-eyed, the desk clerk on duty looked up briefly, then back at his racing form. "Never heard of them, Bud. You must have the wrong hotel."

Mercer turned to go, turned back and described both men in detail. "They look like Filipinos, but they're Japs."

The clerk didn't even bother to look up. "So what does that make me?"

Mercer caught him by the coat front with his artificial hand, dragged him half across the counter, and slapped the sneer from his lips. "Is that enough, or do you want more?" he asked.

The clerk whimpered, "Okay. I'll talk. How was I to know you was a cop? Sure. Those guys used to live here. They lived here for three months. But they scrambled out early this morning. An' a couple of hours later I hear that they are the two guys who beat up Irv."

Mercer insisted, "Their baggage is still in their room?"

The clerk nodded.

"And I'm the first lad to run them down?"

Half-strangled, the clerk nodded again. Mercer released him and demanded the key to their room. For once he had gotten a break. No two men could live in a room for three months and not leave some clue as to their true identity and connections behind them. All that he needed was enough to convince Haig that he wasn't crazy.

The ancient cage creaked to a stop on the

fifth floor and the colored elevator boy pointed down the dingy hallway. "Room 510 is right down that way, Mister. It's jist around the bend, there. The last room in the hall."

The paint and paper was scaling from the walls and ceiling. The carpeting was torn. The hallway smelled of many things. As a precautionary measure, Mercer rapped on the door of 510.

As he waited, a door across the hallway opened and a stringy-haired blonde smiled at him falsely, "Looking for someone, handsome?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Mercer told her, "but I'm two weeks behind on my homework."

She snorted, "Wise guy, eh?" and slammed the door.

Chuckling, he let himself into room 510. The shade of the single window was drawn. Clothes were tossed carelessly on chairs. The bed had not been made. The room had a shut-up, musty smell. He stepped inside, and closed and locked the door behind him.

He knew that he had made a mistake as soon as he had locked the door. *There was someone in the room with him. A trap had been cleverly baited and he had walked into it like a fool. The white-haired customer in Burke's had been a stooge. The desk clerk had been acting. Even the blonde across the hall had served to throw him off his guard.*

HIS hand streaked for his side coat pocket, froze as a suave voice suggested quietly, "I wouldn't if I were you, Sergeant Mercer. You are covered from all sides."

The door to the bathroom opened. Meangis filled it, a sawed-off double barreled shotgun in his hands. Another man appeared in the doorway that connected 510 with the adjoining room. Over his shoulder, Mercer could see Miss Fariday and Morgan. The actress and her agent were gagged and tied to chairs.

"It looks like I bobbed," Mercer admitted.

"So it looks," the suave voice agreed.

Mercer turned to face the man. He was the black-haired, thin-faced, Eurasian whom he had seen in the sedan. "And who the hell are you?" he asked.

The Eurasian smiled without mirth. "I could be Doctor Fu Manchu, but I'm not. You can call me Mr. Satan."

He cracked an order in Japanese. Meangis handed him the sawed off shot-gun, emptied Mercer's pockets and piled his findings on the bed. A second Japanese sorted through them carefully.

Mercer thought, "*Haig is right. I'm crazy. The hard stuff has finally rotted my brain. This isn't happening. It can't be. I'm in Chicago, not Tokyo or Kobe. Clark Street is five floors below me. The Loop is just across*

the river. We are at war with Japan. And there aren't any Japs in Chicago. They're all in concentration camps."

The Japanese who was searching Mercer's belongings took the scrap of rice paper from Mercer's wallet and handed it to the man who called himself Mr. Satan. Meangis resumed custody of the shot gun.

"Go ahead. Make a break," he taunted Mercer. "I would love to shoot your head right off your shoulders."

Meangis asked Mr. Satan, "That is it?"

"I can't tell," the Eurasian said. He took the torn scrap of rice paper, for which Sarangani and Meangis had slugged Irv, from his own wallet and laid it beside the other. In the dim light of the room, Mercer could barely decipher the brush strokes. They read:

"One comes at noon to the true spot where Legaspi breathed his last and all is mother of pearl and golden silence."

To the best of Mercer's recollection, Legaspi had been the Spaniard who had conquered the Philippines and founded Manila in 1571. The affair made less sense than ever.

Satan tried to fit the pieces of paper together. Their torn edges did not match. He swore quietly for a moment, then told Meangis, "No. We merely have two thirds of the map now. The middle half is still missing." He stared, cold-eyed, at Mercer. "Start talking, Sergeant. Where is it?"

Mercer told the truth. "I haven't the least idea. I don't even know what you're talking about. This is all a lot of Japanese to me."

Satan swung back to Meangis. "It was in that bundle from the personal effects bureau. And if it hadn't been for that stupid carrier, and if you and Sarangani hadn't blundered—"

Mercer interrupted to ask if he had heard the *if* about the dog and Satan struck him across the nose with a blackjack.

"Always the superior white man," the Eurasian jeered. "Always quipping, even in the face of death." He added crisply in Japanese, "Drag him into the other room."

His mind fogged with pain, half-blind with blood, Mercer allowed himself to be walked into the room where he had seen Miss Fariday and Morgan. He doubted that he would leave it alive. If the white haired customer in Burke's had been a stooge, no one knew that he had come to the Mayis. The gang could cut his throat, drop him into the river, and no one would be the wiser.

CHAPTER FOUR

One Eye, One Ear—

STRIPPED to the waist, his legs tied to the rungs of the chair that he straddled, Mercer felt sweat streaming down his broad chest

in bloodstained rivulets. It beaded on the mat of hair and glistened on the heavy straps that held his artificial arm in place. The questioning, it seemed, had been going on for endless hours.

"Ready to talk?" Mr. Satan demanded of Matt.

Mercer looked from him to where Meangis stood with the muzzle of the shot gun pressed close to Steve's wife's temple. He had been warned that the Japanese would shoot at his first outcry.

"No," he shook his head. "I guess I'll just sit tight."

Satan threw the hose on the floor in disgust. "What do you hope to gain by stalling? Just tell us the combination of your safe where Sergeant Pulos' personal effects are stored—"

"And you'll cut my throat," Mercer finished the sentence for him.

Satan lighted a cigarette and studied the actress thoughtfully. "We have been going about this in the wrong manner," he decided. "The Americans make fools of themselves where women are concerned. Tear the dress from that girl's back. We will beat *her* instead."

The actress strained at her bonds, her eyes grown wide with fear. Morgan gargled a protest against the knotted towels that gagged him. Mercer's face grew black with anger. He attempted to stand up, chair and all, and Satan struck him with his fist.

"Yes," the Eurasian smiled. "I believe that this will work."

Mercer sawed at the rope on his wrists with the steel fingers of his artificial hand. It was now or never. Steve's uniform and diary were in his safe. But he doubted that either one contained the missing portion of the map for which the Eurasian was searching. The uniform would have been steam cleaned and deloused. The diary would have been inspected by a censor. To give Satan the combination of the safe would merely prolong the agony. When they failed to find the missing portion of the map, they would resume their questioning. He knew no more than they did about the map.

He studied his chances for survival. Satan was superintending the rebinding of the girl. He caught his yellow fingers in the neck of her dress. There was a sharp, ripping, sound, and the bare back of the girl lay exposed.

Meangis, who had laid his shot gun on the bed to help the Eurasian handle the girl, made a foul remark. The third Japanese, who had stooped to retie her ankles to the chair rungs, laughed toothily.

This was Steve's wife! Mercer gripped the back of his chair, raised it as high as he could from the floor by rising on the balls of his

feet, then sat down hard, the full weight of his two hundred pounds acting as a pile driver. The seat and back broke into pieces. The chair legs spread and snapped. His wrists were free. His ankles were still tied to the chair legs, but the rungs were not connected.

Meangis leaped for the shotgun. Raising the shattered chairback, Mercer brained him with the heavy wood, tore the shotgun from his hands, and rolled just as the third Japanese, screaming with fear and anger, emptied an automatic at the spot where he had been. The slugs thudded soddenly into the already-dead Meangis.

Still on his back, with no time to bring the butt of the shotgun to his shoulder, Mercer emptied one barrel of the gun into the screaming man's face and blew off half his head. The butt of the unsupported gun kicked back against Mercer's right cheek and almost smashed his cheek bone.

Ignoring the pain, he got to his knees and searched for Satan. The Eurasian was standing in the doorway that connected the two rooms. Indecision clouded his face. Mercer knew what he was thinking. Dead men couldn't talk. The Eurasian wanted him alive. As Mercer brought the shot-gun to his shoulder, Satan stepped through the door and slammed it shut.

Cursing, hampered by the chair rungs still dangling from his ankles, Mercer heaved himself to his feet and followed, only to fall sprawling as Morgan, striving to get free, fell chair and all in his path.

As Mercer fell, the shotgun discharged. By the time he fought open the door, the Eurasian was gone. The Japanese automatic that

had belonged to Steve still lay on the bed where Meangis had put it. Mercer snatched it up and raced on out into the hall after the slant-eyed Satan.

THE BLONDE stood in her doorway, screaming shrilly. Satan was twenty feet down the hall. Mercer flipped a quick shot at him and missed as the blonde caught at his arm.

He tore loose and rounded the bend in the hallway in time to see the Eurasian outlined against the stairhead. He triggered a second time and the firing pin clicked dully. He stuffed the gun in his belt and ran on. By the time he had reached the stairs, Satan had disappeared into the gloomy well. It was useless to pursue the man, hobbled as he was. More, the Mavis was a rabbit warren of stairs and passageways where a man could hide out indefinitely. He would have to call in Haig. Haig would believe him now.

He returned to room 510 and through it to the other room. Morgan still lay struggling on the floor, his face purple with his efforts to free himself. Jennifer Fariday had passed out.

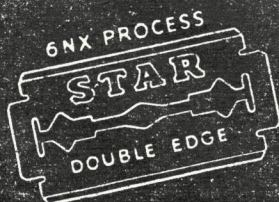
Mercer tore the gag from her mouth, untied her, then carried her to the bed.

When Mercer had removed the gag from his mouth, Morgan's first words were, "Now maybe you'll believe us."

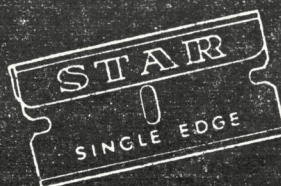
Mercer nodded grimly. "Yeah. I believe you," he told him. "Me and Inspector Haig." He searched Meangis' pockets for shot gun shells, thumbed two into the barrels of the shotgun and emptied the gun out of the window of 510.

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HAIG studied the dead men with interest. They were undeniably Japanese. "So I was wrong," he admitted to Mercer. "I'm sorry I took your guns."

"You damn near killed me," Mercer scowled.

Haig demanded, "But what is it all about?"

"A plum tree with purple blossoms," Mercer told him sourly. "You've sent for Colonel Meyers?"

"I have," Haig nodded.

Mercer sat down on a window sill and scowled at the working tech squad through a blue cloud of cigar smoke. He had killed three men. His life had been attempted twice. He had been beaten for two hours—and he still didn't know the score.

Lieutenant Carlson came in and reported, "I sent Jones and Murphy to the hospital with Miss Fariday. The Doc couldn't find anything wrong, but she was hysterical."

"She had a right to be," Mercer said. "If you guys had listened to me—"

"Okay. So I pulled a boner," Haig admitted. "The boys can print it in headlines if they want to." He swung around to Morgan. "You don't know anymore than you've told me?"

The agent said that he did not. "All that I know," he repeated, "is that when we left Mercer's office, I was slugged. I came to tied to a chair and gagged. When they found that we didn't have what they wanted, they started baiting a trap for Mercer."

Haig asked Carlson, "The boys haven't picked up that white-haired guy, the desk clerk, or the blonde?"

"Not yet," Carlson reported. "They all seem to have scrambled when Satan did."

Morgan crossed the room to Mercer, rubbing his still numb wrists. "Look. My only interest in this affair is Miss Fariday. And Steve Pulos had no right to endanger her life the way he did. Neither have you, for that matter. Why don't you give them whatever they want. I won't feel safe concerning Miss Fariday until they do."

Mercer exploded, "I haven't got what they want. And if I did have, I wouldn't give it to a bunch of slimy Japs."

Colonel Meyers of G-2 strode briskly into the room, nodding to Haig and Mercer. "So it was in our line after all, Matt." He studied the dead Japanese with interest. "Start at the beginning, Matt. Who are these lads, and why?"

"It began," Mercer said, "with the slugging of Irv." He detailed what had happened as he knew it.

Meyers asked Morgan, "This letter your client, Miss Fariday, or I should say, Mrs. Pulos, received—there was nothing in it that alluded to her portion of the map?"

Morgan answered, "Nothing, outside of asking her to deliver it to Matt Mercer." He thought a moment, added, "No. I'm wrong. As I recall, he said that he had taken the enclosure from a Colonel Osaki, and that it had meant a lot to the Colonel."

Meyers smiled wryly. "I don't doubt that at all." He turned to Mercer. "I was right about Colonel Osaki. He led a private looting party through Manila. We thought at the time that the money and jewels had gone into the Japanese exchequer. But this throws a new light on the matter."

Haig whistled. "You mean he kept the loot for himself?"

"It would appear that way," Meyers said. "He obviously buried at least a good share of it for his own personal use when things had quieted down." He asked Mercer to repeat the two portions of the map as he remembered them.

Mercer wrote them out word for word. "I'm no mental giant," he said when he had finished, "but here's the way this thing looks to me. This freak plum tree on the bank of the Pasig is the starting point. The true spot where Legaspi breathed his last, and all is mother-of-pearl and silence, is the hiding place of the loot. The missing portion of the map tells how far it is, and in what direction from the plum tree."

"That sounds right to me," the G-2 Colonel admitted. "And that's just about the way a clever Jap would record a hiding place—a word map that wouldn't mean a damn thing to anyone but himself."

Haig demanded, "Then how did Sergeant Steve Pulos get on to it?"

Mercer shook his head. "God knows. But the big Greek was smart enough to nail a horseshoe on a house-fly. Maybe he squeezed it out of a prisoner who had been on the looting detail. He went into action shortly thereafter. He knew the information was too valuable to keep on his own person until he could contact G-2. That's why he sent one scrap of paper to Irv and the other scrap to his wife."

"But the third piece," Morgan protested. "What did he do with that?"

"I wish I knew," Mercer said simply.

"CONCERNING this Eurasian," Meyers said. "Describe him."

"He's about five feet ten and a half. Thin to the point of emaciation. Fair skinned, black haired. Black, piercing eyes and well modeled black eyebrows that slant upwards toward his temples." Mercer thought a moment, added, "He's a Jap. But he looks more like a high-caste Hindu."

"That sounds like Nagasaki," Meyers said. "And if it is, this thing is big. He was in

charge of all of the Nips' South American espionage. The last that we heard of him, however, Chile had interned him."

"You can check on that?"

"As soon as I get back to the office." Colonel Meyers hesitated, added, "But now, can you tell me this, Mercer? Steve Pulos got the map from Colonel Osaki. It is obvious that Osaki is dead. Even if he was alive, he wouldn't dare admit that he had crossed up his own government. *Then how did Japanese Intelligence get in on this? How did they learn that Steve Pulos had the map? How did they learn that he had sent it back to the States in three pieces?*"

Mercer's head had begun to ache. He had been a long time without a drink. "I don't know," he admitted. "I'm not that kind of a detective."

The phone in 510 rang. Lieutenant Carlson answered it. "It's some dame who wants to talk to Mercer," he told Haig. "I put Kelly on the switchboard and he says she sounds like she's crying."

"Take it, Matt," Haig said.

"Yeah? Matt Mercer speaking," Mercer growled into the phone. "Oh. It's you, Sherry." His back stiffened suddenly. "What!"

In the sudden silence of the room, Sherry's sobbing voice was clearly audible through the two rooms. "Two men in a car," she sobbed. "Magnolia had the boys out in the park. They knocked her down and took the twins." She fought hard to control her sobs and failed. "Then—they told her to tell me to call you at the Mavis." Her last words were a sobbed prayer. "Oh, Matt. Do something, please. They took my babies."

Mercer said, "Don't, Sherry. Hang on to yourself. I'll be right home."

He hung up and turned to face Haig. "They've got my boys."

Haig knew what the four year old youngsters meant to Mercer. "Nagasaki?" he demanded.

"Yeah." Mercer fumbled his hat from a table and turned blindly toward the door. Before he reached it, the phone rang a second time. "Yes. This is Mercer speaking," he admitted in answer to the query.

The Eurasian's voice was cold. "Your wife has phoned you?" Mercer told him that she had. The other man continued. "So sorry. It is extremely distasteful to me to have to go to such lengths. But you must understand by now that this is a matter of great importance. It is now almost two o'clock. I will give you eight hours in which to consider the matter. Be in your office at midnight. I will contact you again. At that time you will either turn over to me the missing portion of the map or I will return your sons to you, one ear, one eye, one nose at a time."

Mercer protested, "But—"

"If the police should attempt to interfere before that time, I need not tell you what will happen."

"But—!" Mercer was talking to an empty line. The Eurasian had hung up.

Haig said, grimly, "We'll turn out the whole force. I'll have every prowl and squad car in the City—"

"You'll do nothing," Mercer cut him short. "They'll kill my boys if you do. To hell with the force. You wouldn't believe me before. Now I'll handle this my way."

Colonel Meyers asked, softly, "But what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Mercer admitted.

CHAPTER FIVE

I'll Call You at Midnight!

IN MERCER'S office the only sound was the big man's heavy breathing and Sherry's muted sobs as her frantic fingers cut the dead Marine's dress uniform to pieces.

"It *has* to be in one of the seams," she sobbed. "It's the only place we haven't looked."

Mercer put down the diary and rubbed his swollen eyes. "Yeah," he agreed, not very hopefully.

Ben Morgan looked at his watch, said grimly, "We've only another half hour before the call comes in."

"It has to be in one of the seams. It *has* to," Sherry sobbed.

Mercer looked at his wife. He wished he could comfort her. But at a time like this, words meant nothing. He picked up the sword, twisted and pulled at the hilt. It contained no secret hiding place.

He thought, "*Advising other people not to deal with kidnappers is one thing. When it happens to you, it's different. To hell with anyone else. I'd give all of Manila to get my boys back safe.*"

Her eyes swimming with tears, Sherry asked, "They won't mistreat them, will they, Matt?"

"Of course not," he assured her. His throat felt dry and constricted.

"And we *will* get them back?"

Mercer came to a decision. "We'll get them back," he promised. "You'll have your boys in your arms by twelve thirty."

Morgan said sharply, "You say that as though you believe it."

"I do," Mercer said. He rested his head in his hands for a moment. "Do me a favor, will you? Step down to the drug store on the corner and get me some five-grain quinine capsules."

"I'll be glad to," the agent said. "I'll do

anything I can to help. That's why I'm sticking around." He turned in the doorway, puzzled. "Did you say quinine capsules?"

"Five grain," Mercer nodded. He explained, "I'm still full of fever from the years I spent in the tropics. Sometimes excitement brings it back."

Morgan said, "I see," and closed the door quietly behind him.

"He's nice," Sherry sobbed. "I—I don't know what we'd have done without him."

"We'd have gotten along," Mercer said. He reached for the phone and dialed his own house number. Magnolia answered. "Get in a cab right away," Mercer told the colored girl, "and come on down to the office building. But don't come upstairs, understand? Wait for me in one of the doorways off the lobby. I'll meet you on the walk a few minutes after midnight. Is that clear?"

She protested, "That clear, Mr. Mercer. But—"

"If you want to see the twins again, do as I say," he said curtly and hung up.

Sherry looked at him strangely.

"No. I'm not crazy," he told her. "I know just what I'm doing."

HE MADE certain that the outer office was empty, then returned to his desk and took a blank scrap of rice paper from his pocket. He had gotten it that afternoon from a Chinese merchant he knew. It was similar in size to the other scraps of paper that Steve had inclosed in his letters. He tore it unevenly on two sides, then laid it on his blotter and took a bottle of ink and a camel's-hair brush from his drawer.

Sherry asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Give Nagasaki what he wants," he told her grimly.

Holding the paper in his right hand he took the brush in his left and began. Japanese ideographs began to take form on the scrap of paper as the fingers of his artificial hand worked smoothly, efficiently. "Unfit for combat!" he snorted.

His wife stared at the picture writing, fascinated. When he had finished, she demanded, "What does it say?"

He told her, "Twenty paces toward the old moat, turn toward the sun."

She said, wide-eyed, "You can't get away with it, Matt."

"I think we can," he said quietly. "And if this doesn't work, I've another joker up my sleeve." He felt the pressure of his guns hard against his chest. "Also two .45s."

He waved the rice paper carefully to dry it and put the brush and ink back in the drawer. "You're going to find this in a seam of Steve's uniform," he told Sherry.

She stared at him a moment, nodded.

"Whatever you say, Matt."

Mercer hesitated, said, "We won't even let Morgan in on the fact that I'm trying to pull a whizzer. Let's keep it between the two of us. It'll make the act more authentic."

He folded the paper carefully and handed it to his wife. "The seam of the collar would be a good place to find it," he told her. "I've hidden things there myself."

She crumpled the paper in her palm. Two minutes passed, three.

Mercer looked at his watch. It was fifteen minutes of twelve. He dialed the hospital to which Irv had been taken and asked to speak to his night nurse. The nurse reported that Irv was conscious and resting nicely. "Tell him it's Matt Mercer calling," Mercer said. "And ask him if Steve said anything in a previous letter about sending the enclosure that Irv found in his letter this morning." The nurse protested disturbing him. "This could be a matter of life or death," Mercer said coldly. "Do as I say and don't argue."

He waited impatiently, listening to the night noises that floated up from the street below and drumming nervously on his desk top with his fingers.

The nurse reported, "He says, no."

Mercer thanked her and hung up.

"I don't understand," Sherry said.

"It took me some time to get it," Mercer admitted dryly. "This deduction business isn't much in my line. *But somebody had to tip off Japanese Intelligence. And I think I know who that someone was. That's why I spent two hours down at the Tribune Morgue this afternoon.*"

Morgan returned with the quinine capsules. There were a half dozen in the box. Mercer put one of the gelatinous capsules on his tongue and washed it down with a shot of rye. "Thanks," he told Morgan. "Look. I don't want you to be insulted. *But just what do you really know about Miss Fariday, Ben? I mean, what do you know about her background?*"

"Not much," Morgan admitted. He smiled thinly. "She played the usual stock and vaudeville, I believe. She was a name when she came to me. I don't handle them until they're big enough for me to charge real fees. Why?"

"Someone tipped off Japanese Intelligence," Mercer pointed out. "And that kidnapping of you both this morning could have been a clever stall to divert suspicion from her."

Morgan said, thoughtfully, "I never thought of it that way. But then why did she insist on coming to you with her third of the map?"

Mercer drummed his desk top. "Perhaps she hoped I would produce the missing portion of the map."

"I don't believe it," the agent said stoutly. "I think it's more likely that Pulos got drunk and babbled it over some bar."

"Steve drank," Mercer admitted. "But bars are scarce in the Gilbert Islands." He pushed the phone toward Morgan. "Do just one more thing for me. Call Miss Fariday and ask her when she last heard from Steve before she got that delayed letter this morning."

Morgan protested, "But Nagasaki is calling at midnight."

"We still have ten minutes," Mercer told him, looking at his watch.

Morgan made the call, reported, "She said it was the first letter in four months."

Mercer sighed. "That would appear to wash out my theory."

"Unless she is lying," Morgan suggested. He added, quickly, "Not that I think that she is. Jennifer Fariday means a lot to me."

"You were engaged to her, weren't you?" Mercer asked. "I mean, when she left on that U.S.O. tour and came back married to Steve?"

"That's right." Morgan nodded glumly. "But why bring that up now?"

"I just thought of it," Mercer murmured quietly.

SHERRY Mercer ripped the last seam on the collar, gasped, "I think I've found it. There's something here in the collar." She opened her palm and exposed the scrap of paper.

Morgan exulted. "It was in Steve's personal effects. Don't you see. Matt. Steve didn't mail the third piece of the map after all. He kept it in the collar of his uniform."

Mercer picked the rice paper from Sherry's palm and unfolded it carefully. "I guess this is it all right." He read aloud, "Twenty paces toward the moat, turn toward the sun."

The agent mopped his neck and forehead with his handkerchief. "That's it all right. The plum tree is the starting point. Twenty paces from it—"

The ring of the phone cut him short. Mercer squared his shoulders and answered. It was Inspector Haig.

"Just in case you've changed your mind, Matt," he said grimly.

"No," Mercer said. "I still feel the same as when I talked to you last. Now get off the wire. I'm expecting a contact at midnight."

He hung up and laid his watch on the desk. It was two minutes of twelve. The phone rang again promptly at midnight.

His face an expressionless mask, Mercer said, "Mercer speaking."

The Eurasian's salutation was a question. "You are alone?"

"No," Mercer admitted. "I'm not. Ben Morgan and my wife are here in the office."

"And the police?"

"I just told Haig to get off the line. My boys are all right?"

Nagasaki ignored the question. "You have that which I want?"

"I think so," Mercer answered. "But I asked you a question."

The Eurasian chuckled, "I believe I can reassure you on that point."

A brief pause followed. Then a childish treble quavered, "This ish Matt, Daddy. I don't like it here." The small voice filled with tears. "When are you coming to take me home?"

His battered face working, Mercer told him, "In just a few minutes, sonny. Stevie is all right?"

"I fine, Daddy," a second treble answered. Sherry Mercer sat staring at the phone, tears streaming down her face, afraid to trust herself to speak.

"Satisfied?" Nagasaki asked.

"Perfectly," Mercer said. "Where do we make the exchange?"

"We'll come to that in just a moment. Where did you find the third part of the map?"

"In Steve's collar," Mercer lied.

"And you aren't trying to pull a fast one?"

Mercer pointed out, "You have my boys?"

"And the note is genuine?"

Mercer handed the phone to Morgan. "Tell him what you saw."

Morgan said into the phone, "I saw Mrs. Mercer find it in the stand-up collar of Steve Pulos' uniform coat. She ripped the uniform to pieces and that was the last place that she looked."

Mercer took back the phone. "Satisfied?"

"I am," Nagasaki admitted. "I knew that it had to be somewhere in the bundle of Pulos' personal effects. But before I give you directions, let me tell you this. If you are attempting to trick me, if you are followed by the police, you know what will happen to your boys."

Mercer said, huskily, "I do."

The Eurasian named a street and a house number on the Northwest side. "Take a Checker Cab," he ordered. "Make certain that you aren't followed. Stop one block from the number. Pay off the driver of the cab. Come the rest of the way on foot. You will be watched from the moment of your arrival. If you have what we want, we'll make the trade. Otherwise—"

He hung up on the implied threat.

Mercer found that his face was dripping sweat. He took another quinine tablet and dropped the box into his pocket.

"I—I can go with you?" Sherry asked.

He kissed her, hard. "No. I have to go alone," he told her. "You and Morgan wait here."

CHAPTER SIX

Voice from a Grave

THE QUIET, rather shabby, residential street lay wrapped in sleep.

The cab stopped under a light. Mercer turned to the colored girl beside him. "You don't have to do this, you know. It will be dangerous. You can go on with the cab if you want to."

She shook her head. "No, sir, Mr. Mercer."

"No what?" the big man demanded.

"I doan' want to go with the cab," she told him. "I want to go with you and get the boys."

He said, "Good girl," and got out of the cab.

The driver asked loudly, "You want me to wait, Mister?"

Mercer told him no, handed him a ten dollar bill. As he waited for his change, he kicked the front tire idly. "You'd better stop at the next filling station and get some air in that," he told the driver. "It looks low to me."

The driver gave him his change and got out to look at the tire. "Low, hell. It's damn near flat," he cursed. "I'd better change that or I'll be tearing up the casing."

Mercer said, "Good night," and walked on down the street with Magnolia, mentally crossing his fingers.

A faint scuff of feet on the opposite walk warned him that Nagasaki had been telling the truth when he had said that he would be watched from the moment of his arrival. He stopped and peered at a house number. It was 3211. He wanted 3231. They walked by several vacant lots. 3231 stood by itself with no house for several lots on either side. The shades of the house were drawn but light showed in the corners of the windows.

He deliberately paused at the walk leading to the porch, took the box of quinine from his pocket and put a capsule in his mouth.

"Frightened?" he asked Magnolia.

"I is scared to death," she admitted.

A quick step sounded on the street, scuffed across the grass of the parkway and the barrel of a gun pressed hard against Mercer's ribs.

"Nagasaki?" Mercer asked.

"Nagasaki," the Eurasian answered coldly. "You were told to come alone, Mercer."

Mercer answered without turning his head. "Don't be a fool. I don't trust you any more than you trust me. That's why I brought Magnolia. She takes the twins back to Sherry before you get the map."

A moment of silence followed. "I see," Nagasaki said coldly. "Well, we'll discuss that in the house."

The gun in his back, Mercer, Magnolia beside him, walked up the stairs to the porch. The white-haired man he had met in Burke's opened the front door.

"Take his guns, Kane," Nagasaki ordered.

Kane smiled as he slipped Mercer's guns from their holsters and dropped them into his own pockets. "I believe that we've met before, sucker."

Mercer looked over his shoulder at the jaundiced-eyed desk clerk who stood scowling at him from a doorway that apparently led into a kitchen. "Yeah," he answered Kane.

Face taut with fear, but determined, Magnolia asked, "Where are my boys? You doan' have no right to worry Miss Sherry so."

"You heard her," Mercer added. He looked around the room. There was nothing unusual about it, no sliding panels or trick walls. It was a typical parlor of a jerry-built bungalow.

The Eurasian laughed. "I really gave you credit for more sense, Mercer. Did you *really* think that I was going to turn your boys over to you and let you walk out of here alive to testify against me in some post-war crime court?"

"I still think so," Mercer said.

Nagasaki raked the sight of his gun across Mercer's injured cheek just hard enough to make it bleed. "So sorry. But you are wrong, Sergeant Mercer. All Americans are too trusting. You are a nation of fools and weaklings."

Mercer reminded him dryly, "From last reports, we're doing pretty well in the South Pacific. That's why you are so damn anxious to get your hands on the loot of Manila. You know you won't be there much longer."

The Eurasian started to strike him again and changed his mind. "All right. Hand over the map."

"First, you hand over my boys," Mercer countered.

There was no mirth in Nagasaki's smile. "Very well. If we must take it from you by force, we can."

"I DOUBT that," Mercer said crisply. He stepped back a step, opened his mouth and held out his tongue. There was a gelatinous capsule on it filled with a white substance. Mercer tucked it back in his cheek, continued. "That's the missing section of your map, Nagasaki. I put the capsule in my mouth when I first stopped out in front of the house. It will take it about five minutes to dissolve. One minute has already passed. I'll swallow it at the first attempt to rush me. You can kill me and cut me open, sure. But by the time you do, my digestive juices will have turned the rice paper to so much pulp."

The Eurasian admitted, grudgingly, "So you aren't such a fool after all."

"You'd better hurry," Mercer reminded him. "Even if I don't have to swallow it, once the capsule has dissolved, my saliva will have the same effect as my digestive juices."

"You win," Nagasaki admitted. He raised his voice and called, "Bring in the boys, Miss Mouton."

The over-stuffed blonde from the Mavis came in from the kitchen holding a squirming twin by each hand. They squealed, "Daddy!" excitedly when they saw Mercer.

"Don't come near Daddy," he told them, smiling. "Be good boys and run straight to Magnolia when the lady lets go your hand. Magnolia is going to take you to mother."

The blonde looked at Nagasaki. "Release them," he said sourly. "For the moment, Mercer is holding the whip hand."

The twins ran to the colored girl. She picked up one in each arm. "Now what do I do, Mister Mercer?"

"Go back to the corner," he told her. He paused a moment and listened. There was the faint clang of a tire iron. "The driver of the cab that we came in should be about finished changing tires."

"You planned that," Nagasaki accused. "You deliberately kicked a valve stem and broke it."

Mercer ignored him. "Take the boys to Mrs. Mercer. She is waiting at my office."

The jaundiced-eyed desk clerk spoke for the first time. "Nix. I don't like this set-up. How do we know the girl won't flag down the first policeman that she sees?"

Nagasaki's eyes were glued on Mercer's mouth. "He has the whip hand," he repeated. "We will have to take that chance." He opened the door for Magnolia.

"Tell the driver of the cab to honk his horn as he passes," Mercer called after her.

Nagasaki slammed and locked the door behind the colored girl. "Now spit out that capsule!"

Mercer shook his head doggedly. "No. Not until I hear that horn." He held the capsule between his teeth so they could see it.

Kane started for him, red-faced with anger. "Damn you, Mercer. You must think that you're dealing with a bunch of punks. I'll—"

"No!" Nagasaki stopped him. "Don't touch him and don't shoot. I know his type well enough to know that he will do just what he says."

They waited in angry silence, their eyes on the dissolving capsule. Then a car motor raced in the night. A moment later it passed the house. A horn tooted and the sound of the cab motor faded quickly into the night.

MERCER spat the soggy capsule on the floor. Nagasaki snatched it up, his eyes glittering with excitement. "You are going to

die hard for this, Mercer," he said. "But I expect you realize that."

He tore the capsule open and unfolded the scrap of rice paper.

"That is it?" the blond demanded.

"I think so," Nagasaki smiled. He read, "*Twenty paces toward the old moat, turn toward the sun—*" As I recall Manila, that should put it somewhere in the park district, a very likely spot for Osaki to have chosen." He took the other two sections of the map from his wallet and laid the section that Mercer had written between them. The difference was instantly obvious. The ink was a deeper black. The chirography was not the same. The torn edges did not match.

Kane swore, "Tricked by God! Tricked by a flat-footed private shamus."

Nagasaki's lemon-tinted face went white. "And I called him a trusting fool." He straightened suddenly and rammed his gun hard into Mercer's stomach. "*You have five seconds to live. Where is the missing portion of the map!*"

Mercer told the truth. "I don't know."

A police siren wailed in the distance. It was joined by a second, then a third.

The man who had posed as a desk clerk swore in German. "Those police cars are coming here?"

Mercer glanced down at the gun in his ribs. "I wouldn't know," he lied.

"He is lying," the blonde screamed shrilly. "Instead of trapping him, we're trapped." She clawed at Nagasaki's face. "We should have known better than to have listened to a dirty Jap even if they *are* supposed to be our allies!"

The Eurasian pushed her away from him. His eyes had narrowed to slits. Mercer saw his arm muscles contract and flung himself to one side just as the gun exploded in his ribs. The slug burned a furrow across his stomach. Mad with frustrated rage, Nagasaki triggered again. At three feet, he couldn't miss. He didn't. The impact of the second slug slapped Mercer back into the wall as though he had been struck with a sledge hammer. A third, a fourth, and a fifth shot burned through his artificial arm. A sixth and seventh were deflected by his steel elbow and ricocheted angrily around the room.

Still babbling Oriental curses, Nagasaki had to pause to slip a fresh clip into his gun.

The thin faced German with the jaundiced-eyes had raced to the back door. He returned shouting loudly, "They are all ready here. The back porch is filled with men. The house must be surrounded!"

Nagasaki turned briefly at the shout. Ignoring his wounded shoulder, Mercer catapulted himself from the wall and attempted to wrest the freshly-loaded gun from his hand.

The Jap turned back, screaming, biting, clawing, kicking. He caught a foot behind Mercer's ankle and the men fell heavily to the floor just as a heavy pounding began on the front door.

Nagasaki was fifty pounds lighter but he was fighting with the desperation of fear. He rode Mercer across the floor. Then Mercer rode him back with Kane and the jaundiced-eyed German, shooting at both men and at the door where the heavy pounding had changed to the thud of axes and the splintering of wood.

Nagasaki tried for Mercer's throat and missed. Then Mercer's fist found his jaw and the man went suddenly limp.

A second slug pounded through Mercer's already wounded shoulder just as his finger closed on the gun. He rolled over on his back in an agony of pain and shot the yellow-eyed man through the throat.

Kane threw up his hands and shouted, "Don't shoot!"

Things were becoming confused in Mercer's mind. He knew that the blonde was still screaming. He knew that he couldn't hold out much longer and the moment that he blacked out, Kane would snatch up his gun and shoot him.

He was suddenly very tired. He wished that Inspector Haig and Colonel Meyers would hurry. He wanted to close his eyes and sleep. His eyelids drooped and Steve's bull bellow burned across his sub-conscious mind. "*Come on. Stay with it, Matt. Don't be a dud!*"

"Dud," Mercer said aloud. "Hell. Of course that's it. I should have known it all along."

Then the crashing of axes ceased. A sudden silence beat against his ears like surf. Haig's lean gray, worried, face swam into his line of vision. The Inspector's voice seemed to come from far away. "We'll take over now, Matt. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Mercer assured him. "Fine." He tried to get to his feet and fainted. . . .

WHEN he came to he was lying on his back with Sherry and Hogan's faces both hovering over him. The police surgeon was packing his wounds with sulfa-sprinkled gauze and assuring Sherry, "Of course he'll be all right, Mrs. Mercer. You can't kill men like Matt by shooting them in the shoulder." "You can come close to it," Mercer told him. He sat up, supported by Sherry's arm and scowled at the stretcher bearers who were waiting for Hogan to finish. "To hell with that, right now. Let's wrap this up and put it in the files." He asked Inspector Haig, "Nagasaki is still alive?"

He saw the Eurasian then, scowling in one

corner of the room, handcuffed to Colonel Meyers. "I've got him on ice, Matt," the man from G-2 assured him. "And Kane is a German agent we've been after for some time."

"Good," Mercer said. He asked Sherry, "I kept my promise? The boys were back by twelve-thirty?"

She kissed him. "They were. But I don't understand, Matt. You told Inspector Haig over the phone—"

Mercer grinned, "That I felt the same as when I had talked to him last. That was about five-thirty, just after I left the Tribune Morgue. We planned this whole thing then. Even my cab man was a cop. You see, I knew that I couldn't trust Nagasaki, but I didn't want to worry you any more than you already were. And I had to figure a way to get the twins out of the joint before the trouble started."

Nagasaki swore at him in Japanese and Lieutenant Carlson cuffed him. "I don't know what you're saying, but keep it up. This is the first chance I've had to slug a monkey."

Mercer looked around the room. "Morgan is here?"

"I'm here," Morgan answered. "~~But you~~ could have told us, Matt. Sherry and I didn't know what to think when Inspector Haig popped in and hustled us into a squad car not two minutes after you left."

"I'll bet you didn't," Mercer said. He looked at Colonel Meyers. "You know that question you asked me, about who tipped Japanese Intelligence?"

"Yes—?"

"Well, I know who it was," Mercer told him. "I know because I knew Steve so well. The only time that that big skirt-chaser couldn't keep his mouth shut was when he was talking or writing to a woman. God knows how he got it past the censor, but a saw-buck gets you a thousand that he spilled the whole affair in a letter to his wife."

Morgan gasped, "And you mean that your theory was right might, that Jennifer Fariday contacted Baron Nagasaki and—"

"No," Mercer cut him short coldly, "you did. She never even saw that letter. You had been engaged to marry her. You were jealous as hell of Steve. And you snaked that letter from her mail as soon as it arrived. Then, being both greedy and a heel, you saw a chance to make a fortune."

The agent smiled weakly. "You're out of your head with pain, Matt."

"Yeah?" Mercer jeered. "Then how did you know that Nagasaki was a Baron? It's the first time that it's been mentioned."

"I—I read it," Morgan explained.

"The hell you did," Mercer told him. "I've been suspicious of you ever since you deliberately threw yourself in my way when I was

chasing Nagasaki at the Mavis. You wanted him to get away. That's why I've kept you close to me all day except the few times that I wanted to shake you."

White-faced, Morgan told Inspector Haig, "He's mad. He can't prove a thing." He turned back to find that Mercer had fumbled the Japanese gun that had been in Steve's personal effects from his belt and had leveled it on him. "No. Don't shoot!" he screamed. "Everything that you say is true. I'll tell you what you want to know."

Mercer triggered deliberately. The firing pin clicked metallically on the dud shell.

Haig asked, "What's the big idea?"

Mercer tossed him the gun, "Dig me out that shell, will you, Haig? Hell. Knowing Steve I should have known where he'd stash something really important. But being dumb, he had to come back and tell me."

Haig pried the shell from the gun with his pen knife, then twisted the lead from the brass and a spill of rice paper fell out. "I'll be damned," he admitted. He picked it up, unfolded it, and handed it to Mercer.

The big man grinned, "I was close." He read, "*Twenty paces to the morning sun away with the Bishop's palace at one's back,* that's a famous landmark," he explained to Sherry, "*'e'en if one walks at snail's pace, one comes at noon—'*" he looked up grinning, "etcetera."

Colonel Meyers took the paper from his hand. "Nice going, Matt. When our boys get back to Manila, all that G-2 has to do is to find this freak plum tree, follow the map and dig. Colonel Osaki looted the town of God knows how many millions. We can use that money in rebuilding Cavite and Corregidor."

"Don't thank me," Mercer said. "Thank Steve."

Baron Nagasaki's black eyes grew resigned. "I have but one request," he told Inspector

Haig. "I wonder if I might be allowed to retire into another room and—"

"Commit hari-kari, or whatever you call it?" Haig interrupted him coldly. "Hell, no. The State of Illinois is going to do that for you with a chair and some powerful electricity."

"But I have killed no one," Nagasaki protested.

"Irv died a few minutes before we got here," Haig told him grimly. "It seems that he wasn't resting nicely after all. He was bleeding to death internally from that beating that your boys gave him."

Lieutenant Carlson hustled Nagasaki and Kane from the room. A sergeant followed with the weeping blonde. The stretcher men lifted Mercer.

Colonel Meyers paused beside the stretcher. "Look, Mercer," he said soberly. "I know that you're an ex-Marine. But the Army could use a man like you. I wonder if you'd consider a commission in—"

"In a combat unit?" Mercer broke in eagerly.

Meyers hesitated, "Well, no. Not exactly a combat unit. I was thinking of G-2. After all, you have only one arm and—"

Mercer started to tell him where he could put G-2, where he could put the Army for that matter, remembered that his wife was present and said, instead, "No. I don't guess so. But thanks a lot. After all, I am forty-five, a family man with two boys and a wife to support. And, as you say, I only have one arm."

Sherry kissed him full on the lips. "One arm is enough for me." She smiled at Matt happily.

Mercer slipped his good arm around her waist and hugged her as she walked beside the stretcher. After all, there were compensations in being just a civilian.

THE END

SEEING-BELIEVING

THIRST-RELIEVING

What happens when you look at the circles and move your head from side to side?



ANSWER. The circles spin like a wheel.



DEATH-



CHAPTER ONE

The Blood Ran Red

I TALKED the matter over with the lawyer, Fennister.

"These threats may be," Fennister admitted, "simply the work of a crank. But frankly, Benning, I think the situation is serious. You see, I know Gloria. I've handled her legal problems, her contracts and investments for years, but like so many people of the theatre she's extremely—" he paused, and chose a word deliberately—"wilful. So she's made a lot of mistakes and a lot of enemies. Someone may, indeed, be intent upon taking her life."

He walked around the room. His hands were thin and fine, the nails faintly pink and polished, and he gestured expressively. He had a way of selling every word, this Mr. Fennister, and seemed to imply *he* would never be caught uncertain, as was I; or napping as was Gloria Dawn.

"But she won't leave town," I said. "I've urged her, but she's trying to get the lead in a new play, *Surprise*."

"Look here, Benning," Fennister said. He returned to his desk, very thin, very tall, gray despite that he was only forty. "You're her fiancé, but apparently you know little of Gloria Dawn's personal affairs. The truth is, she *can't* leave. She hasn't any money."

Naturally I looked incredulous. Gloria Dawn had appeared in several hit shows. She'd starred in radio and in several pictures.

"So my advice," Fennister continued, "is that she move quietly into this place I've suggested. It's adequate, it's safe. I own it and it won't cost her any money. To all intents and purposes she will disappear until the police find the culprit—or until that private detective

WATCH

By CYRIL PLUNKETT

Thrilling Crime-Mystery Novelette



"My wife," I told the detective, "is asleep. She's nervously worn out. . . ." But only that thin door stood between him and the dead body of the girl I once had loved. . . . The same fragile barrier that was keeping me from that last grim walk to the electric chair. . . .

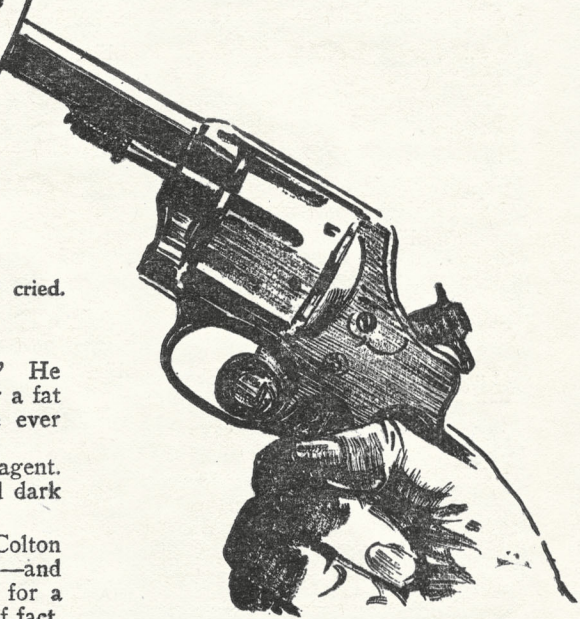
"Gloria!" I cried.

she's hired accomplishes something." He reached for the humidor on his desk, for a fat cigar, and added dryly, "Not that he ever will."

So next I talked to Colton, Gloria's agent. Colton lit a cigaret; he was smooth and dark like Valentino—remember?

"Of course she won't leave town," Colton told me cynically. "She doesn't have to—and the reason isn't only that she's hoping for a part in the play, *Surprise*. As a matter of fact, it'll be a surprise if she ever gets another part, Benning."

"Why?" I said. And to set the record straight, I'm twenty-nine and blond, and I



haven't been around for several years, although once I'd been active in the theatre. Phil Benning Productions—remember?

There was, however, some flying to do, on the China front, and later in the South Pacific, and finally in Italy; it was only recently that I'd been honorably relieved of duty and sent home.

Colton looked steadily at me now; then he said, "Benning, she's a damned good actress. I'll grant that. But she's through, and I'll give it to you straight. Men, booze and brawls—not a producer would touch her. She knows it, and she's scared. She came to me a month ago, shortly before you returned, wanting to cook up a fake kidnaping. She knew she had to become sympathetic to the public—and quick."

It had a nasty ring. Sympathetic only for the public, her career? Not also for the man, Phil Benning, who was coming home high with hope and expecting to marry her? Not for me?

"I refused to have any part of the plan," Colton continued. "Stunt stuff won't ever gild that lily. So what do you think, Benning? No one but she has ever heard these vague threats she says she gets on the phone. For my dough it's a phony. "It's a bait, and I'm not biting."

I thanked Colton and said a cool good day to him.

I found Joe Rice, the dick, in Gloria's hotel, in the lobby. Joe was going hard on fifty and looked every inch the watchdog, swart and blocky.

Gloria, he said, was dining in her suite now, with her secretary, Jane Lowry.

Joe said, "Sure, you're worried, Mr. Benning. I don't blame you. These threats she says she gets are on the level? Look, she hired me, didn't she? And as long as I'm on the job I'll play the game out straight."

"You like Fennister's idea then, that for the present she take the place he offers, that she go into hiding?" I asked.

"Right, Mr. Benning." And Joe nodded. "I think that's what she should do. I'm sure of it."

"Thanks, Joe," I said, and took the elevator.

FUNNY? You think I'm a sap, a guy without a mind, a guy asking other men to make decisions for him? I rapped on Gloria's door, and the door was opened by Jane Lowry. I looked at her—the living room was empty and Gloria's bedroom door was closed—and then she whispered, "Phil—" and she was in my arms. And you can see now why I had to be so sure of things.

Jane Lowry. She had fluffy brown hair; her eyes were blue, proud and level. Though

I'd only known the kid two weeks, somehow I knew she'd go through hell for you. The trouble was, I'd come back to a Gloria who was broke, according to Fennister; washed up and scheming, according to Colton; and moreover, as Joe Rice honestly believed, threatened with danger.

Jane whispered now, "I believe she suspects us, Phil."

I looked at the bedroom door.

"The way she looks at me," Jane added, and shivered. "Darling, we should tell her."

I shook my head. "Not yet."

"Why?"

I shook my head. "I guess because she's backed up in a corner, and no matter what she's done and how she's lived, I can't kick her when she's down, hon."

We heard a buzzing, the phone. The phone was in Gloria's bedroom. We heard Gloria say, faintly, "Hello—"

"But we're moving her to Fennister's place," I said. "It's third floor and no elevator, but it's pretty good. There's a roof below one window, but it's twelve feet straight up to the window. Anyway, the windows lock tight, and there's a chain-lock on the door."

"Darling, she won't go!" Jane said.

"That's why I'm here," I said. "To see that she does—and you don't."

Jane just looked at me.

"Hon," I said, "if she's going to be bait for a bullet, do you think I want you in the way?"

"Jane!" we heard then. Gloria's voice, from the bedroom.

Jane went to the door. She left the door open, and I saw Gloria, still at the phone. She was blonde, very tall, very slim, and standing like stone. She had a beautiful face and she wore red on her beautiful figure, but now her eyes were too wide, and her mouth was too slack, and her teeth began chattering. "A c-call," she said. She was pointing to the phone, as though puzzled and surprised by it; I had never seen her look so frightened.

A damned good actress? "I'm to d-die," she said. And her voice rose with hysteria. "Jane, he—he said that!" She didn't seem to see me in the other room; suddenly she threw herself on the bed and sobbed, "Oh, what has happened? What has happened? Everything has gone wrong for me."

Slap her in the face? I thought again. Now? Tell her at a time like this that I knew the things I'd heard about her past were true, and that I was through with her too? I walked to the window, and looked down upon the city blankly.

NEVER mind the trip across town. We rode in darkness, in my car, and Joe Rice took a taxi. Joe was to see that we weren't

followed, and we weren't followed, he said. He was sure of it. There was a handy restaurant on the corner, opposite Fennister's building. We plodded up two flights of stairs to Apartment Nine—a little hall, third floor front; a living room, bedroom, bath, and kitchen.

Gloria looked at the place. She shuddered. "It's like a morgue!" she moaned.

So I turned on a lamp, turned the switch on a radio.

"Shut it off!" she said. "The phone?" The phone was on a bedside stand. "Phil, I must phone Colton."

He must know where she was, in case the part broke for her in the play, *Surprise*. I remembered Colton's words and walked across the room and began pulling the draperies.

Then she called Fennister, to thank him, she said, for the use of the apartment—and she needed five hundred dollars. Apparently the crock was empty, for they argued, and suddenly she slammed down the phone. "What has happened to the man?" she said. She put one hand to her eyes. Jane was unpacking a bag, and now Gloria shoved her to one side, reached inside for a bottle and drank.

"Am I a freak?" she said.

No, of course not, we soothed.

"Then what are you staring at?" She drank again from the bottle. "Stuck off here alone," she said. She glared at me. "So you and this sweet little tramp—"

"Miss Dawn!" Jane protested.

Now Gloria was pacing the room. "Oh, I know. I've seen it these last few days. Who hasn't? You're like a lot of vultures! You want me out of the way—dead! I know you do, all of you!"

Joe Rice growled, "Look here, Miss Dawn—"

He couldn't finish. She screamed at him, "Oh, get out, you fool! Get out, all of you!"

Temperament? The actress? Perhaps; and yet, as I closed the door I heard her inside, sobbing. And I paused, turned to go back, but the lock clicked.

"Hell, she's safe enough," Joe Rice muttered. We'd started down the stairs. "Who besides her friends know where she is? Who could get in anyway?"

He took a pipe from his pocket, lit it, gnawed at the stem. "She's pretty scared tonight though."

Why tonight? I thought. She'd had these same threats before, hadn't she? So of what was she scared—only death? Not of herself and the future? I dropped Joe at his small hotel. Then I drove Jane home; I went home, to lie long awake, for nothing seemed to jibe. She'd argued with Fennister. Didn't she know she couldn't have five hundred dollars?

"Everything has gone wrong for me," she'd said, back in her hotel. Curious, those words.

Perhaps Colton *had* been right. They sounded as though the threat she'd had tonight was completely unexpected.

I was staring at the ceiling when my phone rang at 1:35.

I KNEW who it was before I reached for the instrument. Gloria. But her voice was husky, and she whispered, and I felt queer. "Phil," she said, "the Voice found me! Hiding didn't help—the Voice found me! It's going to happen *now*. Oh my God, Phil—*now! Tonight!*"

I looked at the phone. "Call Rice or the police?" I asked.

"Not yet, Phil. I—"

"The hall door locked?" I said, reaching for my clothes. "Is it chain-locked?"

"Oh, yes, yes!"

"Windows closed and locked?"

"Yes!"

"Okay. Don't worry." I drew in a deep breath. "Call Rice. Call the police. I'll be there in ten minutes."

Eleven it was though, exactly. Sixty small seconds longer than I'd promised till I parked the car opposite the restaurant and crossed the sidewalk. Okay, eleven minutes, not ten—but what could happen in a minute? I pressed the button in the foyer and the lock clicked open promptly. I ran up the dim, still stairs, and her door stood ajar. That stopped me. The chain-lock too was hanging.

Her hall was lighted, empty. "Gloria—I!" I called. Only silence answered, and I went in, to stare blankly at a chair overturned in the living room. A window stood open.

"Gloria!" I cried.

I found her on the bed, her head tilted back awkwardly, the fairness of her neck bruised from strong, cruel fingers. But it was a pair of golden shears stuck deep in her blood-red breast that made her still, and stiff—and dead.

CHAPTER TWO

Cornered!

CURIOSLY, I remembered the day this very pair of shears had turned up missing. "But I left them on my dressing table," Gloria Dawn had insisted. She'd called to Jane, and it was that day I'd met Jane; and it was on that day, my first back home, that I'd begun to wonder about Gloria.

"But I haven't seen the shears, Miss Dawn," Jane Lowry said. "Truly I haven't since—"

Well, since when? And who could have been in Gloria's hotel suite to take them? Fennister? Colton? Joe Rice? Jane, of course. And Phil Benning. But for that matter, who indeed couldn't have slipped into Gloria's rooms unnoticed?

Still I stood by the bed, and then I saw something caught in the axis of the shears, a piece of fingernail. The growl of a siren, below cut into my thoughts abruptly. I listened, and footsteps pounded on the sidewalk. Almost immediately, the hall buzzer began nagging behind me.

Now my gaze swung back to the other room, to the open window. I knew what was outside that window—the roof, twelve feet down, and too high to get *in*. But hadn't the killer been in when I'd got here? Hadn't he released the foyer lock for me to enter? He'd leaped from the window—but the same method of escape was closed to me. My car stood at the curb and the cops had surely seen it.

The buzzer snarled again and I shook myself. I left the bedroom then and closed its door behind me. Before I reached the hall I could hear someone plodding up the stairs.

I saw the head first, the brown slouch hat; then a round, florid face. The face looked up at me, grinned. "I got a break," the man said. He had a "frog" in his throat. "A tenant was just coming in. Apartment nine, aren't you, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, we're Johnny - on - the - spot, Mr. Dawn!"

Mr. Dawn? The man thought I was Gloria Dawn's husband? I found my hands in my pockets; I removed cigarets and took one from the pack.

"Hannagan is my name, sir—Detective Hannagan." The fleshy Hannagan was panting a little, from the two flights of stairs. "Well, what seems to be the matter here, Mr. Dawn? Your wife sounded pretty scared when she phoned."

So she'd called the police? Well, I'd suggested that she should. Where was Joe Rice though? By this time he, too, should have been here.

"Something about threats, wasn't it?" Hannagan ventured.

"Yes," I said. I lit the cigaret and wondered where the coldness came from. Like an Arctic blast it was, behind me, tugging at the nerves along my spine. Cold because I had a private wire? Because this phone, in Gloria's bedroom, was a private wire also? Because I could never prove that she had called me? But what difference would a phone call make now anyway? She was dead, wasn't she? And here I was with the body.

Hannagan turned back to the stairs. But Hannagan only called dismissal to someone apparently still below, a brother officer; and gradually it dawned upon me that Hannagan was staying. Hannagan, with the grin his passport, was marching straight for the door—and inside.

"Gloria Dawn, the actress? The star?"

"That's right," I said faintly.

The grin on Hannagan's red face widened, and he chuckled. "Funny how a thing works out. My wife collects autographs. She's got 'em from Gable to Garbo, but it seems she never—"

I interrupted, "My wife is resting."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I—I told her to try and get some sleep."

"Oh, I see. Well—" Hannagan looked around. He saw the open window, frowned; the night was far too cool for an open living-room window. He chose a chair near it, sat down. "Wouldn't want to call her?"

"No."

Hannagan's blank stare was irritating. "You can give me all the information, eh?"

"Yes, but really—"

Hannagan was pulling pad and pencil from his pocket. Shaking his head now, he said, "Mr. Dawn, I can see you don't go much for a police guard. But your wife does, or she wouldn't have called us, and she's a big name, see? My orders say I stick around tonight."

"Yes, I understand, but—"

"So," Hannagan tapped the book and continued gently, "we'll start at the beginning, Mr. Dawn."

I crossed the room and shut the window. Where was the beginning? It depended on the person and the viewpoint. Tonight, after Gloria had ordered us out, had seemed the beginning of everything for Jane and me. Tonight, for Gloria, eternity began. Yes, the beginning depended solely on the viewpoint. . . .

THE MAN at the door was pudgy, small.

He wore a faded bathrobe; his eyes were faded blue, weak and owlsh behind thick glasses. Lake, he said his name was. "I heard the siren," he began. His hands were in his pockets; he took them out, seemed embarrassed, put them in his pockets again quickly. Then he glanced, blinking, from me to Hannagan who stood deeper in the hall. "An ambulance, I thought at first."

Apparently he was a resident of the building.

"Thank you, but everything is all right," I said.

"I thought maybe the lady had been taken ill," the pudgy man persisted.

"Ill?" Hannagan said quickly.

The pudgy man backed away a step. "In fact, I was going to come down right away, a few minutes ago, I mean—" He swallowed. "When I heard the scream, you know."

"Scream?" Hannagan said, sharply.

I stood holding to the door. *The bruises on her throat*, I thought. *The killer had to choke off her screams*, I thought. "Yes, she thought

she saw someone at the window," I told him.

Hannagan looked from the pudgy man to me. "How long ago was this?"

"Just before you got here. I opened the window—"

"Yes, I heard you raise the window," Lake, the pudgy man agreed. "Of course, you folks are new. In fact, until I heard the scream, I didn't know new tenants had moved in." He inclined his head upward. "I live above you, you know."

Somehow I forced a smile, got control of my voice. I thanked the pudgy man and got the door closed again. Still I held to the knob.

Hannagan, scowling, said, "The beginning, Mr. Dawn. . . . Remember?"

Give it to him? Everything? Jane's name, who I was, and that I really was in love with Jane Lowry? Let him think Jane had taken the shears and given them to me? After all, Gloria's blood was still bright red—and I hadn't reported the body. Well then, give it

My whole body began to tremble, and I leaned against the door and closed my eyes. But the shears, the blood, the corpse, drew me like a magnet, and I looked around, and yes, she lay there—dead. I stumbled to a chair, sat down, and put my face in both my hands.

Suppose I'd said, casually, to Hannagan, "No, I'm not sleepy. How's about it, mind if I run across the street, to the restaurant?" Hannagan wouldn't have cared.

As far as Hannagan was concerned I could have walked right out and away. But away where? For how long? Hannagan wasn't completely a fool. At that, anyone might have made his mistake. Certainly, alone, he'd rap and look into the bedroom eventually.

I began to wonder again about Joe Rice. Somehow I had the foolish feeling Joe Rice would know what to do, that he would and could help me. Why didn't he come?

Gloria had called me first—I could understand that; but having hired Rice for protec-

SURE, WE'RE ON THE OFFENSIVE! But now, more than ever before, is the time to realize that it's always more costly to attack—in material and human lives—than it is to defend. And now more than ever our boys need the planes, the guns, and the bombs that your purchase of War Bonds helps to give them! Buy a War-Bond Every Pay-Day! Give More Than 10%!

to him? My life, my future, my freedom—everything?

I told the truth, but only as far as I could without mentioning death or the body. I told Hannagan what Fennister had said, and what Colton had said, and that Joe Rice was already on the case.

Hannagan wanted addresses; I gave them to him. Then I wet my lips and said, "Finally the Voice on the Phone called again, tonight about one-thirty. Going into hiding hadn't helped. The last threat was that Gloria would be murdered before morning."

Hannagan snapped his book shut and smiled grimly. He walked around the room, took a stubby gun from its holster, placed the gun on the wide arm of a chair. Then he sat down in the chair, leaned back, put his feet out on a hassock.

"You want to take a nap, Mr. Dawn? You want to tell your wife everything is okay? Because there'll be no murder in this place tonight. I'm telling you!"

THE first few seconds, back in the bedroom, I avoided looking at the bed. I stood with my hands braced against the door, fearful that Hannagan would follow me in. But he didn't. And then the reaction set in.

tion, wouldn't she have phoned for him next, before contacting the police? I looked at the phone, rose, crossed the room to it; I dialed, counted the rings, one, two, three. . . . The fourth drilled into my brain, and then—

"Hello," Jane said. She sounded sleepy.

I wanted to say, *Look, hon. This is Phil. The guy you kissed tonight. The guy who bubbled with new ambition and new plans.* "Phil," I said only, softly. I'd tried—and failed—to control my ragged breathing.

But she didn't seem to notice. She laughed and said, "Couldn't wait till morning, darling?"

Why then did she anticipate my next question? Why did she add, so quickly, "Now I've been a good little girl, asleep in my bed—"

She'd wrinkle up her nose a little, when puzzled. I'd noticed it the day we'd met, when she'd looked at me. She'd looked from me to Gloria, and she'd said—but I couldn't remember what it was she'd said. I knew only that now again she was puzzled and surprised.

"Phil," she said suddenly, "what's wrong?"

I whispered the word, "Gloria." And a moment passed, and something clicked against Jane's phone—like a ring, perhaps, on a nervous finger.

"She's dead," I said—and still nothing happened. There was no sharp cry. "Jane—Jane, listen," I said. "It's going to be nasty. I may even touch you. So don't come here. She's been murdered. And Jane, darling, don't try to phone me!"

Her voice came at last, small and jerky. "You'll call-me-back? Soon?"

"Yes," I said. "I promise."

My hands were wet with sweat. I put the phone down, wiped them on my trousers. Then I began helplessly to jam the fist of one hand against the palm of the other. The thought struck me, *What can you do—here?* But I justified myself. Only I—and now Jane—knew Gloria was dead. There had to be clues to the killer, and they would be here with the body.

What clues? I thought. The piece of fingernail?

I looked at it again. It wasn't a clipping. It was much too large. It was ragged, so it had been torn loose. And it probably wasn't a woman's—whatever the connotation of a shears as a weapon—for it showed no sign of polish.

Why hadn't Joe Rice arrived? It was almost two-thirty. On impulse I turned and picked up the phone again.

A woman's voice answered at Joe Rice's hotel; the switchboard operator. "You'll have to speak louder," she said.

Louder? Yell? With Hannagan just beyond the door? I cursed the connection. "Rice. Joe R-i-c-e," I said.

The operator answered irritably, "Yes, I'm sure he's in . . ."

So Gloria *hadn't* called him! I wondered suddenly what I could say to Joe Rice *now*. Tell him Gloria was dead? Of course he'd come running right down here.

Oh yes, Hannagan, we always have company at three in the morning. Sort of a habit we got into, you know. Like the English with their tea. So come right on in, Joe, into our bedroom. Sure, Hannagan, it's all right. Don't get excited. My—er, wife is still asleep. Yes, she sleeps quite soundly!

Rice, in deep bass, was saying on the phone, "Hello? Hello? Say, who the hell—?"

"I don't know, sir," the switchboard operator cut in. "I'm awfully sorry."

I broke the connection, had no choice. Hannagan had come to the door.

He rapped softly. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

"That's the Man!"

I WIPED my moist forehead, slowly turned until I faced the door. And I waited, and then finally fingers tapped the door again.

"Mr. Dawn?"

The door wasn't locked. If I didn't answer, Hannagan might turn the knob.

"Yes," I said.

"All okay in there?"

I tried to still my loud breathing. "Yes," I said.

"Your wife awake? I thought I heard talking. Say, where do I find the phone?"

Though my lips parted I didn't speak. The pounding was my heart; I knew that. I shook my head; I'd wanted above all else to prevent the finding of the body, and now the rush and roar was in my head, and I couldn't clear it out.

"Phone in the bedroom?" Hannagan persisted. "Look, Mr. Dawn, could I see you a minute?"

Well, it had to end sometime. She had to be found sometime. But still I didn't answer. I ran to the window, jerked the drawn draperies aside. No roof, no twelve-foot fall here. It was straight down here, three stories. And there, below, was my parked car; there, across the street, a parked taxi. And the lighted storefront. I could read the name on the window: "Sheridan's Restaurant."

"Hey, Mr. Dawn!" There was a frown in Hannagan's voice, and he was rapping again, sharply.

He turned the knob. The door began to open. Then he was looking inside, and he gasped, "She's dead! I knew it, when I got to thinking. Hell, there wasn't any Mr. Dawn. She wasn't married!"

His face, red before, became purple, and now his hand flashed for his holster. The gun wasn't there. The gun was on the chair arm, in the other room. Hannagan's little blue eyes blinked with surprise. He whirled, but I had moved instantly and very fast.

I beat him to the gun, and swung a chair between us. The guy had guts, he came lunging right over the chair.

I twisted aside, and he was down on all fours, but with rubber in his hands and knees, it seemed. He bounded up again. "Drop that gun! Drop that gun!" he cried.

I pocketed the gun, ran to the hall and got the hall door open. Funny. On the upper stairs was the man in the bathrobe, Lake, the man with the thick glasses and the owlish eyes.

"Stop him!" Hannagan yelled.

He vaulted the bannister. The stairs ran down like a Z, and I was rounding the first turn. I stopped. He fell just in front of me, but he hit the edge of a step and he couldn't get his balance. He teetered, fell, started rolling down. I jumped the bannister and was once more ahead of him. I was downstairs before he got to his feet.

A late-returning tenant was unlocking the

foyer door. He just stood there, mouth open, as I ran past him.

"Stop him—stop him!" Hannagan was yelling.

The car? I'd never get it started in time. I ran up the dark street, turned at the corner. Hannagan hadn't tried to follow in the darkness.

I ran on, right around the block, and I'd guessed right. There was a side door, on the side street, into Sheridan's Restaurant.

THE cops' sirens ripped the night and the street. The cars climbed the curb. Their headlights bathed the apartment building in a white, merciless glare.

Here, in the restaurant, patrons left their tables; and the cook came out of the kitchen. I sat in the last booth, facing the street, the window. Now I had my breath again; now my mind was clear, but the flutter didn't stop deep down inside of me.

I smoked a cigarette, ordered coffee and drank it black. They wouldn't yet have my name, but Hannagan and Lake could describe me. Hannagan had Fennister's name, Colton's and Joe Rice's, so it wouldn't be long until the dragnet would spread out. And Joe Rice, at least, knew I loved Jane Lowry. What was the word I'd used to paint the picture to Jane on the phone? "Nasty."

The minutes passed, and it was after three. I stiffened as a coupe arrived. I saw Fennister park and get out and go in, and he'd barely gone in when a cab squealed to a stop. Rice's bulky figure, this time. The minutes passed, and finally I saw Colton.

The night, as you may recall, was cool, but not cold. Neither Fennister or Rice, as far as I could see, had worn gloves. But Colton did, yellow, flashy—the kind Colton would wear. He swung across the walk, apparently unmoved and unworried.

Sure, I thought, *Homicide would find the fingernail and notice those gloves—*

"Live around here?" the counterman said as I called him.

"Yes," I said.

"Hey—across the street?"

"No," I said. "Please, another pot of coffee."

My mind grasped at straws. My life was being decided right now in that suite across the street. So what were they doing? What were they saying?

Blackmail, I thought. She'd lived a wild life. Yes, that too would explain the strange loss of Gloria Dawn's money. She'd needed more money. To get it she'd trumped up a threat on her life, the pay-off timed to win for her the coveted lead in *Surprise*.

Yes, it made sense of a sort, excepting that she hadn't known that she couldn't have five

hundred dollars. "Everything has gone wrong for me," she'd said tonight. And I believed she'd had a real threat earlier tonight, and while blackmailers might indeed threaten, they didn't kill.

All right, then the motive was revenge, I thought. But the trouble was, none of them—Colton, Fennister, Joe Rice—fitted into that picture, and it had to be one of those three. Those three, myself—or Jane Lowry. For only we five knew where Gloria Dawn had gone into hiding. And certainly only we five could have gotten in, because now one thing was sure. She'd trusted the murderer and had opened the chain-lock and the door for him.

The counterman returned with my coffee. I paid him, raised the cup to my lips. I didn't drink. A third cab had stopped and the figure emerging was small, slim. Of course they'd have called Jane Lowry.

I could see her in my mind as she'd climb the stairs. Her grave, big eyes, and the fear in them. So little time we'd had together, dinner once or twice, an afternoon, a luncheon.

My fingers began drumming the table. How would she react to Hannagan? She could do so much now if . . . but surely she wouldn't—couldn't—tell about the shears! Not that I had been with Gloria when she'd missed the shears. . . .

Suddenly I saw a familiar figure of the pudgy Lake coming out of the building. He crossed the street to the restaurant, came in. He chose the first stool at the counter. "Golly," he said.

The cook marched up the aisle again. The counterman—Cris, Lake called him—paused in his work; and now it was very still in the restaurant, except for the pudgy man's voice. . . .

"Hey, do I look pale?" he said. He looked at himself in the long counter mirror. He shook his head and wiped his forehead. "Blood all over, a pair of shears. And the questions those cops ask!"

Someone asked the obvious question, "Who did it?"

The pudgy man wanted hot coffee. Cris slid a cup on the counter. "And me upstairs when it happened," the pudgy man whispered. "I even came down—I'd heard the scream, you know. I even talked with the killer. The gal's boy friend, I guess. She'd two-timed him while he was away at war, they figure. Cris, look at me shake!"

"What do you mean," Cris wanted to know, "you talked with the killer?"

"Why," Lake took a deep breath, "I knocked at the door! 'Oh, hello,' he said. Talked just like that, quick, you know? Jerky. Voice just like that, baritone. 'Oh, hello,' he said." Lake paused and grinned. "How'm I doing, Cris?"

"Bud, you've got what it takes," Cris said.

At that moment I saw Colton come out of the building. He still wore his yellow gloves. *The police were finished with him so soon?* I thought. But my heart was pounding almost in my throat as Lake continued:

"I heard a scream," I said to him, and then I noticed the other guy, Hannagan."

"Hannagan?" Cris interrupted.

"Sure. Didn't I tell you? The cop. The cop right there and didn't know the girl was dead yet! *'Scream?'* this Hannagan said. Croaked, talked with a frog in his throat. Look—*'Scream?'* he said."

Cris laughed out loud. "Didn't the damn fool get wise?"

"Naw, he—" Lake stopped, stiffened. "Say, I almost forgot! I came over to use the phone, Cris."

HE DIALED fast; he knew the number.

The phone booth was up front, and I could see his face, his lips as they moved, his eyes as he blinked, but he didn't look at me.

Now everything had changed with something he'd said. Even the flutter was gone. Yes, now at last I could weigh events calmly. I lit my last cigarette and presently Lake returned to his stool at the counter.

"Where was I, Cris?" he was saying. "Oh, yes, the cop. Well, he began asking questions, like when was the scream and who had opened the window."

"Do it the way you did, with the frog," Cris urged.

"Hell, it hurts my throat to do it!" Lake said. "Did I pay you, Cris; I mean for the coffee?"

I no longer listened. I was watching the street, and four or five minutes passed. Then Joe Rice came out of the building opposite. Rice looked up and down the street, struck a match, lit his pipe.

He turned, spoke to someone in the foyer, and the thin and precise Fennister appeared. They stood, they talked, as though Fennister might have said, "Want a lift home?" But Joe waved and moved off in the darkness. Fennister walked to his coupe.

I heard the motor. I could barely see the car as he backed to swing away from the curb. So I craned my neck, and too late heard Lake choke at the counter.

He jumped from his stool like a jack-in-the-box, yelling, "That's the man!"

He was pointing at me. He was reaching back, for his empty cup and throwing it at me. "Cris, get him!" he said.

As I slid from the booth I had a flash view of him running, and of Cris vaulting the counter.

The cook too had heard, and was coming out of the kitchen.

"Stop him!" Cris roared, but the cook wasn't in time. I went out the way I'd come in, by the side door, just as Fennister's coupe was turning the corner.

He couldn't help but see me as I ran into the street. The car slowed, showed his surprise. "Benning!" he cried as I leaped for the running board.

"Stop him! Stop him!" Lake was still yelling.

I got the car door open. "Fennister, drive like hell!" I gasped.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Matter of Murder

WE RODE a block in silence. The hue and cry had died behind now. But the parked squad cars would no doubt jerk alive in seconds. I motioned Fennister to take the next corner; he turned obediently, into a wide, dark thoroughfare.

Only then he looked at me and said calmly, "What's it going to get you, Benning?"

"Time," I said.

"For what?"

"To find the killer."

He cleared his throat with obvious embarrassment.

"All right," I said. "You think *I'm* the killer."

He shrugged. His hands lay on the wheel, and I noted once again their slimness, and as we passed bright street lights, the polish on the nails. Significantly he made no effort to hide them. "Frankly, Benning, I do think so. We all do."

"Jane?"

His voice tightened. "Not Jane Lowry. But even so," he added then, "my personal opinion of your guilt wouldn't prevent me from taking your case."

"Why?"

"For one thing, because I appreciate your motive."

"What motive?" I said.

"Oh, come, Benning!" he said, and he turned another corner.

"Did Hannagan—did Homicide find the clue?"

"The piece of fingernail?" He removed a cigar from his pocket, chewed on it, snapped the lighter on the dash and lit it. "I'm afraid you're exaggerating the importance of that piece of nail in the shears, Benning. Strangely enough, Miss Lowry had a torn nail."

My heart skipped a beat. I waited.

"But fortunately for her, she seemed also to have an iron-clad explanation for it, and an iron-clad alibi. Anyway, the murder would indicate a strength pattern, use of force on the throat to shut off a scream, you know. Even

your disillusioned friend, Hannagan, didn't think much of Jane as the actual killer."

He'd seemed to stress the word "actual." "They're not going to hold Jane?" I said quickly.

He looked at me again. "Yes, Benning, they are."

"Accessory?"

"Before the fact." He nodded. "The shears," he said gently. "You see the nail might have been caught in the shears when she gave them to you."

Oh, no, Fennister, I thought. It wouldn't stick. There must be scientific tests to make. Jane's nails were painted deep red, and surely it could be established the piece of nail in the shears had never seen polish.

Fennister broke into my thoughts. "Where do you want to go?"

I didn't reply.

"Benning, look here," he said. "You have an excellent war record. That should help.



Jane Lowry

"The death of Gloria Dawn is scarcely going to inspire much mourning, not in view of the rather lurid life she led. Your natural interest in Miss Lowry can be soft-pedaled—I think she's clever enough tonight not to admit it, and since you haven't filed intention to wed, you can deny it. The crime, we'll say, was committed in a fit of temporary insanity, and rising from a righteous rage. It can easily be proved that Gloria entertained and encouraged many men while you were overseas."

He'd paused. "Go on," I said.

"That should clear Miss Lowry."

"Go on," I said.

"Well, don't think for a minute I shall let myself wide open by assisting in your escape. As your attorney I have the legal right to arrange for your delivery. I've a place, too, not far off, where you may remain safely until I can make the deal with authorities."

"And if I don't wish an attorney?"

He slowed the car.

"I get out?" I said.

"That's it, Benning."

I took a deep breath. "You don't want to hear my story?"

"Benning," he said flatly, "you're so damned guilty of murder you could read a quotation from the Bible tonight and I wouldn't believe it."

"What do you get out of defending me?"

He laughed. "A very fat fee."

"What else?"

For a moment he hesitated. The car was almost to the edge of town now, going very fast now. He said finally, simply, "I hated her, Benning, and all she stood for. She deserved to die!"

"All right," I said. "You're my attorney, Fennister."

WE RAN blocks out of our way, to play it safe, he said. There was a long lane then, a woods, a hill; and now we were showing only parking lights, and we climbed the hill, and there, below us, was water, the river. Finally we came to a cottage. Fennister stopped and opened the car door.

"Stay close inside the place, Benning, if I'm late in the morning," he said. "There's bottled gas—you won't need to risk the smoke of a wood fire."

"Food?"

"Plenty," he said. He led the way up a path. "I should have all arrangements concluded by noon at the latest. There's a phone, incidentally." He was jingling keys at the door, and it opened and we went in.

"The shades should be drawn," he said. He closed the door. The light snapped on.

I saw Lake, the pudgy man—he stood behind the door. He was grinning and he held a revolver.

"Hello, Benning," he whispered.

I looked at Fennister. He stood off to one side, his teeth clamped on his cigar, and his eyes were shimmering.

"Twice in one night," he said. "You're a sucker for punishment, Benning."

I wet my lips. No wonder 'she' hadn't phoned Rice. I looked at the door, at the windows. "So Gloria didn't call me, or the cops?"

"No. Lake did—after he'd killed her."

"And she unlocked the door because she thought she was letting you in?"

He grinned. "Yes. I plan well, Benning. She wanted money. I told her when she phoned me that I'd try to come over. Naturally, I didn't come over. I've always been very particular about a thing like an alibi. But I plan well, and choose my aides the same way. You thought she was phoning you tonight—there were records of her voice for Lake to work from. She thought the voice from the foyer was mine. Why wouldn't she let me in? She'd never seen Lake, and even if she had

she couldn't have known that he was a mimic."

"So now?"

He removed and glanced casually at his cigar. "Another small matter of murder, Benning. Yours, this time. You see, we're off the track somewhat. The schedule called for Lake to release the foyer lock and scoot up to his suite while you were climbing the stairs. The police were to arrive and find you with the body—which they did. So even though you forestalled the inevitable climax a while, we had you—but the best laid plans go awry occasionally.

"Lake pulled a fingernail on the shears as he jerked them from his pocket, and Lake, unfortunately, is a bit myopic. He thought the nail had dropped to the floor, and he couldn't find it, and—" Fennister shrugged—"our plan was timed to the second, so he hadn't much time to search."

"Never mind the rest," I said. "I understand, Fennister. That little piece of fingernail might have cleared me if they should examine Lake's fingers. But they haven't—not yet—and now if I'm found, promptly, dead, and with a damaged fingernail—"

Fennister interrupted, chuckling, "Exactly!"

I looked back at Lake. Fennister's motive was clear. He'd appropriated Gloria Dawn's money, knew she'd demand an accounting; he knew, too, as Colton had said, she'd trumped up the threats.

So it had been simple, tonight, for Fennister and Lake to make those threats real, to call her early in the evening, force her through fear and dismay to go to the spot they'd chosen for her murder.

Yes, Lake had killed, had let me in, had opened the window to point away from a resident, to show me how the killer had "escaped." He'd killed and come back, to re-examine his work when the police arrived and I wasn't promptly arrested.

They'd had opportunity later, he and Fennister, to switch and rearrange the plans to find, capture, mutilate my finger, and kill me. Plans they'd put into motion the minute Lake found me in the restaurant.

You can think of a lot in a moment. Lake's sneering lips were parting now as I looked at him. "Don't get excited, kid," he jeered. "We know what we're doing. The cops know you hi-jacked Fennister outside the restaurant. I made sure they did! So all he has to do is get himself roughed up a bit. You had a gun,

he'll say—this one—and he got it from you in the scuffle and shot you."

I looked at my hands, clenched and unclenched them. They trembled. Then dumbly I began patting my vest, mumbling about cigarettes.

Fennister laughed at me and said, "Sorry I haven't any, Benning. I smoke cigars, and you won't have time for a long smoke."

My hands moved on nervously down, to my coat, to my pockets. And I shot from the pocket with Hannagan's stubby revolver.

For small seconds Lake didn't move. But his eyes blinked and got very large. His face turned very white. He began to sway, and only then he triggered his gun.

His bullet plowed into the floor, for his pudgy body was already falling. I let him lie there and swung on Fennister.

Fennister just stood staring at me. At last he showed a sickly grin. "The best laid plans," he said.

SO I phoned for the police, and they came; they examined and photographed Lake's broken nail. It didn't help Fennister's peace of mind any either to hear that I'd known the killer from the minute I'd heard Lake's mimicry, the way he'd imitated my voice and Hannagan's for Cris at the lunch-counter in the restaurant.

Why had I gone to the restaurant? Because when Lake first came to the door, I'd noticed his fluttering hands, I'd seen the broken nail. The trouble was, I couldn't tie him into the case until—well, he'd faced me as he spoke in the phone booth.

"Fennister?" he'd said. *I'm not myopic*; the name was plain on his lips.

So I'd known where I was going when I ran from the restaurant. And I'd counted on Hannagan's revolver, reasonably sure Hannagan hadn't advertised to Fennister ad Lake that the gun had been stolen from him.

Hannagan, very red now and embarrassed, growled aside to me, "Next time, Mr. Benning—"

Next time? I grinned, and his flush became still deeper as he realized what he'd said. He stammered, "You know what I mean—" But I didn't wait to hear the rest of it. I turned around and phoned Jane Lowry. Even the darkest night must end.

"What do you say, hon," I said, "we meet now and stay up and wait for the sunrise—and breakfast?"

THE END

The March issue of the new, larger DIME MYSTERY will be on your newsstand January 3rd—Reserve your copy now!

BARGAIN IN BONES

By STEVE
HERRICK



"'Tourist Accommodations,' it says, that's all."

WHY'D I wanta transfer to graveyard, when I got this good go on dayshift? Well, I'll tell you, Charlie. Ma' Burkett, my helper, gives me the creeps. I want a different shift so I won't have to see her no more.

Sure, Boss. I know she's a great little old lady. Three boys in service and a heart as big as all outdoors. It ain't that. It's just—

Stranded and alone, Mike and Diane looked upon Pa Grubb as a good Samaritan when he offered to take them home with him for food and bed. . . . But they found, too late, that the price for accommodations at that remote farmhouse was payable in blood and terror!

well—she reminds me of another little old lady I knew once. Course she ain't like this other one. Not really. It's just how she looks—

her voice—little things—you know, Charlie.

Yeah, I'll tell you about it, if you really want I should. You won't believe me, though. Nobody does. But maybe if I tell it enough, and enough people laugh me down, I'll get to feeling that way myself about it.

Maybe I'll even be able to convince Diane it never happened. And then we can see people like Ma Burkett, and old George Getz who sweeps up around here—people who just happen to look a little like somebody else a long way off, and dead now—without getting the shudders and shakes.

Maybe we'll even be able to sleep nights, without waking up in a cold sweat, screaming, from those gosh-awful nightmares. . .

IT ALL started when we was on our way out here, and the coupe ran outa gas in South Dakota. Sure, the gas board back home give us enough coupons to reach the Coast. But you can drive an awful long way through South Dakota sometimes, Charlie, without coming across an open filling station. Some of 'em was shut on accounta the war, and some was just closed because it was Sunday.

We'd been cruising along for hours, hoping to find an open station around the next bend. But we never did. And by the time our gas tank needle showed "empty," we hadn't seen nothing for forty-five minutes.

Nothing but a few fence posts, a few white-face cattle, and a few bare red rock outcroppings looming up from a landscape flat as a platter. It's been getting dark for an hour, and we musta been on our last ounce of gas when Diane notices this old sign pointing up a side road.

"Tourist Accommodations," it says. That's all. It's pretty old and faded, and it don't show whether the offer's still good, or how far away these accommodations are, or even if they're still there. But we chance it.

This side road is just a rutted, clay track, and we jounce along it maybe a mile before the coupe sputters and coughs and finally conks out. I switch off the lights and look across at Diane and I see she's shivering. . .

You know Diane, Charlie. Cute little blonde kid with big, blue, Norwegian eyes and the perfect kind of figure it's hard to believe. I didn't know a guy could be so crazy about a girl till I met Diane. And we'd only been married two weeks. I guess that's why what happened later left such a mark on me. . .

Well, I take off my coat and make her put it on, and then I look out the window at the moonrise, and decide maybe it ain't the cold that makes her shiver after all. There's this moon, crawling up the sky like a red spider on a black curtain. And there's these crags, humped around the horizon like dinosaur bones.

And that's all—all except space. Miles of space. And a night wind rustling through dry grass. . . Well, you take a couple kids from Minnesota, used to lotsa trees and water and people, and you can guess how we feel, Charlie. There still ain't no sign of these tourist accommodations, or nothing else.

We sit there maybe five minutes, not saying nothing because there's nothing to say, and then we hear this car coming along behind us. I get out and flag it down with the flash, and see it's one of them big square touring cars Henry Ford was putting out back in the '20's.

Two guys is sitting in the front seat. One of 'em has his hat pulled down over his face like he's asleep. The other brakes the Ford and calls out, "What can I do fer ye, son?"

The flashlight shows me a big, rawboned, old guy, with sharp eyes, a hooked nose and white handle-bar mustache. He's wearing a wrinkled gray topcoat and sloppy big-brimmed hat, and he might be any dry farmer or cattleman on his way home from church—except for his hands.

They're long and bony and big-jointed, and they curl around the steering wheel like—well—like a dead man's. You know what they say about people, Charlie. That after they work at the same thing for a long time, parts of 'em even get to look like their jobs. Well, maybe this old guy's hands were like that. . .

I shake myself and point to Diane, just getting out of the coupe, and tell him: "I'm Mike Johanis. My wife and me run out of gas and we're looking for a place to stay for the night."

The old guy pulls a claw off the steering wheel and rubs his mustache. He looks at Diane. "I'm Jonathon Grubb," he says in a dry, cracked voice. "Reckon Mother and me can fix you folks up. Used ta take in tourists once in a while, though we ain't had none now fer a coupla years. . .

"Tomorroy I'll get ye some gas out'n the storage tank in my garage, and tell ye how t' reach Jeb Collins' Fillin' Station. Our place is down the road apiece. Climb in."

All this time the other guy don't say a word or move a muscle, just slouches there, with his hat jammed over his face. Only now I see he ain't exactly slouching, either. He's sitting up straight and rigid. Can't be asleep, because his shoulders is a good three inches from the seat.

There's something creepy about him sitting there, sort of tense and expectant-like, but never saying a word or turning his head to look at us. Diane notices it, too. She stares at him.

Old Jonathon Grubb must've guessed what we're thinking, because after we've climbed

in the back and the Ford's rolling again, he half turns his head.

"Don't worry about Billy Fetlock here," he says. "He won't hurt ye. He's been dead since last night."

THERE'S a moment of silence, while that raw red moon crawls up the sky, and the night wind whips around the windshield and seeps into our bones, and a coyote howls, off by them crags to the east somewhere.

Then Diane gives a kind of low gurgling gasp and I gulp. "Excuse me," I say. "For a moment I thought you said your friend there was dead."

Jonathon Grubb nods. "He is. His niece, Spotted Rabbit, come over last night and told me. I had her tie him in a chair so he'd stiffen sittin' up and be easier to handle. . . Y' see, Billy's a client of mine. Couple months ago he sold me his bones."

Diane begins to shake all over. Not me. I'm just all froze up inside. "S-sold you his *b-bones*?" I echo.

Old John laughs. If it's supposed to be calm and reassuring, it isn't. He's too old to laugh nice. It just comes out as a sort of dry cackle.

"Sure," he says. "Lotsa folks hereabouts do that. For posthumous delivery of course. Y' see, I deal in skeletons."

"There's a good market for 'em right now," he goes on. "The Army and Navy's trainin' thousands of medical students and technicians. They need every skeleton they can get. I don't mind admittin' I was plenty glad to get ahold of Billy Fetlock tonight. Only trouble is, I need one more."

Diane shudders. I think she was starting to catch on already, though she wouldn't admit it, of course—even to herself. Me, I'm dumb. I don't get it till later. A lot later. "One more?" I say.

Grubb nods. "Yep. I subcontract with a small dealer in St. Louis. Contract runs out in a coupla months, and even with Billy here I need one more t' fill my quota. Otherwise, I stand to lose a right smart passel of money. Five hundred dollars. Might not seem like much to you folks, but it means a lot to Mother and me. Especially Mother. . ."

Just then the Ford hits an extra bad chuck-hole, and Billy Fetlock's corpse slews around and the hat falls off his face. His dead old Indian eyes stare sullenly at Grubb. I guess Spotted Rabbit forgot to close 'em.

Diane screams, long and loud. And believe you me, Charlie, that girl can scream! Grubb stops the car and swivels around.

"Shut up!" he snaps. "There's nothin' to get excited about! What's a dead body, after the sperrit's gone? Ninety-eight cents worth o' junk, that's what! Now then, if you can take

that junk and make somethin' vital to th' war effort out'n it, what's wrong with that?"

Diane stops screaming and I slide an arm around her shoulders. "But is it legal?" I growl.

Old John smiles frostily. "We-ell," he says, "there's laws agin traffickin' in dead bodies. But after I get the bones stripped it's all right. I ship 'em back as natural history specimens. Th' dealer does the final maceratin' and assembly on rush jobs like this. Used t' do it m'self, when I was gettin' my bones from th' old Indian graveyard. But that's played out."

He starts the Ford again and pretty soon we top a little rise and there below us is a big square white frame house, the downstairs windows yellow with lamplight.

"Here we are, folks," Grubb says. "Tain't much, but we got an extry bedroom."

WELL, maybe it wasn't much, Charlie. But it sure looked like heaven right then. Like the houses you see on calendars and Christmas cards, only without the snow. Cozy and solid and homey. . .

Grubb tools the Ford into a neat little weather-tight garage behind the house, pulling over tight against the left wall so the hood blocks the front door and all the spare room's on the right side. A minute later I find out why.

He asks me to help him get Billy Fetlock into the storm cellar!

Well, what can I do. I admit the flesh starts crawling along my arms and legs. But after all the old duffer did pick us up and offer us a place to stay. When he points out the importance of his work again, I agree.

Billy's dressed in a rotten old coat and dirty pants with the smell of death about 'em. He don't weigh much, but he's cold and stiff as cast iron. I do most of the lifting. Grubb isn't kidding when he says he's not as young as he used to be. He darn near totters.

We get Billy out on the grass outside, and then Grubb asks me to close the rear garage doors. "I shut 'em but don't bolt 'em," he says. "The inside bolt's so rusty it sticks and you can't hardly get it open again, once you get it fastened."

This storm cellar's a deep cave reaching back part way under the garage floor. You get into it by throwing back a couple heavy wooden doors set level with the ground in the cement roof outside. One door overlaps the other, and there's a big open padlock in its hasp.

Steep wooden steps lead down to the bottom of the cave. The place is empty. Three little round air holes go up from one end of the ceiling into the garage above, but they don't do much good. It's dank and dark and musty down there.

Diane holds the flash while Grubb and me sit Billy Fetlock in a corner to soften. Then we climb out and head for the house.

A log crackles in the fireplace along one wall of the big front room. A kerosene mantle lamp shines on the table, and a little old lady peers up at us from one of the rocking chairs, her big sharp eyes full of question marks. She's got a patchwork quilt tucked around her, and she looks kinda like a withered white flower in a bright vase.

Only her eyes lead a life of their own. They keep jumping around all the time—over us, and the walls, and the rug, and the ceiling. But they always come back to old Jonathon Grubb before they scamper away off somewhere else.

Grubb walks over and pats her on the head. "Everything's all right, Mother," he says. "Billy Fetlock's down in our storm cellar right now."

Her eyes stop jumping then and get all soft and warm. "Thank goodness, Pa," she says, in a low quavery voice just like somebody's nice old Aunt Sarah. "Now we can send for my casket. . . The big yellow casket to go in the vault down to Shady Rest Cemetery. . .

"I wrote to my sister Effie, Pa. I told her I wanted to be locked in that casket and put in the vault right after the funeral. She'll see my wishes carried out. . ."

The old man grins like he was discussing goblins with a four-year-old. "O' course, Mother," he says. "You can rest in peace now. Nobody's goin' t' disturb your bones."

He turns to us. "Pay no mind to Mother," he says softly. "I'm afraid this business of mine's sorta gone to her head. She's got a mortal fear that someday her own bones'll be dug up and put on exhibition somewhere. Lord knows why. Anyhow, I promised her a vault in the cemetery at Burrton, if I make good on this contract."

Mother Grubb doesn't seem to hear him. She reaches for a pile of mail order catalogues on a stand beside her. "I think I'll just look up that casket again," she says, kind of sweet and childlike. "Just thinking about it makes me so happy!"

Diane begins to shake again, and I don't feel so good myself. But Grubb puts a hand on the old lady's arm. "That can wait, Mother," he says gently. "This here's Mr. and Mrs. Mike Johanis. They've come to spend th' night with us, and I expect they're hungry."

The little old lady looks up as though she hasn't even seen us before. Her eyes get big and bright and kind of scared or something.

"Oh, of—of course," she quavers. "I—I'll get something right away." She unfolds the quilt and stands up, tiny and frail and wrinkled, and totters off to the kitchen.

AFTER we eat what we can of the bacon and beans she lays out, Mother Grubb says firmly: "Now I'll take these young folks up to their room, Pa. You just stay here. I expect you've got something else you want to do." She insists, so finally the old man gives in.

She fills a water pitcher at a cistern pump and gives it to Diane. Then she gets a candle from a cupboard, lights it, and leads us up a big wide staircase from the dining room. We go down a dusty second-floor hall, and Mother Grubb opens a squeaky door at the back.

The room has a square old four-poster bed, a marble-topped dresser and wash stand and a couple chairs. There's another door at the back, bolted on the outside, which I figure leads into a closet.

Mother Grubb stands the candle in a holder on the dresser and motions us in. "The bed has a nice soft feather-mattress," she says, her eyes jumping. "Try it."

Diane puts the water pitcher beside the candle and we go over and sit down on the bed. Mother Grubb scurries around, quick and birdlike now, like she's working against time, and pokes her head into the hall. She looks both ways, then closes the door and bolts it. Two great big tears roll down her cheeks as she turns around.

She runs over to the bed and hunkers down in front of us on her knees. "Oh, my dears," she sobs. "I'm so glad you've come. . . You've got to help me get away! My days on this earth are numbered, and I don't want to d-die in this house. I'm afraid of what Pa might d-do, afterwards. . ."

I don't get it. But Diane does. Her eyes swell with horror, and she reaches out and grabs the old lady's wrists.

"Oh, Mother Grubb!" she gasps. "You—you don't mean—?"

Mother Grubb nods. "Yes I do!" she says. "You don't know him like I do. Jonathon doesn't feel about this thing like other folks. He still needs one more skeleton to fill his quota, and if I should die in the next two months I know whose it would be. Didn't I watch him scrape his own daughter's bones two years ago?"

She begins to whimper. "Don't you s-see? You're the f-first outsiders I've s-seen in almost two years. Pa w-won't take me to town any m-more. And nobody comes here, now Mary's dead. . ."

I know, Charlie. It sounds like a Hallowe'en gag. But it wasn't. It wasn't no gag at all to Mother Grubb. It was pretty grim and horrible. The sudden pounding on the hall door makes us all jump.

"Mother!" old Jonathon Grubb's voice calls. "Open up here!"

The little old lady gets up off her knees,

stiff and rigid like them zombies in the movies, and walks across the room. She pushes back the bolt and the door opens. Grubb takes her gently by the shoulders. "Go to bed, Mother," he says tiredly. "Go on now."

I hear her old high-topped shoes padding off down the hall, and Grubb turns to us. "I'm awful sorry, folks," he apologizes. "I was afraid somethin' like this'd happen if I left her alone with you. Mother's not so young as she used to be. She gets kinda mixed up in the head and her mind wanders sometimes. I hope you won't let it bother you. Get a good rest now. Good night."

Diane gets up, moving a little like old Mother Grubb, and bolts the door. "Good God in Heaven, Mike," she moans. "How did we ever get into this house of death, anyway? Let's get out, Mike! Let's make old man Grubb give us the gas he promised, now. If he won't, let's go back to the car, anyway."

I shake my head. I'm dog-tired, and that makes me stubborn. "The old lady's nuttier than a fruitcake," I admit. "But she's too old to be dangerous. The door's locked and the bed's soft, and you'd catch your death of pneumonia out in that car all night. Come on to bed, Diane."

She just looks at me. "And what if she *isn't* nutty, Mike?" she whispers.

"For gosh sakes, Diane," I growl, snuffing out the candle. "Come on to bed. Every thing'll look different in the morning."

I said I was dumb, Charlie. That old dame nutty? Sure—nutty like a fox!

The bed's soft, all right. Too soft, maybe. Anyway, I can't get to sleep. I just lie there, watching the moonlight crawl across the blanket from the window, and listening to the noises the walls make, popping and ticking as the cold moves in, to the soft muffled sobbing from somewhere upstairs. And after a while I hear the sound of the kitchen door opening, downstairs.

Things get quiet for a while, and then the outside door closes again. I don't know how much longer it is before the scratching begins on our bedroom door.

I get up and light the candle and pick up the water pitcher. Holding it above my head like a mace, I catfoot over and snick back the bolt. I yank the door open with my left hand, and put the pitcher down again. It's only old Mother Grubb, looking pale and panicky in a long white nightgown and little lace cap. She scuttles into the room and bolts the door before I can stop her.

Diane's sitting up now, big-eyed and shaky. Mother Grubb runs to her. "I've got to get you two out of here!" she whispers. "Pa's carrying on something terrible! He went out to see Billy Fetlock again, and found out his bones weren't all there! Billy was kicked by

a horse years ago, and those government doctors took out a couple of his ribs. Pa remembered, after he saw the scar. . ."

"So what?" I growl. "What's all this got to do with us?"

The little old lady turns, her eyes startled. "Why, don't you see?" she says. "A skeleton's no good without all its bones! They won't let you patch them up with somebody else's either! Billy's worthless to Pa now. He needs *two* skeletons! I left him in the kitchen, loading the shotgun."

Sure, I know, Charlie. It sounds like a hophead's dream, when I tell it to you now. But it didn't sound that way when *she* said it! It sounded damned plausible. Downright probable, in fact! Anyway I guess we were kinda fed up with that place by then. I toss Diane my coat and begin to yank on my pants.

"That door over there leads to the outside steps," Mother Grubb says. "That's why I gave you this room. I'll take you down and lock you in the storm cellar. I've got the only key, and you'll be safe there. Then I'll get the car and go for help."

"Thank goodness, Pa still loves me—in his way. He won't harm me. But you young folks would never reach the road alive. Best bring the candle, Mr. Johanis!" she squeals, as something heavy begins to bang against the hall door.

She runs over and claws back the bolt on this other door I thought led to a closet, and we follow her onto a little platform where the candle blows out, and then down steep, narrow steps that run along a side of the house we haven't seen before.

THAT raw red moon is still crawling across a sky mottled now like leprosy by high flying clouds. The wind moans through the grass and catches Mother Grubb's nightgown and streams it out behind her like a ghost, and by the time we reach the storm cellar she's already clawing the doors open.

"I'll lock the padlock and take the key with me," she pants. "You'll be all right down there."

She crouches at the top of the steps while we climb down into blackness, and I hear her laughing a little, kind of low and hysterical, as the doors slam shut and the padlock clicks home.

We hunker down there at the foot of the steps, trying to keep away from Billy Fetlock's corner, and pretty soon I hear sounds on the garage floor above. They last quite awhile, and then the Ford engine coughs and begins to turn over.

I wait for it to back out and down the drive, but instead it just settles down to a steady throbbing and doesn't move at all.

Listening to that motor idling away while

the seconds stretch longer and longer, I finally can't stand it any more. "Hey!" I yell, my voice suddenly tight and hoarse. "Aren't you going for the sheriff or something?"

The garage doors scuff shut, and then there's a gentle rap on the cellar doors and Mother Grubb's voice quavers down. "You just take it easy," she says, soft and soothing-like. "I've got to go back to the house where it's warm now. But it'll all be over soon now, and then I can buy my pretty yellow casket."

Diane screams, and I run up the steps and rattle the doors. But it doesn't do any good. That padlock may be rusty, but it's still plenty strong.

"Oh, Mike," Diane moans after a while. "She brought us down here alive, so they wouldn't have to carry our bodies all this way, after they killed us!"

I fumble for her in the darkness and put my arms around her, tight. "Don't worry, honey," I mutter. "We're not dead yet. He doesn't dare use a gun on us, if he expects to have all our bones intact, afterwards. I should've thought of that before. . . He'll have to use a knife, and when he opens those doors I'll get him before he knows what hit him!"

You see, Charlie, that was before I notice this funny smell. I light the candle and stand it on the floor, and at first I think maybe the smell comes from Billy Fetlock, sitting over there in the corner with his clothes stripped off and sprawled across his lap, and the scar tissue ugly along his bare side.

I pick up the candle and cross over to take a sniff—and then I recognize it.

Exhaust fumes. Carbon monoxide gas!

I get it then. I hold up the candle and see what she's done. Two of those air holes that go up through the garage floor are stuffed with rags. The third's got one end of a rubber hose jammed into it. I know the other end of that hose is fastened to the Ford's exhaust pipe!

You know what that means, Charlie. It takes less than one percent of that carbon monoxide in the air you breathe to kill you—but quick! The cellar's air tight and the ceiling's high—ten feet. And aside from us and Billy Fetlock and the candle, there ain't another thing in that room. Not a thing!

I put the candle on the floor and jump up and bat at the air hole a couple times, trying to knock the hose out onto the garage floor above. But it don't do any good. The rubber's stuck in there tight.

And all the time this filthy gas keeps oozing in on us, stinking and sickening and deadly.

I TELL Diane to lie face down on the floor, breathing no more than she has to, while I tear a sleeve out of Billy Fetlock's coat. The

sleeve comes loose with a rotten tearing sound and I hand it to Diane. She looks kinda green around the gills.

Then I braid my fingers in front of my belt buckle, making a kind of stirrup, and have Diane put her foot in it and climb up with one hand in my hair. That way she barely manages to rip the hose loose and plug up the air hole with the sleeve.

The Ford still rumbles away upstairs and the fumes still spew from the exhaust. Only now they stay out of the cellar. And that gives me a chance to start working on the doors—because I know we've got to bust out of there before the Grubbs find out what's happened. They'll use the shotgun now, all right. Anything—to keep us from getting loose and telling our story.

I run up the steps and try ramming the doors with my shoulder, but the angle's bad. My head keeps getting in the way—and it's plenty woozy already from that damn gas.



Finally I crawl back down and sit on the cellar floor with my arms around Diane and begin to sob. I'm just about ready to let old John Grubb come down and do his dirty work, when I remember the stiff, Billy Fetlock.

I think about how stiff and cold and hard he is, and it gives me an idea. I gag a little at first, but I go ahead and pick him up and sling him over my shoulder, anyway, with his face against my back and his feet sticking up over my head. And Charlie, he's no lightweight!

I start running up and down the steps again, banging the soles of his feet against the doors like a battering ram. I don't know how many times I do it before the lock finally gives way, and I bust out into the open.

Evidently the Ford's rumble has muffled my racket, because nobody's watching from the kitchen door. The back of the house is dark, though a light still glows in the living room windows.

I see our coupe standing in the drive, and realize that while his wife was supposed to be taking care of us in the storm cellar, old Pa Grubb's hiked down with a can of gas and brought our car back, so nobody would come across it on the country road and get suspicious, later.

I drop Billy Fetlock's corpse on the grass and whisper for Diane to stay hid in the cel-

lar. Then I head for the house in a kind of lope, my fingers curling and uncurling so I couldn't stop 'em, even if I wanted to. By this time I'm so worn out and crazy with all that's happened that I'm moving in a red haze. I forget all about the shotgun Pa Grubb's supposed to have. I guess he never had none anyway. That was just part of the bluff.

I go around front and bust into the living room and there I find 'em, huddled on the horsehair sofa waiting for us to die. The old lady lets out a squawk and jumps up when she sees me, and the old man follows. They run right through the house for the garage, where the Ford is.

I don't hurry, because I know I'm gonna get 'em now anyway, sooner or later. I just plod along behind, like a tired bloodhound trailing a couple chain-gang fugitives taking my own sweet time.

When they reach the garage, the old man inches back the rear doors and they slip in, closing the doors again quick. I get there just in time to hear the inside bolt snick shut.

Then I hear the old lady scream, and fingers start fumbling at the bolt again, trying to yank it open. But it sticks, just like the old man said it would, and pretty soon the fumbling gets weaker and stops. For a while there's still a little scrabbling, retching noise on the floor inside. Then that stops, too. . .

WHAT happened? My God, Charlie, don't you see? The air in that neat little weather-tight garage was lousy with carbon monoxide gas! Not just one percent—damn near

one hundred percent! They were caught in their own trap, that's all. And they died in it like rats. . .

What'd Diane and me do *then*? Well, I ask you, Charlie! What'd *you* of done in a spot like that?

Well, we jumped in our little coupe and got the hell out of there, that's what! The old man had put enough gas in the tank to get us to Burrtown, and we found an open filling station the next morning and headed on out here to the Coast. No more sweet country cottages for us.

Yeah, there was a little piece in the papers about it, after they found the bodies. Sheriff decided it was a double suicide. The old lady'd been ailing for years, and the old man couldn't stand to go on without her. So, they ended it all together.

So that's how it is, Boss. Ever since that night, little old ladies kinda give me the screaming meemies. Now you take Ma Burkett, my helper here on day shift. There's as nice a little old lady as you'd ever hope to find. There's nothing wrong with *her*! . . . *And I know it.* She's every bit as sweet as my own mother.

Only she's about the same size as Mother Grubb. And her eyes are sorta the same color. And her voice, sometimes. . . Well, maybe it's just that Diane and me are kinda off old people for a while. I guess you can understand that, can't you?

But thanks, Charlie! Thanks for the transfer. I'll report to graveyard first thing tomorrow night!



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PLUS: the latest Mariano Mercado novelette about the little Latin shamus with the sanitary psychosis, *The Vanishing American*, by D. L. CHAMPION; and stories by JULIUS LONG and FERGUS TRUSLOW.

December issue on sale November 3rd

By
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CHAPTER ONE

Death Without Sound

THE gambling place was located in a mid-town Los Angeles office building, very cleverly concealed from prying eyes. Tom Kincaid, ex-big time gambler turned motion-picture producer, espied Maxie Keystone and knew it was a house with a high ceiling. Maxie did not play for peanuts.

Tom wondered if the police knew about Maxie, then remembered that the former policy king had never been actually indicted for various peccadilloes back in Brooklyn. The wizened little gambler, Tom thought, must be behind this place, which was ostensibly run by one Grape Wysocki, a heavy-jawed individual of great capabilities.

The club was patronized by some of the screen colony, by businessmen, by such politicians as Morgan Lynch and his wife, by such well known legal lights as kindly, humorous Homer Martin, who had introduced Roxanne Queen, Matt Durkin and Tom to its pleasures. It seemed highly legitimate and Tom, had at one time owned such joints and should know. The roulette wheel contained no visible gimmicks, the faro dealer seemed on the level, the poker games quiet and orderly under the eyes of careful house men and the dice bounced freely off the walls of the barricade.

Roxanne, the beautiful, wise-cracking

blonde picture player, sat in a bridge game with Mrs. Leila Lynch, a predatory woman of fortyish, Ronald Vesper, the millionaire idler and Jack Carey, Vesper's Man Friday. Tom Kincaid could not learn to care for Vesper nor his bluff and hearty pal, Carey. Nor did he love the acidulous Leila, but they were part and parcel of the Hollywood scene Tom was trying to tolerate. He said to Homer Martin, "Nice little place."

The lawyer, pink-cheeked, white-haired and affable, said, "Maybe we can pick up some capital for Coronet Pictures! I'd like to see you in action at poker, Tom."

"Maybe Maxie Keystone would play," said Tom. He was watching the slant-eyed, grinning little Brooklyn man. Maxie was tilting at the faro table, losing steadily, never blinking. He was, Tom knew, one of the great gamblers of the time. Tom's long dormant gambling blood was beginning to rise.

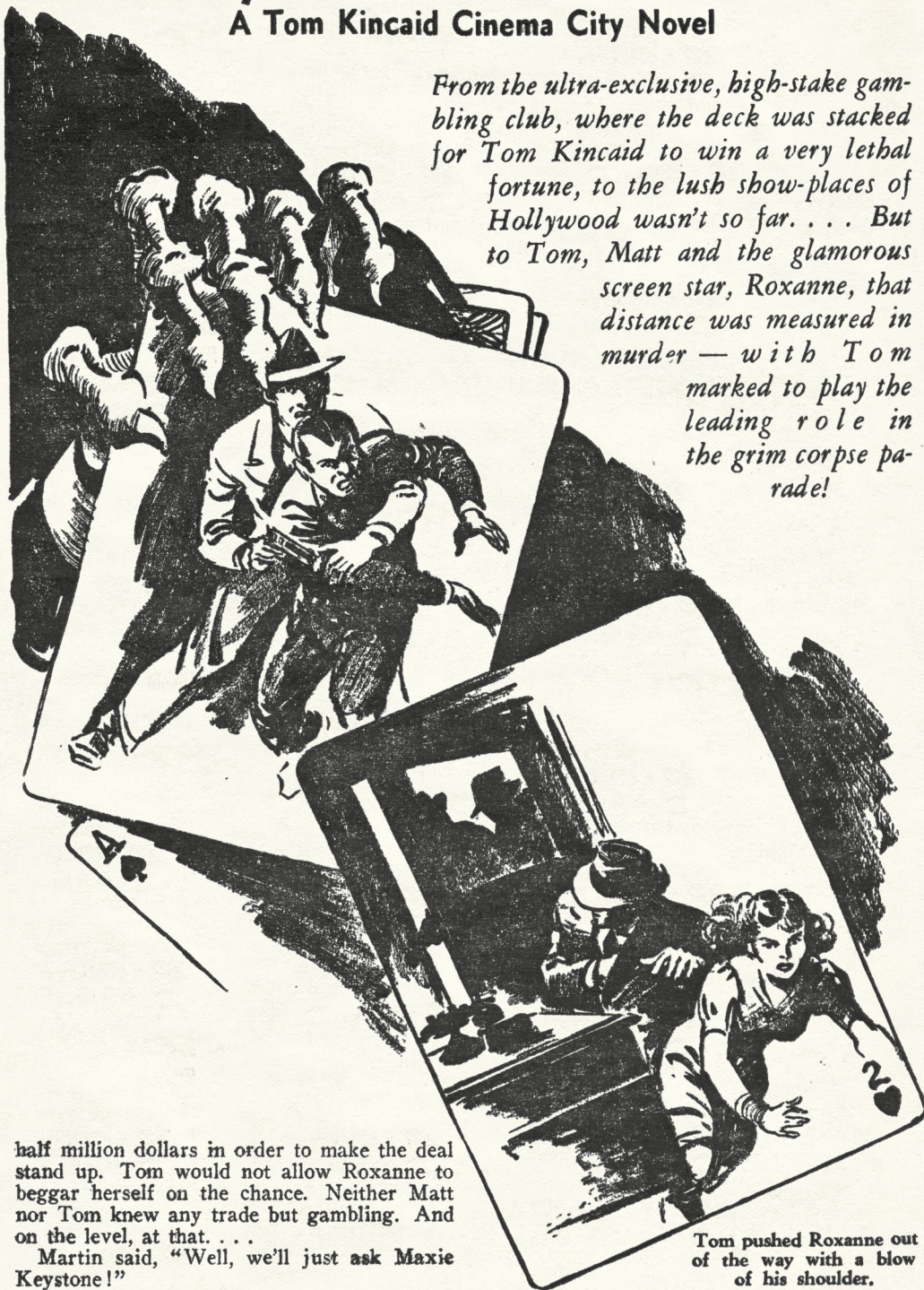
He had a definite need of money these days. With Roxanne and Matt Durkin and Homer Martin, he was attempting to raise funds to start an independent moving picture company to star Roxanne Queen in a series of stories written especially for her and for the well-known free-lance actors she could rally into a repertory company. It was a sound idea, and Martin already was drawing up plans and lending his advice and experience to the partners.

However it was necessary to raise over a

Ready, Action—Murder!

A Tom Kincaid Cinema City Novel

From the ultra-exclusive, high-stake gambling club, where the deck was stacked for Tom Kincaid to win a very lethal fortune, to the lush show-places of Hollywood wasn't so far. . . . But to Tom, Matt and the glamorous screen star, Roxanne, that distance was measured in murder — with Tom marked to play the leading role in the grim corpse parade!



half million dollars in order to make the deal stand up. Tom would not allow Roxanne to beggar herself on the chance. Neither Matt nor Tom knew any trade but gambling. And on the level, at that. . . .

Martin said, "Well, we'll just ask Maxie Keystone!"

Tom pushed Roxanne out of the way with a blow of his shoulder.

Matt Durkin, sharp-eyed, dapper and morose, was at Tom's side. He muttered, "You play. I'll kibitz the game and watch for phonies. This joint is too good to be true."

Tom said, "Maybe, maybe not. . . . Look, isn't that Sam Valenti, the muscle man from *Stargazer*?"

The big fellow, a 4F-er with a build like Hercules, came in alone. He was darkly handsome in a rugged manner and his nose was slightly twisted from football days with the pro Behemoths. He had come to pictures by accident and had remained to knock the bobby sock girls into a Sinatra swoon. He went to the poker table and spoke to Morgan Lynch, the politician.

"He gives me the creeps with his cat walk and his lousy biceps," growled Matt, who weighed one-fifteen and was five feet four. "Always around with a clingin' little ole brunette."

Martin was returning with Maxie Keystone. The little gambler said without preamble, "Kincaid, this is poifect! I been lookin' for somebuddy in this joik town could gimme a game!" Despite the Greenpoint accent, bright intelligence peered out of his Oriental eyes.

Martin said, "Grape'll play for the house. If we could get a couple more good gamblers. . . ."

Sam Valenti turned from the crap table. He said in a deep, quiet voice, "If you'd allow me, Mr. Martin. . . ."

Morgan Lynch immediately followed. He had deep, sonorous accents for politics, but he was a lean man, well tanned, spiked-moustached, the Hollywood fashion plate, downtown style. Martin coolly greeted him. There was a moment of awkwardness as they all milled about, starting for the semi-private room indicated by the dour Grape Wysocki.

Then Maxie was chatting and distributing the chips for Grape. The others simmered down to normalcy, especially the man Lynch. But Tom had felt the piercing gaze of the politician and had the feeling that he had been probed by a sharp lancet.

GRAPE WYSOCKI broke out cards. Grape had been a very crooked corkscrew in his day, but Tom had no fears for the present. The surroundings were wrong for markers and Matt, sitting on a stool, slightly above the others, behind Tom's back, could detect cheating almost before it happened.

Maxie Keystone glanced shrewdly at Matt, then looked back at Tom and winked, grinning. He was, Tom thought, a merry little bandit. He was not much bigger than Matt and quite as dressy. His ears came to a point. He was a very engaging character, and Tom was glad to play against him and his heavy bankroll. . . .

For two hours Tom played them close, as was his habit, while he studied the game. He was a careful and complete poker player. He gauged his opponents, learned their psychological quirks, if any, then moved to the attack. Knowledge of percentages was one thing. . . . Tom preferred knowledge of his fellow players.

Grape was a conservative house man, he found, but willing to back up a good hand with money. Lynch was brilliant but erratic, and held only fair cards that night. Valenti, strangely, played very well, but in a surly manner, as though he were displeased at everyone. Martin was careless, but able to hold his own. Keystone was the star, a sheer gambler all the way through. And Matt, sitting on high, had not given a sign that there was anything wrong in the game they were playing.

So, when Tom found himself holding aces up before the draw, with Lynch having opened between Tom and Keystone, who was dealing, he said, "Up twenty dollars."

Valenti studied his hand, and said, "Play."

Martin played. Keystone looked at his hand, grinned and shook his head. "Bad time, Kincaid. I up it fifty."

Grape dropped. Lynch played. Tom said carelessly, "Up another fifty to keep the peddlers out."

Valenti played without confidence, Tom thought. Martin threw in a blue chip. Keystone nodded. "Up again. One hundred."

Matt hunched on his stool, his eyes were like points of fire as he concentrated. This was obviously a big one, by far the most exciting of the evening. Lynch looked angry and said, "I'm in the middle, but dammit, I'll draw to this hand!"

Tom said, "I've got enough. I'll call. These two pairs won't stand up, I'm afraid."

Valenti played without comment, as did Martin. Keystone fingered the cards. Tom, depending upon Matt's guardian eyes behind him, studied the faces and ignored the deal. He let his one card draw lay in front of him, watching the others.

Lynch's jaw set in hard lines as he ground out his two tickets. Valenti, taking one, was leonine, brooding. Martin also took one, scowled at it, grinding his cards together. Keystone tapped the deck and laughed. "I'll play these."

Lynch said sharply, "I'll check to the strong hands."

"Bet," said Tom without examining his draw. He felt Keystone's eyes upon him. He tossed two blues into the pot. He smiled gently at Maxie.

Valenti said, "Call."

Martin scratched his head with his folded cards. He looked about, as though suddenly

puzzled. He said, "This is very strange. I am forced to raise this pot."

Tom held his hand over his drawn card. He hadn't he thought, a chance in the world. Even if he bettered, the odds were that Keystone or Martin had him beaten.

Keystone was saying, "Strictly this is business. One time I'll boost it five Cs!"

Lynch said with asperity, "That's a lot of money, but I'm calling."

"In that case," said Tom coolly, "I'll raise one thousand dollars." He still had not glimpsed his draw and he felt Valenti hesitate, glaring at him.

Valenti spat out, "Fours!" He threw down his hand.

Martin said, "I'll . . . No, I won't either! I drop."

It was up to Maxie. He licked his chops, grimacing at Tom. He said, "How much are you good for, Kincaid? Cash, right now?"

"Name your bet," said Tom gently.

Maxie reached into his pocket and took out a long wallet. He produced a sheaf of bills and every eye at the table bulged. He said, "It's just you and me, a couple of professionals, now. I could maybe go for twenty grand."

Tom said, "Put it on the table, Maxie."

The gambler slowly unsheafed twenty thousand-dollar bills. "They done away with the ten grand notes," he complained lightly. "Match me, Kincaid."

Tom shook his head. He said, "Couldn't think of it. It'll cost you another twenty thousand!" He laid out the money.

There was no sound in the room.

MAXIE KEYSTONE'S face narrowed and for a moment he was not so pleasant. Then he said, "Just as good as anything I know your hand, Kincaid. Just as good as though I held it myself. It's two damned pair, and you can't bluff me by not lookin' at your draw." He carefully placed twenty thousand dollars in a separate heap before him. He said, "We chased the peddlers out. I'm a gambler, Kincaid, but I got sense. I'm just calling!"

Tom still held his hand over the draw. He said, "Tough, Maxie. Of course, you're standing pat with two pair. Mine are aces up, going in."

The other players spoke according to their lights. They cursed, or they laughed, or they exclaimed. Maxie Keystone, his lips tight, looked very ugly. Then in an instant he was laughing again. He said, "Kings up. . . . You win, Kincaid."

Tom showed his two pairs. Then he flipped over the other card. It did not fill his hand. He said, "Nice play, Maxie. You were almost correct, at that."

A chair crashed. Sam Valenti was on his feet. His face was black. He said hotly, "I'm through! You damned gamblers squeeze out legitimate players. Every man in this pot held better than two pairs!"

Tom said, "Why, of course! This is poker, isn't it?"

"It's crooked!" choked Valenti. "I'll never play here again!"

Grape Wysocki was on his feet. At the first sound of Valenti's voice, a trio of gentlemen had drifted to the door of the room. Tom recognized Birdie Jones, Rackety Kamel and Sig Lemmon, all very tough characters despite their neat evening dress. Grape said flatly. "Take this fella out and repay him what he lost."

Valenti said, "The hell with that! I just want to go on record."

The three men were about him. He looked at them, at his fellow players. He took a deep breath and shrugged. He said, "All right. You know what I think. I may see you again sometime. Singly, I hope. . . . In an alley!" He went out.

Maxie Keystone was lighting a cigar too big for his face. He said, "A thing like that, it breaks up a game. . . . I wouldn't want to play any more, gents. I can take my losses."

Tom gathered his winnings. He said, "Any time you want revenge, men."

"I'll ask for it," nodded Maxie. He had regained his good humor.

As they filtered outside, Matt and Tom and Homer Martin were together alone for an instant. Matt came close to Tom and said, "The deal was stinkin'!"

"What?" demanded Tom.

"It's screwy," Matt whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "I read the deal and Lynch, Valenti and Mr. Martin got seconds. It was the slickest dealin' I ever saw. Keystone is a wizard."

Martin said sharply, "This is serious, Durkin!"

"Sure," said Matt imperturbably. "You had the winnin' hand!"

Martin looked dazed. At that moment Roxanne arose from the bridge table and wrote a check for her losses to Leila Lynch who seemed to be the big winner. Ronald Vesper was murmuring nonsense and Morgan Lynch drew his wife away and began talking earnestly in her ear. Jack Carey was being the gallant, bluff admirer for Rox's benefit.

Tom said, "Let's discuss it later. And let's get out of here." He had a pocketful of money, and he did not like such people as Birdie Jones, Rackety Kamel and Sig Lemmon, nor anyone associated with them. He had known square gambling houses before where big winners, somehow, never got home with their money.

They were in Martin's car and Roxanne was explaining her losing hand in her light, clever voice. "And after holding those cards, I only won six damn tricks!"

Tom's attention swerved to the girl. He said sharply, "Who was your partner?"

"Carey, that dope," she said. "We were doubled and re-doubled and that cat woman just drooled with pleasure."

Tom said, "A strange gambling house! The poker game is crooked, but not designed for house winnings! And in a bridge game among friends the Mississippi Heart hand raises its ugly head!"

Roxanne cried, "You mean I was gypped?"

"Cold-decked with a sad old gag," nodded Tom. "Take it out of here fast, Homer. We've got to think about this."

They were parked discreetly in an open-air parking lot a block from the office building which housed the gambling place. Martin bent forward to put his keys in the switch. He remained there, rigid.

Tom said sharply, "Homer!" Then he wrenched open the car door and ran around to the driver's side of the vehicle. He touched Martin and the man slumped over, against Matt's shoulder. Matt gripped the lawyer, snapping on the interior lights as Tom ran for the parked cars beyond them.

Roxanne said, "What makes with Homer, Matt?"

Matt turned and stared at her. He said, "Steady, Rox. . . . Homer's dead!"

CHAPTER TWO

Twenty-Four Hours to Go!

THERE was no sign of anyone on the lot. Tom came back, his face grim. Matt said, "In the side of the head. A small hole. Must have been an air pistol, huh, Tom?"

Roxanne was pale but dry-eyed. She said, "I've known Homer for ten years. . . . The police, Tom!"

"I called them from the drug store," said Tom. "This is damned bad. Ethically, we can't say anything about the gambling house, you know. Matt and I couldn't, anyway."

Roxanne said, "I couldn't, if you couldn't. They'll question us, Tom."

He nodded. "I asked for Captain Clarke. I'm going to beg him for twenty-four hours. Then I'm going to see Maxie Keystone and maybe Grape. . . ." He stared at the huddled body of the lawyer who had been dealt the winning hand in the memorable poker game. He said, "You're sure Homer had no connection with Grape Wysocki or Keystone? He knew Maxie."

"He was the most honest man in Hollywood," said Roxanne sturdily.

Tom said, "I don't like this. . . . Not at all." He heard the police siren and reflected that the money in his pocket would not be any good if Roxanne became mixed up in a gambling-house murder-mystery. The resultant publicity would hurt her terribly.

He saw Captain Clarke with relief. The big detective was friendly enough. He had the photographers on the job and he put Roxanne into his own car to hide her from the newsmen. He refused to talk for publication, shooed everyone away, then took the three of them by back streets to Roxanne's house high in the Hollywood Hills. He accepted a drink and sat back and said, "Okay, folks. I'm your pal. But give! Tell me what you know."

Tom said, "We can't, Captain. We've got to have a day. He was killed by an air pistol, undoubtedly. There was no sound and the killer left no tracks. It was awfully good shooting."

"Maybe the shot was meant for someone else," said Clarke.

Tom said, "I don't believe it. I've got ideas, Clarke. I admit we know a few things."

Clarke got up heavily. He said, "If you hold out on me and this blows up, it means my job. I can't take a chance like that."

Tom said, "One day—twenty-four hours. Tomorrow night at this time?"

"My job," said Clarke, "is all I got. I oughta take you in."

Roxanne came forward and stood before the big policeman. She said, "We'll go in with you. Of course it means my career if we do. But that's all right. . . . If you say so, Captain."

Clarke frowned, looking down at the wide, candid eyes of the girl, at the curves of her amazingly beautiful body. He said, "Aw . . . hell! I'll take a chance, but I'll be here waiting tomorrow. And if those damned newspaper guys get onto this. . . !" He spread his big hands helplessly. He lumbered from the room and eased out the winding driveway to the slanting road which led to town.

Roxanne said, "The first time I ever charmed a cop. . . . Now what do we do?"

Tom said, "Who dealt you the Mississippi Heart hand?"

She frowned, "Why, Leila Lynch."

"Fine!" said Tom satirically. "Keystone throws a big hand to Homer Martin, who folds it up, forcing Keystone to play me. Keystone, however, can't give himself a winning card to his two pairs. Mrs. Morgan Lynch, social and political mentor, dishes out a crooked bridge hand. Homer Martin is shot immediately afterwards by a sharpshooter with an air gun. If the guy had wanted to get me because I won that pot,

he wouldn't have aimed at the front seat, even in the dark. Nor from the left side, if he had been after Matt . . . it just doesn't make sense."

Matt said suddenly, "That Valenti was fakin'. He wasn't sore. And I saw Grape slip him some dough as he left the joint."

"Matt sees everything," sighed Tom. "What the hell has Valenti to do with this muddle?"

The telephone rang, startling them. Roxanne picked it up and listened. Then she said, "It's a strange time of night to be calling about business. Well. . . . All right, come on up."

She replaced the receiver and her eyes were very bright. She said, "That was Jack Carey. He says Vesper heard we wanted to start an independent producing outfit and is hugely interested. Hugely is his word. Ronald wants to put up a lot of money, if we'll agree."

Tom said, "Now that is interesting!"

Again the phone rang. Tom answered. A rasping, merry voice said, "This is Maxie. I just got the wire on Martin's killin'. . . . Are you clammin' up?"

"What do you think?" asked Tom. "I've got to see you." He told Maxie where they were. Maxie said, "I'll be right there."

Tom hung up and turned to the others. "I'll take Maxie in the game room. You keep the others in here. Matt, you listen for anything out of order. Rox, you talk and talk, around the bush."

He dialed a number. At the other end of the wire a voice answered immediately. Tom said, "Mr. Lynch? . . . Homer Martin was murdered tonight. Could you and your wife come up to Miss Queen's house in about an hour? I know it's late, but I'd advise you to come. You see, I know all about the Mississippi Heart hand. . . . Okay. Be here!"

He got up and walked the length of the room, a rumped man with sloping, powerful shoulders. He muttered, "It's about time for Valenti to call. . . ."

The clamor of the phone bell interrupted him. Roxanne took it and turned, her eyes wide. "It's Valenti and he wants in. Says he is dying to play with me—in pictures, of course."

"Have him up," said Tom. "It'll make a complete party."

Roxanne did as Tom directed. Matt was spinning the cylinder of his special .22 revolver, whistling off-key his own arrangement of "Paper Doll." Tom said, "This is a hell of a crew. . . . How far had Homer Martin gone with the papers we asked him to draw up about Coronet Pictures?"

Roxanne said, "Why, I don't know. Except that he was very interested and wanted a

part of it himself. I guess he had made fairly complete plans."

Tom said, "Who was his confidential secretary?"

"A girl named Claire Manning, a very pretty girl," said Roxanne. "I remember she asked me about a screen test once."

Matt said, "Oh-oh! Here it says Sam Valenti is being seen around with the brunette secretary of what big legal light?" He extended the evening newspaper, opened at a screen gossip column.

Tom said, "You're a valuable piece of property, Rox."

"So they tell me," said Roxanne, grinning like a street gamin. Then she sobered. "You mean someone is trying to take me over? You think that's it?"

"With Homer out of the way," said Tom slowly, "and his plans for the organization in their hands, a group of people could snap you up and use you to make money. You know the millions that are to be made producing pictures, given the right set-up. It would be a fine racket to control a few stars and featured players."

"But that's impossible!" said Roxanne. "I wouldn't be sucked in on anything like that. I'm a smart girl. Everyone knows that!"

Tom said, "And the world is full of smart people who are being had every day. . . . Well, here comes the first contingent."

HE MOVED quickly into the game room adjoining Roxanne's large parlor. He left the door on a crack and saw that Matt had drifted into the shadows of the porch. It was a warm evening and all the windows were open. The early arrivals were Carey and his boss, the elegant Ronald Vesper. Vesper wore cream colored slacks, a silk shirt and sandals and his toenails were very pink. Carey was big and hearty, an athlete gone slightly to seed. They were a strangely contrasting pair.

Through the open door, Tom heard Carey say gaily, "Roxanne, darling, this is momentous! Ronald will put up a million if necessary to start a company. If you can line up the best of the independent actors. . . . Jack Lacey, for instance, or Mary Coldwin, or Jenny Rice, and some of the best character players, such as Monte Wild and Frieda Kaley. . . . And if you can get Charley Ring as producer-director. . . ."

Roxanne said, "That's fine. Those people are close friends of mine."

"Everyone knows that!" said Carey. "That's why we're so hot."

Ronald Vesper said in his lisping, affected voice, "I am sure we can come to terms, my dear. I have some plans. . . ."

Roxanne said, "I was saying to Homer

only the other day— You know, Homer Martin—I was saying that if I could get Jack. . . .” She was off, rattling along pleasantly, as though she had parked her brains at the Union Station. Tom listened admiringly.

From behind him, Maxie Keystone said, “Naughty boy! Listeners don’t never hear no good of themselves!”

Tom turned, and Maxie was sitting at the bar at the far end of the playroom. Tom said, “You come through screens awful quiet.”

Maxie shrugged. “It’s a stunt I know. How do you like things, Tom? Think Roxanne oughta join up with them folks?”

Tom said, “You know all about it, huh?”

“I know plenty,” grinned Maxie. “I even know your gal can’t take the rap on this murder business.”

“You even know who killed Homer Martin,” nodded Tom.

Maxie said, “Nix, chum. Not that. I wouldn’t know a thing about anybody gettin’ chilled no time. . . . But I’ll admit I know they got Miss Queen on the griddle.”

“Where do you come in?” asked Tom without surprise.

“I can use a load of that moon-pitcher dough,” said Maxie.

“Worse characters than you have made it,” muttered Tom. “But I can’t see just how. . . .” He broke off as he heard Sam Valenti’s deep accents in the outer room. There was the sound of a car coming up the road, and he walked past Maxie, opening the screen wide onto the side porch. He resumed, “I’ll catch on. I suppose Matt and I are dealt out of it?”

“Nacherally,” said Maxie. “Vesper wants control. I’m here to tell you to cool off. You can play with Martin’s murder, but lay off the pitcher deal, see?”

Tom said, “You mean you are going to throw me a stooge?”

Maxie said, “Well, could be. Of course I dunno who killed Martin. But I could slip you somebody to take the rap!”

There were footsteps outside. Leila Lynch, her face sharper than a honed axe came into the room, followed by her lean husband and Matt Durkin. She stopped, staring at Maxie.

Tom said, “Maxie Keystone, Mrs. Lynch. . . . You know the Senator that was. . . . You slipped him a good card tonight but he didn’t play it right. Like poor Homer Martin.”

Maxie slid to his feet like a small cat. His good nature was gone and his eyes blazed at Tom. He said, “You know too much already, gambler. You talk like you’ll need fixin’, later on.”

Tom said, “I always need fixin’. Mrs. Lynch dealt a bridge hand tonight that smelled bad. You all are tied up together to grab off Roxanne Queen and her projected company.

And I’m going to stop you. Is that clear?”

Maxie said, “Look, Kincaid. I ain’t foolin’. We’re takin’ this job over, or—we’re squawkin’ to the cops. We’ll all swear we were havin’ a friendly game and you rooked us. The moola’s marked, pal, that’s in your pocket. We’ll all swear that you and Martin had a quarrel.

“You might as well know—every one of us here is in on it. This is a big deal, gambler. That dough you took from me ain’t peanuts but you’re welcome to it. But we’re grabbin’ Coronet Pictures, and you’re out. Figure it for yourself. It’s your move.”

He sat back in the chair and crossed his knees. Matt regarded him intently, but Tom moved over and nudged Matt’s nervous hand, which had begun to move toward his armpit where the .22 nestled.

It was no time for violence, Tom knew. The Lynches had not said a word, but their silence was enough. They had deliberately thrown in with Keystone, and between them they controlled a heap of politics, all the way to Washington.

In the other room with Roxanne was Ronald Vesper, who had the money bags. Representing the film people was Sam Valenti, who, of course, had broken up the poker game so that the marked money would stay with Tom. . . .

He knew now why Homer Martin had drawn the winning hand. It had been intended to work this squeeze on Homer. Valenti, through Martin’s secretary, had the inside track there. It was all becoming very clear and simple—excepting the murder of Martin.

Maxie suggested, “Take your time. Get the broad and talk it over. We know what we’re doin’.”

Tom stepped to the door and said, “Roxanne, dear! Could you excuse yourself for a moment?”

He saw the smirk on Ronald Vesper’s face as he exchanged glances with his burly secretary. He controlled himself with difficulty as Roxanne came inside the playroom and glanced around at the people. She said, “A houseful of guests! Isn’t that nice?” She leveled her gaze at Leila Lynch, “And you too, dear! You must show me sometime, how you cheat at bridge!”

Leila Lynch said one uncomplimentary word, then relapsed to silence. Her husband shifted, watching the confident Maxie.

Tom said, “These people have just explained many things. . . .” He told her about it quickly and simply. She took it standing, without change of color, and he finished, “If you do not sign with them, they will make a nasty scandal, perjure themselves to put you in jeopardy in court. Matt and I are known gamblers. Our testimony would be worthless

against theirs. The girl, Claire Manning, could hurt us by lying about our relations with Homer Martin. What do you think, dear?"

Roxanne leaned against the bar. "I think I'll have a short drink." Tom went behind the counter and Maxie got up at once and came where he could watch.

Roxanne said, "I don't suppose it would do any good to shoot the whole damned bunch of them. . . . It would mess up my house, too." She took a small revolver from a metal box which apparently was for cigarettes. Leila Lynch inhaled sharply.

Matt produced his gun with a nonchalance born of much practise. Tom straightened up with his pearl-handled .38 in his hand. Maxie froze, hands half-raised, saying sharply, "That's a dumb play, you dopes! I got men outside!"

"I imagined you had," nodded Tom gravely. "And they'll stay there, or you will get your blood let out all over Roxanne's clean floor. Now you listen to me, you characters. . . ." He opened the door and called, "You too, you fine-feathered frauds! Come in here!" He motioned with the gun. They came, even Valenti walking silently, his hands in plain view. Vesper was white and shaky. Carey seemed only amused.

Tom said, "One of you killed Homer Martin for reasons of your own. I think I can learn which one. You all came up here to give us the rush on this business before we could turn around and get our breaths. That was half-smart. Now I'm telling you that nobody is going to sign anything, that Roxanne would rather quit pictures than work for you, and that before tomorrow night at midnight I am coming for the killer of Homer Martin."

Maxie said, "You're makin' a big mistake, gambler!"

The others were silent. Looking them over, Tom was amazed at their calmness, their complete confidence. They were an assorted gang, but they were dangerous. Their coolness was the tip-off. He realized that they represented power and money in almost unlimited quantity. It was, he realized, a most formidable array of off-color talent. . . .

Tom said, "I've made mistakes before, and I've also made a few dead men. You can go now—every last damned one of you!"

Maxie said, "I got to warn you, Tom. This ain't healthy. We're callin' the cops right as soon as we leave here."

"I'm making that a personal matter," said Tom. He walked from behind the little bar and faced Maxie. "You know me. I'm telling you now: "If you call the cops before midnight tomorrow, I'm taking you, Maxie. I'll take a dozen of your hoods, if I have to, also. But

I'll get you, and Matt'll be with me and we'll get a few others before we go down. Think about that, pal. Think hard!" He was jeering, laughing into Maxie's face.

The little man moved his feet uncertainly, then shrugged. He said, "You can't scare me, gambler. I'll be seein' you—in the jug!"

They went out, all of them, and shadowy figures outside joined them. They got into their cars and made a parade going away from Roxanne's lovely little home.

Tom put his arm around the girl and said, "There goes the biggest menace Hollywood ever had! There goes the gang which would like to control the picture industry. And they're starting on you and your pals."

Roxanne said, "I don't even think Valenti is cute! Let's get Homer's murderer and finish this before it's started."

Matt said, "You think they'll holler cop, Tom?"

Tom said, "I gave Maxie an out. I said, 'until midnight tomorrow.' Maxie is smarter than most crooks. He'll take that chance, I think—unless he sees me closing in."

Matt said, "Where the hell do we start lookin' for the killer?"

"I wouldn't know," said Tom urbanely. "We've got until tomorrow night, haven't we?"

"Is that good?" demanded Roxanne. "I couldn't find him in Burton's *Thousand and One Nights!*"

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Breeds Murder

IT WAS close to three o'clock when Tom located the modest house in Wilshire. He had been forced to find a directory and then to drive through unfamiliar streets looking for numbers. He parked Roxanne's car a block past the house and said, "That's where the fair Claire dwells!"

Roxanne said, "It'll look better if I try her."

Tom and Matt followed, watching Roxanne's shapely legs in the reflection from the street lamps. She turned in and mounted the steps of the house. They waited in the shadows. The door opened almost at once and Roxanne stepped inside.

Tom kept watching up and down the street. He said, "If this Claire Manning is as important to the case as I think she is, almost anybody—including the cops—are liable to turn up here."

Matt said, "I'll turn into a cop myself, chasin' murderers. I thought when we got rid of George Grey that we were done with playin' detective. It ain't natural."

Tom said, "Rox is very clever. She ought to be calling us in any moment." But as the

seconds ticked away, he began to feel uncomfortable.

Matt said, "The gal's had time enough to dress for dinner. . . ."

"Let's go!" said Tom. "I can't stand this!"

They started down the street, walking rapidly. A car swung the corner. It came with speed, and Tom called sharply, "Down, Matt!" He threw himself onto the lawn of the small house, rolling over and over, trying to draw his gun. He got the weapon out and came against the porch at the same moment. He swung about, firing five times as the car spun past, rocking wildly.

Matt said, "I felt the bullets spatterin', but I didn't hear a thing. . . . Those damned air guns again!"

Tom said, "They nearly got me, too. Into the house, quick!"

He went up the steps and banged against the door. It was a stout door and did not give. He raced around the back, Matt at his heels. There were lights going on in a couple of neighboring windows, and if people saw them it would mean a general alarm, which he did not want.

He came to a side door and yanked at the knob. It came flying open in his hand. It had been standing ajar, he realized. . . .

He barged into the house, frightened now, aware that there was no sound. He came into a small kitchen and snapped at a switch. The light shone through into a dining room. He went on, clammy with fear.

He saw the girl on the floor and his heart stopped beating for an instant. Then he noted that the flowing hair was brunette, that the girl was small and thin. He went on, not bothering to ascertain what ailed the fallen figure, leaving that to Matt.

He plunged into the front hall. Roxanne lay on her face. He knelt, reaching for her. She rolled over, and his relief was so complete that he sank back, unable to touch her.

She got to her knees, like a punch-drunk fighter and said dully, "Clipped me good—as I walked in. . . . Never saw the girl, Tom. . . . Is she—all right?"

A voice quavered from upstairs, "Claire? Are you all right, Claire?"

Tom motioned, and Roxanne recovered some strength. She called, "Mrs. Manning?"

The voice said, "I'll be right down, dearie. Claire shouldn't drink like that! I've scolded her. . . ."

Tom raised Roxanne to her feet. She held tight to him and whispered, "Someone was standing inside the door when I rang. When I got in, fingers grabbed my throat. I couldn't yell. . . . I thought I was finished. Then something hit me on the head."

They went into the other room. Matt was covering the face of the girl on the floor. Matt

said, "If that's Claire, she's no longer with us."

Tom said, "I've got to look. . . ." He put aside the sheet and reached down a lamp from a nearby end table. He held it close to the dead face.

Claire Manning had been pretty. She was very slight, and her neck was not very strong. . . .

The marks were deep and there were slight scratches where the strangler's long fingernails had cut in. Tom winced, putting the lamp back. The girl was wearing a party dress as though she had just come in from a dance.

Tom said, "This is police work. . . . Oh, I beg your pardon!"

He arose, facing a small, elderly woman with greying hair. She wore a woolly, old-fashioned robe and peered near-sightedly at the figure on the floor. She steadied herself a moment, holding to Tom's big arm. Then she said, "I'm her father's sister. . . . She has—had—no parents. . . ." A tear ran down the thin cheek.

Tom said, "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Manning."

"'Miss' Manning," corrected the little grey woman. She wiped away the tear and said, "Poor Mr. Martin. . . . He depended on her so. . . . What happened to her, sir? Did she take too much to drink again? I never liked her going with those picture people."

"Like Sam Valenti?" asked Roxanne sympathetically.

"Any of them!" said the aunt of the dead girl. "They're bad! Not nice, clean-cut, like you, dearie!" She smiled at Roxanne through her tears.

"Did she have a late date with Valenti?" Tom asked.

"With one of them, I suppose," said the dazed old lady. "She was always having late dates. It was confusing. . . ."

There was the sound of a police siren. The neighbors had decided to butt in, Tom thought. He seized Roxanne's elbow and motioned to Matt. He said swiftly to Miss Manning, "We have to go now. . . . We'll see you again, and please keep your doors locked."

"They're always locked!" said the woman bewilderedly. "I lock them myself. I'm very careful. . . ."

It would have meant a lot to stay and talk to her, mainly about the side door, but Tom knew that he could not risk meeting the police. He got the others out and they made a run for the car. They slipped away to the south as quietly as possible, not speeding once they were started. The cops came from Wilshire Boulevard and missed the coupe entirely. . . .

Matt said, "Valenti could have left Rox's and come right here and killed her."

"Why should he?" asked Roxanne.

"She knew something," said Matt positively. "Broads like her always know a lot."

Tom said, "You're right that she knew something. But unless Homer Martin was crooked, or unless he was planning some coup that we knew nothing about, what was dangerous about any knowledge Claire might have had?"

"Detective stuff!" muttered Matt. "It makes my head ache!"

They were silent, driving in a circle, making for Hollywood. He sighed and said, "Rox, are you sure it was a man who choked and slugged you?"

"Show me the woman who could do it to me!" said Rox. Then she sobered and said, "Why, truthfully, Tom, I wouldn't know. It was so sudden."

Matt said, "Cherchay la femmy! Are you nuts, Tom?"

"Claire Manning went out with many men," said Tom. "Her aunt told us so. Homer

lettered, "Homer Martin." The police, he perceived, had been and gone, leaving traces of flash powder and broad footmarks on the tile. They had broken the lock to get in, and had replaced it with an official padlock. Tom boldly used a piece of bent hairpin from Roxanne's upswept coiffure. The padlock was amazingly fragile and they walked in, closing the door behind them.

Roxanne, womanlike, was at the job of ransacking Homer's desk. Matt nosed into odd corners of the three rooms, his bright eyes alert. He said, "What in hell we lookin' for? The cops must have cased the joint to pieces."

Roxanne said, "Tom! Look what's under his blotter!"

There was a scrap of paper. On it was written an address. Tom said, "Claire Manning's house. And it says, 'Side door will be open, darling.'"

"That side door," said Matt. "Homer and Claire were palsy-walsy, then."

There was a picture of Claire under the

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Martin, among them. Obviously Homer did not depend on her very much for her work as his secretary. He had office clerks who did the real work, we know. Therefore Homer depended on her for other things. . . . He was a bachelor!"

"Valenti!" said Matt positively. "He was jealous!"

Tom shrugged. He drove past Santa Monica, heading for Sunset. It was nearly four o'clock. The police, he was afraid, would be asking questions and looking for them. Miss Manning's description would be adequate to give away their identity, of course. Two murders in one night were more than even Captain Clarke could be expected to take. . . .

He returned doggedly to the problem of the killings. He needed to know some more about that genial legal light, Homer Martin.

He said, "Matt doesn't like detective work, so let's commit a little burglary!" He drove the car to the Hollywood building where Homer Martin's office had been located.

THE elevators were not running, and they had only to climb one flight, and walk down a corridor. Tom walked briskly to the door

blotter, one of those taken by a Hollywood professional studio, shiny and artificially posed. Tom said, "The police thought nothing of that, evidently—but they'll be back for it when they find she is dead. We've got to hurry."

He went to the file. He found under "L" a dossier which interested him, a short account of the activities of Leila and Morgan Lynch among the politics of the county and state. On the bottom was pencilled a note, "Watch them in the deal."

Homer had known some things, all right, Tom decided. Perhaps he had feared that the Lynches would attempt to move in on the Coronet Pictures set-up. But it was not like Martin to have been secretive about it. Tom shook his head, baffled.

Roxanne left the desk and wandered into the anteroom. Tom deserted the files, having learned little. The three stood in the anteroom a moment, staring helplessly at one another. None noticed the slowly opening door, the hand which reached in and snapped off the lights. All they knew was that darkness suddenly engulfed them.

There was no time to go for a gun and no target at which to shoot. Tom ducked,

weaved and sent Roxanne hurtling to safety with a blow of his shoulder. Then he dove forward, directly at the door. He encountered a hard body, heard a curse and took a terrific blow on the side of his head. There were several men, he saw, all converging for the attack.

He swung back, kicking out at a kneecap and getting home with his heel. A man spun and swore. Matt was driving up from the ground, slapping his revolver muzzle. A man fell, rolled over. Matt kicked him in the head. A dim hall light gave partial illumination. Tom knocked his principle adversary away, but the man came back and belted Tom with shrewd, practised blows.

Then Matt was clear and calling, "Duck, Tom! I'm gonna shoot hell out of them!"

Tom landed a stinging uppercut. It went smack on a solid jaw and the burly man staggered backwards. In the dim light Tom went forward, seeking a glimpse of his assailant. The last of the mob, defeated, leaped backwards and slammed the door. The attack was over as soon as it had begun. Matt, wrenching at the portal, was unable to open it.

Tom said, "Easy does it. . . . Reach something through the crack and lift off that damn padlock, if they didn't snap it."

Matt poked a paper-knife through. He said, "They damn near did, at that. But it didn't catch." The door swung wide and Matt burst into the hall, his revolver ready. Running footsteps sounded below.

Tom walked down to the end of the hall. A huge apron was on the floor and a mop leaned against the wall. He said, "The guy was there all the time. He saw us go in and brought in a crew to help him get us. But they didn't want to kill. . . . Don't ask me why. . . ."

Roxanne said, "It was Valenti, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," said Tom, rubbing his head. "He can fight, too, never forget it."

"Why don't we chase him?" demanded Matt. "I'll cut that big murderer down to size."

Tom said, "He must think there's something in Homer's office to incriminate him. But we didn't find it, did we? A hell of a note!" He seemed quite unconcerned by the escape of the picture-playing athlete.

Roxanne said, "I'm beginning to see why they don't kill us."

"Yeah," said Tom. "That's easy. You're still a valuable piece of property."

"They'd do *you* in like a mouse," nodded Roxanne. "But they want me alive, to play in their pictures."

Matt said disgustedly, "A hell of a thing! Now Rox is our bodyguard!"

Tom said slowly, "The time has come to see the people who are financing this deal

which needs Rox alive. Let's go. I think I know enough about Homer Martin now."

They stole out of the building and went back to their car. Matt said, "It's comin' on daylight. Can't we sleep some?"

"Yeah," said Tom. "At a side street hotel, if you can get rooms. Or in the park—it's warm enough. But we can't go home."

They compromised by taking turns sleeping in the car. It was a very uncomfortable night.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Welcome Sucker!"

BEHIND its high brick wall, the estate of Ronald Vesper stretched over pleasant acres of carefully manicured grounds. The huge pool was a bright blue spot, shaded by tall trees. Roxanne was fresh and unruffled, amazingly, but Tom and Matt needed shaves as they stepped into the open and surveyed the small party in bathing suits.

Vesper recovered almost at once, and lisped, "Surprise! Surprise! So glad to see you good people! Won't you have a bite, a drink and a nice, cool swim?"

Jack Carey bustled in, bringing a tray. The trio sat under gay umbrellas at a metal table. A Filipino boy served them. Mrs. Leila Lynch, tanned and surprisingly neat of limb and torso, wore a two piece brevity and kept apart, glowering, but her husband made small smooth speeches at Roxanne. Tom ate and drank and watched.

Carey said, "I see you could shave, pals. Follow me."

Tom and Matt arose and Roxanne, lingering with the assiduous Morgan Lynch, went to another dressing room. Out of hearing of the others, Carey's manner changed. He said abruptly, "The police are looking for you. If you've compromised Roxanne, Kincaid, it will be too damned bad. . . ."

Tom said, "How deep are you in this thing, Carey?"

The big man shrugged. "We like to use our power. The big companies have pushed Ronald Vesper around. You'd be surprised how tough Ronnie can get when he is aroused. He wants to get into pictures, and he's going to get in. Rox can swing it for him. . . . As for the others—they're in, and that's all there is to it."

Tom said, "Maxie Keystone and Ronald Vesper! A hell of a team!"

Carey said, "I'm not the boss. . . . Here's a place to shave. Razors, soap, towels. . . . You can borrow my swim pants, Kincaid, if you'd like."

"Thanks," said Tom. He shed coat and shirt and faced the mirror. He looked all

of his forty-odd years, he noted and wondered what the radiant Roxanne could possibly see in him. He lathered with brushless cream. He caught Matt's eye in the mirror and gave him a sign.

Matt said, "Look, Carey, I'd like to ask you a few things about this place. Fifty rooms you've got, I hear." He led Carey outdoors, holding him by the arm. The big man reluctantly went along, answering Matt's questions.

Tom was in the dressing rooms beyond like a shot. Without removing the lather he went through the clothes of the men bathers with practised, swift hands. He slid back into the bathroom tucking a snapshot and a scented note into his pocket. He had again found the trail of Claire Manning.

He was finishing his shave when Matt came in. He stepped aside to let the dapper little man renovate himself and said, "I don't think we'll bathe. The cops might come and find us. We're trying to get to Martin's murderer, as you know, Carey. I don't mind telling you we're stumped so far, and that we might have to take Maxie's proposition and ask him for a fall guy."

Carey said, "You'd better, Kincaid. No one wants to harm you. Ronald is determined to star Roxanne in Coronet Pictures. If you get out of the way, we can go ahead. Roxanne will benefit thereby. Why should you be stubborn?"

Tom put his loose tweed coat back on, adjusting the shoulder holster where he carried his revolver in plain sight of Carey. He said, "I'm a tough character, or hadn't you heard? I object strenuously to being pushed around. I'll fight you until I have to go to the police. . . . How about rounding up the gang for about eleven tonight at Maxie's gambling house?"

"You mean Grape Wysocki's place?" asked Carey.

"Let it go at that," said Tom. "I'll be there at eleven."

He went back to the pool and Roxanne was waiting, her makeup refreshed, Vesper and Lynch dancing attendance upon her. She drained a champagne cocktail and said to Tom, "Best service in Beverly Hills. I'm going to give them a testimonial, with color photograph, in bathing suit."

Lynch said in his rotund accents, "It would make a lovely picture, but not for public consumption, please!"

Ronald Vesper giggled. He had a pink face, despite his hours in the sun. Only in his unblinking eyes, which were bright, china blue, was there any hint of character. He said, "If you could visit us oftener, darling, we should be *such* good friends! Just wait until we are working together! *Such fun!*"

Matt rambled down with Carey. Leila Lynch was swimming, using the Australian crawl, yet splashing very little. She touched one end of the pool, flipped about and went back, working off exasperation. There were muscles in her back like fishes playing just beneath the surface of the water. Tom looked at her husband, but Morgan Lynch was paying full attention to Roxanne.

Rox arose and said, "You're all just peachy to be so kind to poor little me!" in a most affected voice. She glided to where Tom waited, slid her arm through his and continued archly, "I just must go with my big man and solve a murder!"

Matt said idly, "That's right. And I'd hate to think anyone here put the cops on us. You know how it is—murder breeds murder! This joint is too pretty to have it loused up with a couple corpses!"

They sauntered back the way they had come, but this time they were let out through the gate by the ubiquitous Carey. He said, "I guess you got in by climbing the eucalyptus and dropping over the fence, eh? I warned Ronnie about that. . . ."

Tom said, "We came through the fence. We're zombies! Go and tell that to your pals. And when Sam Valenti shows up with a swollen jaw, tell him I'll meet him anytime—with gloves or without. He's too muscle-bound to be a fighter!"

He nodded and led his companions to Roxanne's car, which was parked behind a bush in an open lot nearby. He said, "I think we shall have to do a mope into limbo for the day."

Matt complained, "We haven't got too much time to detect that murderer. . . . We oughta be busy at it!"

"The murderer?" said Tom. "I think I've got him stached out. I just want to think how to hang it on him so that Captain Clarke will be satisfied."

"Who is it?" demanded Matt.

"I'm not sure," countered Tom. "I must think about it."

He took the picture and the note from his pocket and handed it to Roxanne. He said, "The Manning girl was a busy little bee, wasn't she?"

Roxanne said, "Where did you get these?"

"Out of someone's clothing," said Tom. "In the bath house."

"Whose?" demanded Matt.

"I'm not sure of that, either," said Tom. "I was in a hurry and it wasn't very bright in there."

Matt said, "You're a cockeyed liar."

"Okay," said Tom. "But let me think awhile before I steer you wrong and have you shooting people, you little rascal!"

Roxanne said, "Drive up into the Hills. I

know an abandoned estate, owned by Moggy Hill before he killed himself. We can hide the car and sleep.

"As for me, I'm sick of the whole deal. Claire Manning had more lovers than the newspapers ascribe to me! Homer Martin seems to have been double-crossing everybody. Sam Valenti is a villain no matter which way you look at it. Leila Lynch is a female crook and her husband is on the make. Ronnie Vesper is a swishing idiot and Jack Carey is a fat-head. I do believe Maxie Keystone is the most attractive of the lot!"

Tom said, "Your estimation of our friends is colorful, my dear, but probably a bit inaccurate in spots. Is this the place?"

HE TURNED in and parked behind a convenient garage. The weeds had begun to take care of the late Moggy Hill's estate, but it made a fine hideout. Clarke would prevent too close a chase, Tom thought, else they would have been picked up before now. Clarke was a dependable man and had worked with Tom before. He would have no idea that Tom was committing murders—but he would want to know what information Tom had.

Tilting his hat over his eyes, Tom laid back on the thick grass. Matt found a deck of cards in the car and challenged Roxanne to a game of gin, and they began to play. It was like a picnic in the country, Tom thought lazily.

It took him a long time to examine each step of the way they had come. He began to get a very strong glimmer of understanding of the twin murders.

He saw that they were interdependent, that the same killer, using different methods, had accomplished both. . . . The day went by without incident, and Roxanne lost twenty dollars to the ungallant Matt, who could even play gin with science and skill.

They drove over into the Valley, donning dark glasses, and ate at a drive-in. Then Tom turned the coupe down Ventura Boulevard and thence into Los Angeles. It was dusk, four hours too early for their appointment, but Tom parked the car in a lot several blocks from the office building which housed the gambling club, and they walked in the gathering shadows.

Roxanne said, "This is very unreal and quite confusing. I can't believe that Homer is dead and that the killer actually had me in his grasp . . . or her grasp. Which is it, Tom?"

"You noticed Leila's muscles," said Tom. "She's a strong and bitter woman."

"Claire was playing around," said Roxanne. "Maybe she was playing with the wandering-eyed Mr. Lynch, too."

"You're a very smart girl," said Tom.

"I am glad that I am going to marry you."

"It wouldn't be Ronnie," she pointed out.

"And I don't think Jack Carey has talent for that sort of thing. And besides, Valenti is the one who tipped them off about Coronet Pictures, or Sammy would not be in on the deal. So it was Valenti, Lynch and poor Homer who were on the late Claire's strings."

Matt said, "Rox is as big a detective as you! When do we start closin' in on this murderer?"

Tom said, "Rox has forgotten Maxie and Grape Wysocki and the mob."

"No, I haven't," said Roxanne. "That's why I am so puzzled."

They came to the office building. The gambling place was on the eighth floor. Tom stood before the directory and conned the white letters. He went to the elevator and there was an ancient night man who took them up. Tom said, "Nine."

They got off and walked along the hall. There was a door bearing the name, "Morgan Lynch."

Tom said, "It would be interesting to know what goes on in here. However, there seems to be a strong spring lock."

"I'll blast it off," muttered Matt.

"Not a good idea," said Tom. "Is that a broom and mop closet?"

He opened a door and said, "Only room for two. In you go. . . . Leave it on a crack, so that you can see and hear." He shoved them inside before they could pretest and went back to the stairhead he had previously noted.

He proceeded through the fire door and climbed the stairs. On the tenth floor he examined several doors, but found nothing of interest. He went down again, passing the ninth floor and onto the eighth.

The gambling place occupied three offices and the single entrance was labelled, "Macey Importing." He saw Birdie Jones and Rackety Kamel come from the elevator and open the place with a key. He waited, watching from the stairs, and soon Sig Lemmon appeared, and with him Grape Wysocki.

He tiptoed down and tried the door. It was locked. He went back irresolutely and began to descend the stairs. He was between floors when he heard the motion behind him and whirled. He saw a hand bearing a weapon, and he flung himself sideways and around the corner of the stair well. He banged down the remaining stairs, crouched in the hall of the seventh floor, waiting, but the attacker did not pursue.

He went all the way down, then, and into the lobby. He entered the elevator cage and the old operator stared at him. Tom said, "I fell out the window. . . . Here's proof." He handed the man a bill and got off at the ninth floor again.

He went down the hall and tapped at the closet door. There was no reply. He swung it open. It was empty.

He moved swiftly, getting to the office of Morgan Lynch. He heaved against the door, but it was tightly shut. He began to sweat a little.

He may have overreached himself, he thought numbly. He may have put Rox and Matt into greater danger than he could extract them from. He had taken a chance that being early he had disrupted plans which he was sure had been made. But he had never thought that they would harm Roxanne. That had been his ace.

Now he was not so sure. He drew his gun and went back to the stairs and ascended carefully. He made the landing and drew a deep breath.

It was only eight o'clock, but he was going to keep his appointment right now. He shoved the gun into his belt, buttoned his coat and went straight to the door of the gambling club. He knocked, and Grape Wysocki himself peered through the crack.

Tom said, "I want to see Maxie, right now."

Grape said, "Come in, sucker! Make yourself at home."

CHAPTER FIVE

Say It with Bullets!

THERE was a small anteroom, then a lounge. Seated about were the people Tom had expected to see at eleven o'clock. Beyond, the gaming rooms were not yet opened, and none of the dealers were in the place.

Maxie Keystone said, "I been waitin' for you, gambler. Thought you'd be nosin' around early." Maxie had on an outrageously colorful Hollywood slack suit and a green scarf. He looked very pleased with himself.

Tom said, "Yeah. Had some ideas to run down."

"You'll run an idea down a rat hole some day," said Maxie pleasantly. "Why don't you take my fall guy and quit?"

Tom looked about. Ronnie Vesper and Carey were dead-panned. Sam Valenti's jaw was swollen, all right. Leila Lynch and her husband sat nearest the door. They were all very solemn except Maxie, who seemed quite at ease with his big cigar. Just outside the door Grape and his three gunmen lounged within easy call.

"It's a hell of a set-up, all right," Tom admitted. "Get my girl and my partner in here and we'll talk turkey."

He was watching Maxie when he spoke. He saw the gambler's eyes switch away, then come back to Tom. Maxie said, "You better

make up your mind right now. You ain't in no position to tell us what to do."

Tom said, "No, I'm not. But I won't talk unless Roxanne Queen and Matt Durkin are here with me."

Maxie came to his feet and seemed to float across the room until he stood very close to Tom, blowing smoke through his nostrils, his face tight and suddenly hard. Grape and the boys edged within the door. They bore drawn guns.

Maxie said softly, "I'm tired of your tough talk, gambler. You're not foolin' with punks now. You're not tellin' off these Hollywood characters."

He knocked the ash from his cigar. Holding up the glowing, red end, he said, "How would you like to have this jammed up your nose? How would you like to stand there and feel it burnin'? And take it and like it—because I say so?"

Tom said boredly, "You're actin' more like Hollywood than even it can think up! Be your age, Maxie!"

Maxie actually made a gesture with the cigar. Tom leaned away from him, then jerked back with a speed which Maxie must have found hard to believe. The cigar burst into fragments. Maxie left his feet and dangled, in Tom's grasp, helpless, coughing. Tom's right hand produced his revolver as he backed to the door.

The gunsels hesitated. To shoot was to endanger Maxie, now acting unwillingly as Tom's shield. Tom said mockingly, "That's right, Grape. You're learning who's the sucker! Hold everything!"

"Put me down!" raged Maxie. "I was only kiddin', you joik! Put me down, or we'll rap this whole thing! I don't have to take this stuff! Put me down!"

Tom held him, deliberately roughing his costume. Maxie could not take it, he knew now. Maxie's small stature was the tip-off. Held ignominiously in Tom's one arm, he was ridiculous and he knew it, and that knowledge was more than his ego could stand.

Tom said, "Easy does it! I want Roxanne and Matt released right now! Or I'll bump you off first and then take a few others with me." He was watching them all.

Maxie screamed, "I ain't got your damn friends! I don't know where the hell they are, you big dopey dumbbell! Can I help it if you lost your stupid pals?"

Tom said, "Now that is interestin'. Then who has got them? Somebody better speak up!"

There was no sound except Maxie's muted protestations. Grape tried to edge around for a chance shot. There was movement on Tom's right. He steadied himself, clutched Maxie a little tighter, and fired once. Grape swore

heartily and went down on one knee. Valenti started up from his chair.

Tom snapped, "Get back, Sam! I only winged your brother!"

Maxie stopped struggling all of a sudden. He choked, "Grape is Sam Valenti's brother? What kinda talk is this?"

"Well, they look alike," said Tom. "Grape is a sort of caricature of his younger brother!"

Like spectators at a tennis match, every head in the room swivelled to stare at Valenti and Grape Wysocki. Tom stepped back one pace. He reached out and deposited Maxie into a chair with enough force to send that piece of furniture over backward, bearing Maxie with it.

He said, "Next time I'm shootin' to kill! . . . Grape! Send Birdie down and bring the rest of us up for the finish!"

The wounded man glared, then wilted. He muttered to Birdie and that character came gingerly forward. Tom frisked him and got a gun and a long knife. Then Birdie went into the hall.

Tom leaned against the wall, a gun in each hand. He said, "This is very nice. Hold still, Ronnie. You make me nervous, jiggling like that. . . . This was a fine conspiracy, except that you did not get together on every detail. . . . How do you like being a patsy, Mr. Keystone?"

Maxie, sitting on the floor, had not tried to arise. He said without rancor, "What you got, Kincaid?"

Tom said, "Plenty. . . . But here are the people!"

Roxanne and Matt looked a bit battered, but they were not seriously injured. He said, "Who took you?"

Matt said, "They threw a stink bomb, or something. It was Grape and Sig. . . . But they put us in—"

"I know," said Tom. "In Morgan Lynch's office. He couldn't make up his mind right away."

"About what?" demanded Maxie Keystone.

"Whether it was worth while to leave Roxanne alive again when we were so close to him," said Tom carelessly. "Those long fingers of his still itch for a throat to throttle!"

He saw the lean man make his play. Tom came around from his lounging position at the door and drove his gun broadside. The muzzle struck Morgan Lynch on the face.

BLOOD spurted as Leila Lynch made a tigerish leap. Tom reached out and held her at arm's length. One of the gunmen started to go into action. Matt seized the gun from Tom's left hand and started pumping lead.

There was a stunned silence. Lynch's right hand was again plucking at his coat pocket.

Tom slammed Leila with sufficient force to knock both Lynchs to the floor.

He said, "You didn't know it was Morgan Lynch who killed Martin and the girl, Maxie? You're not so smart, at that!"

Sig Lemmon was down, he saw. Rackety Kamel was nursing a wounded arm. Maxie's forces were seriously depleted. Maxie said, "Give it to me straight, Kincaid."

Matt was on Morgan Lynch, searching him. He came up with a weapon, flourishing it. "The air gun!"

"Yeah," nodded Tom. "They were all playing with the brunette Claire Manning. Remember her aunt told us there were many of them? Sam Valenti was pumping her about Coronet Pictures. But Homer Martin was fond of her and warned her that Lynch was a wolf. She believed Homer, and wrote Lynch this note."

He produced the pink paper he had looted in the bath house. "It tells Lynch he is through. It threatens him with blackmail. Claire was not a very nice girl. She left the side door open for a late assignation with Valenti, who did not keep it. . . ."

Morgan Lynch was dabbing at his torn face with a handkerchief. His wife sat, panting with rage. Lynch said hoarsely, "Lies—all lies. . . . Stop him, Keystone!"

Tom said, "So Roxanne came in and Lynch almost strangled her, but he remembered that you needed her for pictures, so he just knocked her cold. Then he got away through the rear, came around in a hired car and tried to knock off Matt and me with his air gun. . . . A versatile chap, this Lynch! I'm afraid I dropped a spot of shaving soap on his clothing when I pilfered this note, and tonight he was in a panic and tried to shoot me again. He undoubtedly bribed the mob to grab Roxanne and Matt. . . . Sam Valenti used them earlier. I'd get new men, Maxie, if I were you."

Maxie said, "You ain't proved nothin' yet."

"Well, there's the air pistol. Then there's the time element. You'll all have to testify that Lynch could have committed both crimes. The cops, once started, will find tracks in the Manning house. And with you helping, every one of you, and our own testimony, I think Lynch will burn!"

"You're crazy!" Carey ejaculated. "We couldn't testify!"

Tom grinned satirically. He said, "Maxie offered us a victim. I don't know who he had in mind. But he knew he could plant murder on someone. Now he can do it to Lynch!"

"No!" cried Ronald Vesper. "He couldn't, possibly!"

Tom laughed. "Captain Clarke is a very good friend of mine. He will not like it when you clam up—not after I talk to him. Your

little scheme about Coronet Pictures got loused up, Vesper. Whenever such a crowd of crumbs get together there is always a flaw. This time a murdering philanderer messed things up."

Maxie said, "Now wait, Kincaid. I didn't have nothin' to do with no murders."

"No," said Tom. "You did not. You are just a nice boy in bad company. But you are going to throw Lynch to the cops and have him burned, aren't you, Maxie?"

He saw the affirmative answer in Maxie's slanting eyes. He saw Leila Lynch's face and shivered. Morgan Lynch was slumped in a chair. After a moment Leila turned from her husband and stared at Tom, with all the concentrated hatred of her catlike being.

Vesper was quite still, but his opaque blue eyes were also upon Tom. Jack Carey and Sam Valenti sat like images of stone.

Tom said, "I see. A tough crowd! Valenti, you'd better be careful. You'd probably be in this deeper if you hadn't stolen some of Martin's records before I got there. I know you called your brother and the gang to take me in Martin's office and I'm not forgetting it!"

Valenti sat quiet, just staring. Maxie Keystone got to his feet, brushing himself, rearranging his fantastic apparel. He said, "We better get the coppers and be done with the thing. Call 'em, Durkin, will ya? I don't like this kinda game, Kincaid. . . . I don't make with moider."

Tom said, "Not when you can get caught."

"That dough of mine is still marked," said Maxie, speculatively.

"It's still in my pocket, too," said Tom. "You want to make anything out of it?"

In no time Clarke came. He looked at Lynch and said, "A big fish, eh?"

"He'll be squawking for the governor and everyone else," said Tom. "But he's twice a cold-blooded murderer."

"He can holler his head off if you got enough on him," said the honest Clarke. "How many of these do I take?"

Tom looked around at the crew. Jack Carey spoke. "We are witnesses, Captain."

Tom went into the hall. Roxanne was leaning against the wall. She said, "I'm scared, now it's over."

Tom said, "I'm hungry. . . . We've made a flock of very bad enemies, Rox. . . ."

Matt, padding behind, said, "They'll be tryin' to get even. What price Coronet Pictures now?"

A voice hailed them. They waited at the elevator. Maxie Keystone hastened up to them. He whispered, "As soon as we get this rap squared I'll want evens, Kincaid. You got my dough, y' know!"

Tom said, "Well, I'll be damned. . . . Okay, Maxie. Any time."

They went down in the elevator, leaving Maxie staring wistfully after them. Tom said, "You see? Coronet Pictures will be financed by Maxie Keystone, without his consent!"

"If we live," said Roxanne. "Take me home, Tom. Let me just be in love for awhile, won't you?"

"Yeah," said Tom. "That's an idea!"

THE END



THROW TO THE KILL!

The upstairs room in that swank midtown hot-spot was a frozen cave of silence as tense, baleful eyes focused on the little man crouched over the green table . . . Then, sweating and trembling, he rolled those red dice once more. "Double Six!" This was his pay-off—but was it to be in gold . . . or in cold, deadly steel? Don't miss this novel of murder-laden intrigue, by Francis K. Allan—

"DOUBLE SIX SAYS MURDER!"

DETECTIVE TALES

Dogs howled in that sombre sinister house down by the tracks . . . It was only natural, then, that the neighbors complained to the police—and Lieutenant Tommy Blade found that his ex-wife's murder led to a grisly

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And many another gripping murder tale—by Frederick C. Davis, Ray Bradbury, Cyril Plunkett, Donald G. Cormack, Robert Turner, Harriet Crittenden, Don James—in the big December issue . . . For "Murder-As-You-Like-It" buy this magazine of startlingly different detective stories October 27th!

Coffins for Two

By ROBERT TURNER

He moved very fast then and it was easy. . . .



Lollie and Beau were two kids the world had forgotten—thrown together by Big Jumbo. . . . But when the cops found Jumbo looking like one of his own hamburgers, it took them no time at all to remember Beau, and Beau remembered—nothing!

AT TEN o'clock a small coupe stopped at the lonely barbecue stand and juke joint known as Jumbo's Place. A strong wind had come up and the straight, monotonous drizzle which had been falling all night now whipped and blew in a wet black frenzy. Over the entrance to Jumbo's a sign swung squeaking back and forth. Little muddy rivers jagged through the red clay around the ramshackle building and flinging rain slashed at

the stolid gas pumps and a sedan parked around the side.

A girl got out of the coupe. Her high heels sunk into the red muck as she clutched the collar of her trench coat tight up against her throat with small white fists. Rain rivered off the limp brim of her sodden felt hat.

She had a thin, oval white face, screwed up at one side now, against the storm, but unmistakably pretty. Her eyes squinted at the lighted windows of Jumbo's, distorted with oyster-colored streaks of water. She caught the wallop and thud of juke music coming from inside and sighed with relief.

At least they didn't kill each other, the girl thought. It's all over and Jumbo's got customers. He never plays the machine when he's alone.

She went up to the door, leaned against it and half fell inside on a shrieking gust of wind and rain. She leaned back against the closed door, her eyes moving all around. She had been wrong about Jumbo's having customers. There was nobody there at all.

The girl stood still, letting her breath in and out, heavily, through her small white teeth. "Jumbo!" she called. And then, again, on a rising inflection, over the loud thump of the music: "Jumbo! I'm back!"

Nobody answered. She moved away from the door, took several half steps into the room, one hand out tentatively, as though feeling her way, and then the hand fell limply back to her side again and she stopped statue-still once more.

It had not been much of a place to begin with. Just a little shack, dirty and unpainted, with a crude lunch counter in the center, the juke machine on one side and a row of dimly lit booths on the other. But now it was really a shambles. One end of the lunch counter had been turned over and a welter of wrapped cupcakes and cookies and candies lay sprawled all over the floor.

A cauldron of red and green barbecue sauce had been turned over, too, leaving a sticky mess over everything. Two of the booths were overturned, as was the soft drink ice box, with broken bottles scattered all around the room.

The incongruity of the blaring, gay music that hammered in her ears suddenly struck the girl, and she wheeled as though someone had jabbed her with a needle. The juke box was on its side, the glass front and the pushbutton system smashed in and broken.

That was a peculiar thing. Either the machine had been working when overturned and jammed and kept right on playing, or the sudden jolt had started it. Anyhow it was jammed. The girl walked over to it, tried to turn it off, reached through the broken glass front and tried to stop the spinning record, but couldn't. As she did this, the needle came

to the end, lifted, swung back, dropped again, and started playing the same record over.

The girl turned from the machine, cupped one hand to the side of her full red mouth and called Jumbo's name again. She stepped through the debris, around behind what was left of the counter. And then she saw why Jumbo hadn't answered her.

JUMBO had been nicknamed well—an elephant of a man in a filthy apron, he had a shiny bald head. He had no neck, but layers of chin and the tremendous, powerful shoulders and arms that fat men sometimes have. The girl could not see Jumbo's gross, meaty face. There was nothing left of it. It was a bloody mess that had been hacked to pieces with something sharp. That something sharp had made a final swipe at the folds of Jumbo's throat, and with the way the fat man was sprawled on his back, half over the overturned sauce cauldron, his eyes popping open. Jumbo was dead, no question.

The girl's hands dug into the brown hair at her temples and up under her wet felt hat, pushing it awry. Her face went tight and her mouth split wide. A vein strained like a thin blue worm at her throat. But the scream didn't sound; it bottled in her throat, and rain water ran down from her hat, across her waxen cheeks and into her gaping mouth.

She started to back away, slowly, until she half fell over a broken chair. Then she changed direction and wheeled toward the back of the joint where the telephone was. Halfway, she stopped, and looked down at a man's foot and leg, sprawled out from a half darkened booth.

Her large, terror-filled black eyes ran up the leg and saw the rest of the man in the booth. He was big-framed and bony across the shoulders under his checkered flannel shirt. He had his head on his arms and he was snoring. She couldn't see his face. She didn't have to. She kept looking at that crop of tightly curled, almost boyishly golden hair.

"Beau!" she said over and over, softly, like someone waking a child. Then she saw that in one of his big hands, this blond man clutched the neck and the broken, jagged top half of a beer bottle, red with blood. Blood was caked and matted into the fine blond hairs of his hand.

This time she screamed. "Beau!" And she reached over and tangled her fingers into the golden curls and yanked back the man's head. The head lolled loosely on the big bony shoulders, the features swollen and battered and lax, the eyes rolling to show the whites. She slapped his puffed and swollen face, half a dozen times before he came around.

He took time to focus his eyes and then grinned at her, a half hearted, crooked and painful grin.

"Hey, Lollie," he said, thickly. "I fixed him. I knocked hell out of the fat pig for talking about us like that. I fixed him."

She stood looking down at him, water dripping steadily from the hem of her trenchcoat, running down her bare, shapely legs. She closed her eyes and saw again her husband, Jumbo, lying dead in the wreckage of the lunch counter.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, you sure, did, Beau, you surely did."

And all the time, the jammed juke box was grinding out the same maddening pulse and pound of cheap, ear-aching music.

For the next few seconds neither of them moved, or spoke. Then as the record ended, in the few moments before it began again, Lollie said in a flat monotone: "Why did you go and kill him, Beau? The way Jumbo's been talking around—the kind of people you and I are—they—they'll hang you. Beau, you didn't have to *kill* him!"

He didn't answer. The silly, pained grin fled from his puffy face. He put his hands up over his eyes, shook his head. When he looked up again, he said: "I must still be groggy. I swear I thought you said—"

He stopped. Lollie was staring, almost hypnotically at the jagged, bloody weapon in Beau's hand. His glance dropped to it then, too. Slowly, stiffly, his fingers opened. The piece of bottle dropped to the floor. The music was going again, filling the room with its deep, rhythmic throb.

"Where did I get that?" Beau said. He pushed himself up out of the booth, stood leaning against the table, looking at his hand, at the piece of bottle on the floor. "I didn't have that. I didn't use any broken bottle. I didn't have to. I—I had him without—"

Again he stopped talking. He pushed past Lollie, dumbly, walked with feet wide spread, hunched forward from the waist, like a drunken sailor, toward the front of the wrecked barbecue stand. He went over to the juke box first, reached around and yanked out the cord. The sudden silence seemed to sweep over the place in heavy waves.

Then Beau looked all around him, pivoting slowly like a mechanical man. Finally he saw the vulgar, elephantine corpse of Jumbo, and his spraddle-legged walk took him toward it. He stood, looking down.

Lollie had come up behind him. She said, her voice tight as a strummed wire: "What are you going to do, Beau? You'd better beat it. You'd better leave, never come back. Quickly, Beau—now."

HE DIDN'T turn—didn't answer. Standing there with him, she thought what they'd do to him for this. The whole thing flashed through her mind from the beginning, five

years ago when, as a crazy young kid of seventeen, she had married Jumbo. He'd been big, then, but not huge and bloated and disgusting the way he'd become the last few years.

Jumbo had just given her a job, at first. He'd been nice to her, and desperate, fresh out of the women's pen, she'd married him when he asked. She'd figured her life was all shot to hell, anyhow.

It had been a bad five years. Jumbo soon tired of her and he was brutal. Several times she had tried to run away, but he'd caught her, half killed her. She gave that up.

Then this big, blond stranger came in one day—Beau Wallace. He was on the stem. He had no family, nothing behind him, either, except a manslaughter rap for accidentally killing a man in a fight.

For some crazy reason, Jumbo took to Beau, gave him a job, too. Pretty soon he began to throw Lollie and Beau together, every chance he got. He never said anything to Beau, but he tortured Lollie, all the time hinting and half-teasing that she and Beau were carrying on behind his back.

The strange part was that it was true—Lollie and Beau had fallen for each other. They had everything in common. They were both young, both knock-about, booted around by the world. But they never admitted it even to each other. There was never a thing, actually, between them. It was all under the surface. Beau appreciated too much that Jumbo had given him a break of sorts. And Lollie was afraid of what Jumbo might do to both of them.

They stood it for about a year. Then, last week, Beau was offered another job in a nearby town and he left and took it. He hadn't come back until tonight when, drunk and fighting mad, he'd stopped in to have it out with Jumbo about the stories Jumbo had spread all over town as to why he'd left the barbecue stand.

Lollie had been there when the fight started. No one else was there, because of the rotten weather, and lately, with the gas shortage, there hadn't been many customers, anyhow. She couldn't stand it, watching them fight and tearing the place apart. She'd run out. She took Jumbo's car and drove off, figuring to run away but after driving around for an hour, she gave up that idea and came back.

So Lollie knew what would happen, now. With the talk about her and Beau that Jumbo had stirred up, with Beau's criminal record, they'd give him the business on this killing. She couldn't stand the thought. She grabbed Beau, suddenly, whirled him around, threw herself into his arms. She clung to him, for the first time.

"Beau," she said. "Take me with you. I

don't care that you killed him. Let's go. Let's get away from here."

He pushed her away, still staring dumbly down at the corpse. "I—I didn't do—I—" He broke off, moistened his fist-battered lips. "Maybe, he isn't dead," he said. "Let's get him out of that mess."

Before she could stop him, he stepped forward, grabbed Jumbo under his fat arms, started to drag him clear.

The car came skidding to a halt outside, then. Beau stopped dragging the corpse, half turned toward the sound, frozen. Lollie turned toward the door, too, tried to speak, but couldn't.

Then they came bursting in, half a dozen young people from town. They had come from the show there, stopping off for a beer and barbecue on their way home. The first one in was a thin, dark and fiercely pretty girl of about twenty-five. She stopped just inside the door. The others piled up behind her. The grins flopped from their faces. Their laughter and the sound of their voices faded.

Lollie knew the dark girl. She was Ruby Lanvig, a town girl with a rep. She hung out here at Jumbo's a lot, with her crowd—always kidding around that she thought Jumbo was cute, and playing up to him in a mocking, half-serious sort of way. This went over big with the crazy, hard-drinking crowd she ran with.

With her raincoat open, slender and yet voluptuous in a tight green dress, Ruby Lanvig stood stiffly staring at Lollie and Beau, and the corpse of Jumbo. Her dark eyes widened in horror. She pushed her rainwet hair back from her forehead and screamed.

One of the young men with her was a deputy sheriff. He pushed through the crowd. "What's this?" he demanded. "What's *this*?"

Lollie grabbed Beau's arm fiercely. "He didn't do it, you hear?" She told them, crazily, over and over.

BUT that didn't do much good. Half an hour later she and Beau were in the sheriff's office in town and they had handcuffs on Beau Wallace. They all sat around the little office in the town jail building and went over the whole thing.

"I didn't kill him," Beau insisted for the thousandth time, and told the story of the fight again. "He had me on weight, y'understand, but I was younger and faster. I finally got in a couple of good ones and he went out—cold. But he was all right, I tell you, there wasn't a cut on him—except maybe a few small ones from my knuckles."

"All right," Sheriff Benz said. He was a big, iron-gray man, with a leathery wrinkled face. He didn't like this at all. It made a lot of trouble for him. "And then what?"

Beau continued: "After the fight, I was all

pooped and dizzy. I don't know, reaction or something set in. I could hardly stand. I'd been drinking heavy as hell to begin with. I found a bottle of beer that hadn't got broken, sat down in a booth and drank it. I laid my head on my arms to rest for a moment—and that's all I knew until Lollie woke me up and he—Jumbo, he was—"

"I know," the sheriff stopped him. "Well . . ." He stood up, turned to his deputy: "Take him to a cell, Charlie."

"Wait a minute!" Lollie said. She looked at Beau, so big and awkward and boyish, his gold curly hair studded with water from where they'd led him through the rain outside. She looked at the sheriff and the several deputies. "You *can't*!" she half sobbed. "He didn't do it. It would be crazy for Beau to do that, even drunk he wouldn't be that crazy. He *told* you he didn't do it. Don't you believe him?"

Sheriff Benz tugged at his wrinkled jowels. "No," he said, quietly. "But it ain't up to me to decide. A jury'll answer that."

Lollie felt herself go limp all over. "Sure," she said, woodenly. "A jury." She pictured them. Local people, people with families, with good home-grown backgrounds—people who wouldn't understand about a couple of lifetime losers like Lollie and Beau. They wouldn't understand that they couldn't cheat on the one man who had at least done *something* for them.

"How about Dan Mauriello, Jumbo's brother, who's been visiting him?" Beau suddenly blurted. "He hangs out in the room in back of Jumbo's place, sleeping off his drunks. He and Jumbo never got along. Maybe, after the fight, he came out and killed Jumbo, framed it on me."

Nobody had anything to say to that for a moment. They realized it was strange that Dan Mauriello, a slightly fatter, slightly younger edition of his brother, Jumbo, hadn't shown up in all the excitement.

Then Ruby Lanvig spoke up. "Dan left town, tonight," she said. "I saw him driving out the highway, several hours ago, heading away from town."

Lollie stepped forward. Her hands clawed at her sides. "You're lying. You're just trying to attract attention!" she said. "You couldn't have seen that. Dan's black sedan was parked outside the place when I left—it was still there when I came back."

Ruby Lanvig laughed. It was a cold laugh—a little wild, almost crazy. "That's right," Ruby chuckled. "Protect your lover!" Then the slim, dark girl stopped laughing abruptly. Her face took on its usual fierce look. Her enormous, flashing brown eyes went to the deputy who had entered Jumbo's with her.

"I'll leave it up to the rest of you," she snapped. "Was there any car there when we arrived?"

They all took time remembering, then they shook their heads. Some answered audibly: "No, Dan's car wasn't there."

Lollie started to refute them, but the words never came out. A chill seemed suddenly to prickle all over her. She remembered now, too, that when they left Jumbo's, *she* had not seen Dan's black sedan there, either. What could have happened to it?

She didn't get much more time to think about that. Just then, Sheriff Benz and a deputy started to take Beau back to the little cell block in back. Beau said: "Listen, I've *been* to jail. Six years." He balked, and looked all around at them. His handcuffed hands were clenched tightly in front of him. His lean face, handsome, even under the puffiness from Jumbo's fists, was all sharp angles and ridges of muscle. He was pale as pot-cheese, but his eyes glowed almost feverishly, under their hedges of black brows.

"This time it'll be a lot longer than that," Beau went on. "I don't think I'll go back!"

and she saw that all of Ben Mauriello's stuff had been cleaned out, and of course the black sedan wasn't there.

She drove around for about an hour after that, through the rain, up and down the slippery red clay back roads.

If Beau was telling the truth—if he was innocent—there was only one other answer. Someone else came in and killed Jumbo while he was knocked out, while Beau slept exhausted in the booth. But who would do that? There was no one with anything to gain, any reason—except Jumbo's brother, Dan, who hated him enough and only hung on Jumbo when he was broke and had nowhere else to go. But Ruby Lanvig's story let Dan out.

Lollie didn't know. It was too much for her. Maybe Beau had done it, after all. Maybe he didn't remember. It could be shock, or something. She'd heard of cases like that. And Beau had killed another man, years before, in a fight. She didn't know.

It was well after midnight when, in des-

WASTE PAPER IS A WEAPON OF WAR

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HE MOVED very fast then and it was easy, because they all felt so safe; there were so many of them; and it was a crazy thing for him to do. But it worked. His big, handcuffed hands dipped and had the sheriff's gun out of its holster just like that. He backed away covering them with the gun.

"No, Beau! Please!" Lollie cried.

He didn't even look at her. He kept his eyes on the men, saying nothing until his legs hit the window. Then, as he started to climb out, he yelled, "I'll wait a moment outside and if any of you want to show your faces, go ahead. . . Just remember, I've *been* to prison!"

With his two hands tight-gripping the sheriff's gun, then, he climbed backward out the window into the rain that pelted into a side alley and disappeared. For several minutes no one spoke. Finally the sheriff sighed.

"More trouble," Benz said. "And for nothing. He won't last an hour—with that checkered shirt of his, with that build and that yaller curly hair!"

After she left the sheriff's office, Lollie drove her coupe back out to the juke joint. A couple of deputies were stationed on guard, there. She got them to let her go into the back room

peration, Lollie drove along the back road to the little lonely frame house she had shared with Jumbo.

At first she didn't even notice the light burning in the kitchen; or perhaps, tired and distraught as she was, it just didn't register. She was starting to lock the doors when it came to her that the lights *were* on and that was wrong because when she and Jumbo had last been here, it had been daylight. She stood rooted to the kitchen floor, and wheeled quickly all the way around, her eyes searching, a centipede of terror skittering up and down her spine.

And then she saw him, as he stepped out of the dining room, looming mountain-big in his baggy, soiled tweeds, in the dim light. The .32 pistol looked toy-like in his huge, sausage fingers. His grinning moon-face, dough-pale and layered with fat was stubbled with beard. His wet, red little mouth was curved up at the corners into deep lines that ran into his button nose. His close-set eyes, small and green, squinted deep within their pouches of flesh.

The hand that didn't hold the gun kept rubbing up and down the tweed trouser leg. "Hello, Lollie, my sweet," he said.

"Dan!" she gasped. She fell back against the kitchen table. Then—then it—*was* you! You didn't go away. I was right!"

"Come, come," he said. The fat that joined his chin and throat wobbled and a rumbling sound of laughter welled from the huge paunch. "Aren't you a little confused?"

She kept staring. Then she saw the traces of the fight around his face that ice packs and astringents had not completely removed. She saw the little Z-shaped scar above his left eye.

"No!" she said and this time her voice was little more than a breath. "It's *not* Dan! It's *you*!"

Jumbo Mauriello, in his brother's clothes, moved forward a few feet, still chuckling. Without looking back, with the bubbling of the laughter still in his deep voice, he called: "All right, Ruby, come on out and join the party."

THE slim, dark, town girl stepped out of the darkness of the dining room then. She had put aside the raincoat and she had her arms akimbo, as she strutted up beside Jumbo. Then she smoothed the bright green dress down over her figure, staring at Lollie. For a quick moment, her own crazy, wild laughter joined Jumbo's rumblings.

"Look at her!" Ruby mocked. "Just look!" Lollie was arched backward over the table, staring at first one, then the other of the two who confronted her.

"I see," she said, finally. "You came to, and saw Beau asleep. You went and killed your brother, Dan, and brought him out, dressed in your clothes and slashed up his face so there'd be no mistake, didn't you, Jumbo?"

"One thing wrong, my sweet," Jumbo said in his musically deep voice. "I had killed Dan long before that—late this afternoon—while you were in town, shopping. I'd had enough of him, and Ruby and I wanted to go away together. We needed money, so we figured out a little scheme. It was all going to work out the same, eventually, but it was going to be a lot more complicated, if Beau hadn't come around tonight, if you hadn't run out and left us. That simplified everything beautifully."

"I see," Lolly said. "You were going to change places with Dan all the way around, I guess, Jumbo. You, as Dan, were going to be your own insurance beneficiary. You'd go to some other city—you and Ruby—and live as Dan, on your own insurance money."

The rumbling laughter kept rushing from Jumbo. He stood there, the .32 pointed at Lollie, like some fat, sluggish animal.

"And an amusing joke on you and Beau in the bargain," he roared.

"Look, Jumbo," Ruby put in. "Let's do what we said. Give it to her! Hurry, Jumbo, and let's get away from here!"

"Yes," Jumbo said. He stopped laughing. "Quite right."

Lollie didn't know what to do. She flashed a glance all around the kitchen, tried to figure her chances of getting out a window or a door. She knew they weren't good. In spite of his size, Jumbo could move fast when he had to.

She knew too, what was going to happen. They were going to kill her, make it look like a suicide. Then there would be her insurance, too. It would look all right. The widow—her lover headed for the penitentiary—might do something like that. It was all going their way—Jumbo's and Ruby's. She realized now, that Jumbo in his gross, clever way, must've been building up to something like this for a long time. Perhaps that's why he had cultivated Beau right from the beginning. That was the way a brain like Jumbo's would work.

Meanwhile Jumbo's soft grubby of a forefinger was tightening on the trigger. But it never finished the squeeze. The three of them suddenly twisted toward the dining room door and the front part of the house.

There was the sound of the front door opening and closing, heavy footsteps coming through the intervening rooms. Jumbo swung the .32 from Lollie toward the dining room door. Ruby Lanvig moved like a lithe serpent, glided toward the door leading into the kitchen, and flattened herself out of sight of anyone entering.

Beau Wallace, big and gaunt, soaked through from the rain, and with his curly yellow hair plastered to his forehead, came stumbling into the room. The handcuffs were still on his wrists, but he still held the sheriff's Police Positive in both fists. He stopped just inside the kitchen.

"Lollie!" Beau said. Then he looked at Jumbo. Beau's jaw dropped to the sopping flannel shirt at his chest.

For an instant they all just stood staring at each other. Then the gun in Jumbo's fat white hand jumped and spat out flame. The weapon in Beau's hand fell to the floor. The hole in Beau's wrist ribboned out blood in fast, steady little splashes of red.

Beau didn't look at his hand. He hadn't taken his eyes off of Jumbo. Suddenly he started nodding his long head. His eyes took on a peculiar glitter. Once again, as they had in the sheriff's office, the muscles in his face all bunched up. His breathing sounded loud in the room. He started across the kitchen in slow, deliberate steps toward Jumbo.

ALL RIGHT, Jumbo," he said. "All right. But I'm not going to let it work!" Jumbo was not laughing, now. His moon

face was like a big glob of suet. His eyes seemed to sink back further into the meat of his face. The bald top of his huge head got shiny with sweat.

"Stay away from me, Beau," Jumbo said. "This ain't like earlier tonight. I got a gun, now. Stay away!"

"Yes," Beau said. "You've got a gun." But he kept moving forward. It seemed to take him a long time to plant each step, but he kept going toward the fat man.

Suddenly Lollie screamed: "Don't kill him, Jumbo!"

She was too late. With the gun aimed right at Beau's face, Jumbo had shot. In what seemed like the same instant, Ruby Lanvig lunged in to help Jumbo, moving swiftly from where she had stood flattened against the wall next to the door, and sticking her leg between Beau's large feet.

Beau plunged forward on his face and the bullet from Jumbo's gun plowed into the wall behind him. Lollie moved, too, now that the spell was broken. She grabbed at Jumbo's gun arm, tried to bend it down. That didn't do much good, except that in the struggle, Jumbo pressed the trigger again, and this time, the muzzle of the gun had gotten twisted, and was pointed at Ruby Lanvig.

Ruby turned around twice on her heels like

a Russian dancer, bending over further and further each time, holding her hands over her stomach. Finally, she plunged over across a chair and lay still, the bright green of her dress darkening with crimson in several places.

On the floor, Beau reached out and with his handcuffed hands, pulled Jumbo's thick ankles. Jumbo spilled backward to the floor with a wallop that knocked cups from their hooks in the china closet. Then Beau swarmed up along Jumbo's tremendous avoirdupois, moving his hands from Jumbo's ankles to his throat. They stayed there, digging into folds of flesh until Sheriff Benz and some deputies burst in, a few moments later.

They had come there looking for Beau, but when they heard Ruby Lanvig's terrified dying story, they forgot about him.

Lollie didn't, though. She stayed right with him all the time. And several hours later, when they left a doctor's office with Beau's wrist neatly bandaged, Beau said:

"Y'know, kid, he must've driven away in Dan's car while that damned jammed juke box was wailing away. That's why we didn't hear the motor."

"Yes," Lollie said. "And because of the sounds of the storm . . . But look, Beau—the sunrise. A new day."

"A new day," he said, smiling at Lollie.

THE NOD TO THE HANGMAN

HOW many prisoners, condemned to death by law, have gone to the chair or the gallows protesting their innocence? Unfortunately, in many cases there is no way of sifting the truth, but the following unusual case occurred in Scotland which in the Eighteenth century too late proved that a convicted murderer unjustly paid the final penalty.

William Shaw, of Edinburgh, was one of those dour, grim Scotsmen who believed that the Lord had appointed him to rule the destinies of his family. Though his daughter was in love with a young man, Shaw had chosen an older suitor for her. Their arguments were both long and heated over the matter, until one night a close neighbor happened to overhear snatches of an unusually noisy quarrel.

The listener heard the daughter call her father barbarous and cruel. He heard her scream: "If you keep on with this, father, you'll be the death of me. You're killing me. Stop it, for God's sake!"

The voices suddenly died away. The door opened and Shaw's footsteps were heard clumping down stairs.

Within, the daughter was lying in a pool of her own blood, a knife driven into her side. Just before she died, she was able to nod, when asked if her father was responsible.

Suddenly Shaw came in, bewildered, and wanted to know what was going on. At once the man was accused of the murder of his daughter, and promptly arrested. Later he was tried, convicted, and hanged, swearing until the trap was sprung that he had had nothing to do with his daughter's death.

Almost a year after the girl's death, a new tenant in the flat where the tragedy had taken place was repairing the cracked mantle-piece, when he came upon a piece of paper hidden there which read:

"Cruel father, I cannot—will not!—live without the only man I love . . . I have made up my mind to put an end to an existence that has become intolerable. . . My death I lay to your charge. When you read this, consider yourself as the inhuman wretch that caused me to plunge the murderous knife into my bosom.

Your unhappy daughter, Catherine."

The writing was found to be that of the daughter, and the father's cries of his innocence had been only the truth. The body of William Shaw was at last taken from its nameless grave and given another resting place. It was, at once, the least—and the most—that justice could do.

—John Hartman

THE FATAL FLOWER



I bent over to read the sign and something smashed against the back of my head!

By LARRY STERNIG and W. FREDRIC KRUGER

Uncle Caleb collected antiques—strange ornaments, vases, candelabra and curios of mystic meaning—but before the night was out he had a record collection of corpses on his cold hands!

BOY, it was great to be back home, driving my jalopy again, even though I was handicapped with a bum shoulder and the “Fatal Flower,” both acquired in Italy.

Not that I thought much of the old Italian’s warning. After all, how could that cumbersome candelabra in the back seat kill any one unless it was used as a club? Sure, the guy who’d had it in his possession was plenty

dead, but so were a lot of other Nazi officers. "Fatal Flower"—nuts!

Seeing Audrey again would be the real treat. But if her collector uncle thought there was something to my battle-front souvenir, and wanted to pay enough—well, maybe Audrey and I—

I'd know soon. That curve ahead should be close to the Carson estate. My headlights swept around it, and then I suddenly jammed on the brakes to avoid a barricade across the gravel road. The tall, wrought iron candelabra tipped forward and grazed my head. I shoved it back with a grumbled "Damn."

The barricade was only a two-by-four on crude bucks. A red lantern gleamed warning. I swore again when I saw that I could have run right through the thing and saved myself a crack on the head. Because the gates to the Carson estate were just a half block away and the road looked okay.

I climbed out to investigate, glad of the chance to stretch my long legs. A small sign on the barricade caught my eye and I bent over to read it. That's when something smashed against the back of my head.

When I came to, my brain throbbled horribly. I was face down behind some bushes and inhaling the soggy smell of decaying vegetation. I sat up groggily and saw my car was still there. But the barricade was gone.

And so was the candelabra!

Even with my dazed head it didn't take me long to figure out that someone had ambushed me to steal the antique—someone who knew I was coming this way tonight. I kicked the starter viciously and roared through the gates up a winding road, through grounds so heavily landscaped that I caught only an occasional glimpse of the light ahead.

Nobody was getting away with this. Not now that I knew the thing was valuable—valuable enough for attempted murder!

Rounding a high clump of spruce I stopped. Ahead stood the Carson mansion, the short wall of the left wing glowing eerily against the background of towering trees. Then I realized the wall was made of translucent glass blocks and the small room behind was brilliantly lighted. I took my automatic from under the car seat and shoved it in my pocket.

The front door opened almost before I stopped ringing.

"Roy, darling!"

A dark haired girl in trim, gray suit held out her hands. I relaxed a little, even managed a grin. I grabbed her hands and kissed her.

Audrey is a pin-up honey, all rose and gold, with big blue eyes, but this was no time for sentiment. We were in the base of a U-shaped hallway, and it was difficult to watch both corners. I didn't like it.

"Who knew I was coming here, darling?"

She wrinkled her nose in the cute way she has, and laughed. "Why? Did you expect a welcoming committee?"

When I told her about the reception I'd had below the gates, she was horrified. "And you think someone in here is responsible?" she asked, her voice a mere whisper.

"Could be," I said. "Who's here?"

"Well, Uncle Caleb, of course. He's done nothing but talk of the "Fatal Flower" since your wire. And Karl, our handyman, is around somewhere. Walter was invited, but he isn't here yet."

I remembered Walter Kerchok, antique dealer, who was in good part responsible for Caleb's unusual collection.

Audrey looked troubled. "Uncle is in his museum room, Roy. The theft will be a shock to him, but you'll have to tell him.

If he doesn't know already, I thought grimly. Not that it was easy to picture gentle, eccentric Caleb Carson as a vicious thief, but greed did strange things to people sometimes. . .

The museum room was at the end of the hall. I pulled open the heavy fireproof door and we stepped inside and through a smaller glass door to a glass-encased room, cluttered with every conceivable type of candle holder, each containing a flaming taper. The glass walls, the high ceiling—the very floor of the room writhed with myriad flickering flames.

I squinted against the wavering light, hesitating about drawing another breath, I was so sure the air would be smoky and oily, but it was surprisingly clean. Then I heard the faint hum of the air conditioner.

To my left was a glass case containing labeled candles. Before it stood a row of tall candlesticks. I squinted harder to look at the ceiling high above me my eyes falling on the wrought iron stand, inverted and hanging from a ceiling bracket. It was mine! There was no mistaking the trident of metal lilies whose petals jutted out above big calyxes to form drip pans.

"Roy! What's wrong?" Audrey's voice held fear as she saw me pull out my gun. I wheeled around angrily, and then I saw the man I held responsible for slugging and robbing me. But I didn't shoot Caleb Carson, it was too late for that. The frail, white-haired man was sprawled in ominous quiet before a corner desk.

His gentle old face was distorted by bulging eyes and protruding tongue. Scratches on the old man's throat indicated he had clawed for breath, and over his ear was a large welt. Evidently he'd been at the desk when death tumbled him off the chair. The desk top held several sheets of paper covered with fine script, the top page uncompleted.

Audrey clung to me, sobbing, and I thought

grimly that maybe there was something to that Fatal Flower superstition. Of course, Caleb was pretty old and his ticker hadn't been so good, but—

I felt sympathy for Audrey, but none for Caleb. It was pretty obvious that he'd thought he had killed me. Otherwise he wouldn't have dared to put the "Fatal Flower" on display where I might see it.

"Come along, Audrey," I urged. "I'm calling the police."

The glass door swung open and I hurriedly pulled Audrey aside. A short, thin man, wearing Oxford glasses that gave his small face an owlish appearance, stood blinking in the doorway. His hair was long and black, his tie flowing and his tweed suit baggy.

It was Walter Kerchok, the antique dealer, and behind him bulked a stocky, flat-faced man in chauffeur's uniform. From where they stood, Caleb's body wasn't visible.

Kerchok piped, "Hello, Audrey. And Sellers, glad to see you're back from the war—with a valuable souvenir, too, Caleb tells me." He minced forward to shake hands, but I stepped aside just enough so he could see the corpse. He shrank back, lifting small hands in horror.

"It's murder," I told them. "We were about to call the police. If you men will wait in here—"

At my words, Karl, the chauffeur, peered in with nervous curiosity.

Down the hall, out of earshot, I asked Audrey, "What do you know about Karl?"

"Well, he had the usual references when we hired him about three months ago. Karl—Oh, Roy, you don't think he—"

"We'll let the police decide, honey." I picked up the phone and jiggled the cradle, but it didn't work. "Wire's cut. Let's get back to the museum room; Kerchok is such a little guy—"

But Kerchok was okay. He and Karl stood near the door. Both looked nervously ill at ease.

"Phone's dead. One of us will have to go for the police." I walked toward the desk and Kerchok quavered:

"I'll go, Sellers. I don't want to stay here."

I didn't particularly care to stay, either, but I wanted to keep an eye on the "Fatal Flower." It was still in its place, but something else in the room *had* been disturbed. The papers on the desk were disarranged and the top one was missing. The page that was incomplete.

Karl spoke up stolidly. "I'll drive Mr. Kerchok. It's starting to rain and—the roads—"

"I can drive," Kerchok objected. "Better stay with Mr. Sellers and Miss Audrey."

Karl muttered something, but finally nodded. He probably remembered that Kerchok

was just as familiar with the roads as he was, having made weekly trips to confer with Caleb for many years.

I said, "There's no reason why both of you can't go. Audrey and I will be all right."

Karl's coarse, flat face brightened and he headed for the door before Kerchok could protest. That gave me a chance to talk with the dealer.

"Did Karl go near the desk while I was out of the room?"

Kerchok frowned thoughtfully. "He did go over to take a look at Caleb's body, but while he was there I took off my glasses to clean them, and I can't see a foot without them. I only had them off a few seconds, though. Why?"

I slipped him my gun. "Karl stole a paper from Caleb's desk. Turn him in to the police."

Kerchok accepted the gun reluctantly. "I can do that without violence," he mumbled. "I never handled a gun."

"The safety is off," I warned. "Keep your finger away from the trigger unless you need to shoot."

Karl was waiting impatiently at the front door, but he managed a faint smile for Audrey. "Don't worry, Miss," he rumbled. "We'll have the cops here right away."

When they were gone Audrey demanded anxiously, "Why did you give up your gun? We might need it. The murderer might be someone we don't even suspect and he may still be in this house."

I took her cold hand in mine. "We'll be okay in the museum. No windows, only one door. I can easily guard that." I hefted a heavy candlestick and grinned with confidence as we took a stand near the closed door.

"I hope this is all a dream, darling," Audrey whispered. "All except the part about you being here."

"Don't worry, baby. We'll always be together after this. I've a hunch that souvenir of mine is going to pay for a long, long honeymoon."

I went on talking, just to keep her mind off the corpse by the desk. Suddenly she stopped me in the middle of a sentence.

"Roy! The air conditioning machine isn't going. We'll have to get out of this room."

"Take it easy, hon. We'll just open the door a little, that's all."

I reached for the doorknob, but the door wouldn't budge. I guess I must've gotten a little panicky because, without thinking, I threw my bum shoulder against the heavy glass-brick—but no go.

"What a dope I am," I said. "The police'll be here soon. They'll let us out long before we suffocate."

And then Audrey put into words the

thought that had suddenly chilled my own backbone.

"Karl—he's so much bigger than Walter. He could easily have taken the gun away and then come back to shut off the air conditioner after locking us in. Maybe—" her voice rose hysterically "—maybe the police will never get here!"

I told her to stay near the door and listen if someone came down the hall. Then I walked around the outer edge of the room, but it was as futile to think of breaking through those glass walls as it was to break down the vault-like outer door.

I passed Caleb's body and thought of poison gas. It gave me a jolt. I strained to hear any hissing sound that would warn of invisible death creeping through the hidden air ducts of the room. There was only the sound of my own breathing, and I wildly paced along the walls, looking for the air ducts.

I came to the glass case and noticed an empty space where three candles were missing. The label read: "Medici Candles." I turned away, but the name Medici pulled me back. Feverishly I read the finer print on the label.

These candles are genuine poison candles made for the infamous Catherine Medici. It is claimed that these candles, burned in a closed room, will release sufficient poison gas to kill a man in twenty minutes.

I could feel my throat burn. The air conditioner had been off for some time and somewhere in this room those candles were burning. But where? How many? There were scores of lighted candles. The best bet would be to snuff them all.

"Slow poison, honey," I explained to Audrey. "Not a pretty way to die. Karl's outside waiting for us to keel over. He'll have to turn the conditioner on again to clear the air for himself. And he'll be coming, because it's my candelabra he's after. He must have heard your uncle talk about what it's worth."

I ran around like crazy trying to find the poison candles, but I had no way of telling which they were. I'd never seen them. Audrey snuffed out a few of the wall candles at random—just to be doing something—but it was a hopeless job. I was afraid Karl might notice through the glass walls if we put out any more. If he thought we were on to his scheme, he'd simply leave the machine off until he was sure we were suffocated.

"This way we have a chance. As soon as the machine starts up, you go over and light those candles you put out. There's no real danger with the conditioner working. They were lit all this while. I picked up a heavy candlestick.

After what seemed a lifetime the air conditioner started up. I moved to the door, weapon ready, and Audrey ran to light the candles. Coming back toward me, her legs buckled and she sank to the floor—out cold. But every thing depended on getting the killer as he stepped through that glass doorway—I had to let her stay there—not knowing whether she was dead or alive.

A key snicked in the lock. The door swung open. I waited another lifetime for him to walk into the trap.

"Very realistic. Very," a familiar voice piped sarcastically from the darkened hallway.

I was too stunned to do anything but listen as the squeaky voice continued. "Miss Carson's act is useless. Wherever you are, Sellers, if you don't appear in the doorway, hands outstretched, in three seconds, I'll be forced to shoot her. One—"

So Kerchok was the killer. And I'd given him my gun!

"Two—"

I was checkmated. Definitely. I dropped the candlestick and stepped into the doorway, hands thrust out. It was Kerchok, all right, his little monkey-face wrinkled into a sarcastic smile.

"I would have disliked shooting Audrey—You may get up now, my dear. I merely want a few baubles which I know are concealed in the Fatal Flower. Behave sensibly and you'll both be safe."

His eyes, magnified by the glasses, were on us continuously.

"Sellers remove the Medici Candles—there—there—and there—and put them out. No need to tell you to hold your breath," he chuckled. "I'd have thought you had inhaled deeply the delightful perfume of the Medici Candles and walked into your trap if I hadn't heard your footsteps above me as I turned on the conditioner."

"Where is Karl?" I demanded.

Kerchok scowled. "I had to kill him. He saw me come out of the rear cellar entrance and told me about it when he let me in at the front door later. When he came in here and he heard Caleb had been—well, he knew too much and demanded a cut."

"I see. You knocked me out and stole my candelabra, then brought it here knowing I'd see it and assume Caleb was—"

He showed small yellow teeth. "Too bad I didn't kill you out there but, as I told you, I'm not accustomed to violence. I came here with your "Fatal Flower," knowing its value but not its secret. Caleb refused to reveal the secret—so. . . . The poison candles were an inspiration."

"Hurry up! Remove those candles, Sellers, and lie down beside her. After I get the gems,

"I'll lock you in. Someone will let you out tomorrow."

Fat chance, I thought. When he leaves, my chance of getting out alive leave with him—Audrey's chance may be over now. My eyes fell to her still figure on the floor.

I removed the first candle and said, hoping to flatter him into lowering the gun, "This poison gas idea of yours was pretty clever, Kerchok."

"I think so myself. I had often considered what might be done with Medici candles, but nothing offered enough profit until Caleb hinted about the value of the Fatal Flower. The air conditioner *could* jam accidentally, you know, causing a regrettable death."

I removed another candle. Kerchok was as alert as ever. I tried again, searching for another question to bait him with.

"How did you learn the secret of the Fatal Flower?"

Kerchok chuckled. "All the while I was trying to persuade Caleb to reveal the secret he had it all written out on the desk. Unfortunately, I failed to see it until you went to phone, and by that time you had noticed it also, though I'm sure you didn't realize what it was."

"But you took only the top sheet," I said.

"It was all I needed, having full instructions. The rest of the manuscript was merely the history of the "Fatal Flower." The directions for finding the secreted gems were very simple; with a little time I could have discovered that the calyxes contain secret compartments opened by heat—thermal action."

A scowl crossed Kerchok's face. "Karl guessed what was on the paper. Naturally

he didn't want me to get out of his sight after that. He probably would have eliminated me and stolen the instructions and the 'Fatal Flower,' but you very helpfully gave me this gun."

He waggled the automatic significantly in his hand.

"And I'm going to use it right now if you don't quit stalling."

I felt licked. I picked off that last candle and started to rub it out against its iron holder.

At that same moment Audrey stirred and moaned. Kerchok's glance dropped to her twisting figure.

I didn't hesitate. The still flaming candle flew straight for the little guy's face. He looked up in time to see the poison taper coming at him. He let out a yell and jumped back. He flung up his arm for protection and pulled the trigger blindly. The slugs zipped over me as I dived for the half-pint killer.

He toppled backward and I knocked the gun from his grasp. After that it was a cinch to lay him out cold. I guess Kerchok just wasn't used to violence—

A slightly hysterical laugh made me whirl around. Audrey was sitting up, her nose wrinkling in that cute way it has.

"Audrey, honey. You're all right! Thank God!"

"Certainly, darling. You don't think I'd really faint, do you?"

I helped her up and took her trembling body in my arms. I kissed her—and I'll be damned if she didn't faint dead away. . . .

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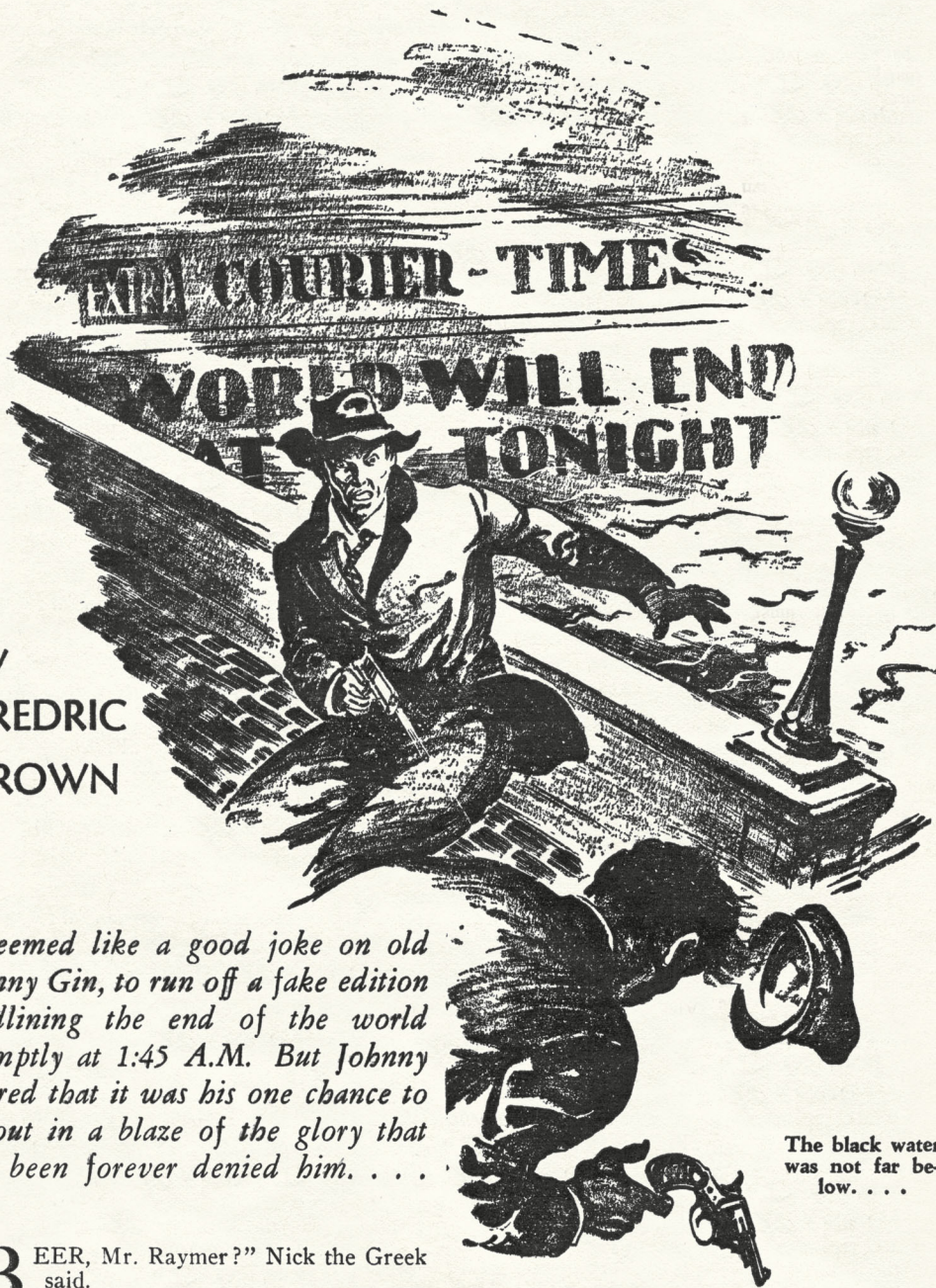
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The Night the World Ended



By
FREDRIC
BROWN

It seemed like a good joke on old Johnny Gin, to run off a fake edition headlining the end of the world promptly at 1:45 A.M. But Johnny figured that it was his one chance to go out in a blaze of the glory that had been forever denied him. . . .

The black water was not far below. . . .

“**B**EER, Mr. Raymer?” Nick the Greek said.

“Yeah, Nick. How’s things? Halloran been in yet?” Dick Raymer, rim man on the Courier-Times, put a foot up on the rail.

“Not yet, Mr. Raymer.” Nick flipped the

suds off, shoved the beer across the bar. “Damn. I hoped I’d miss him.”

Nobody liked Halloran, night-side city editor and general wise guy. His idea of a joke

was to get somebody to break a leg. Like the time he sent a green kid who was trying out for a reporter's job to get a story from Louis Goroni, the numbers king. He figured Goroni would give the kid the scare of his life and toss him out on his pratt. Which is what happened—except being tossed out of a second story window sent the kid to the hospital for three months. P. S. He didn't get on the paper, of course. Halloran was laughing about it for almost a week.

Raymer was the only customer in the place. Johnny Gin was asleep in a back corner, and Metaxes, the cat, was examining a mouse hole with the care it deserved.

Nick drew a short beer for himself, tossed it off. "Well, Mr. Raymer, how long till the next one?"

Next what, Nick?"

"War. Man weeth a beeg moustache in here today say we got another one in ten year. What you theenk?"

"Another war in ten years, Nick, and it would be the end of the world."

The door opened to let another customer in. Raymer slid his glass in wet circles on the bar. "End of the World, Saturday Night," he said, and took a long swallow of his beer.

Somebody beat him on the back, then chuckled as Raymer choked. "What the hell is this 'end of the world' stuff. You been drinking out of the same bottle with Johnny Gin?" Halloran was in a good humor. Probably someone had just slipped on a banana peel he'd dropped.

Raymer straightened up. Nick said, "Hi-yuh, Mr. Halloran. Beer?"

"Yeah. Come on Dick. What's this stuff about the end of the world coming on Saturday night?"

Raymer shrugged. "Name of a painting. Some artist painted a picture of a Paris café called the 'End of the World.' He called his painting 'End of the World, Saturday Night.' That's all."

"So what?" Halloran wanted to know.

"So nothing. I just sort of like it. Let's skip the whole thing. Gimme another beer, Nick."

"That *would* be a headline," Halloran said, "'WORLD WILL END AT 1:45 TONIGHT.' What a stink that would make!"

Nick chuckled. "Maybe she end tonight, huh, Mr. Halloran? This is Saturday night, sure enough."

Raymer smiled wryly. "That would be a story to end all stories, all right. Only you couldn't get away with it—if you're thinking of trying it. One edition of that and you'd spend the rest of your life in jail, if people didn't lynch you first."

Halloran nodded. He put his glass down, empty, and started to turn from the bar.

His eyes fell on Johnny Gin, asleep back in the corner. Sodden, fuzz-witted old Johnny, whose last name nobody knew nor cared about— Just another punchy stew-bum, who had attached himself to the Greek's place because Nick gave him drinks and pretzels for sweeping-out and mopping-up and cuspidor-cleaning.

Halloran laughed. He said, "Wonder what Johnny Gin'd do if he thought the world was going to end tonight. Gimme one more beer, Nick."

Raymer raised one eyebrow half a pica. "Mean you're thinking of running off a special edition just to find out?"

"Special edition, hell. Johnny can't read any type smaller'n headlines. All we got to do is get a galley proof of a banner head and paste it over the regular headline. For that matter, we wouldn't even need a paper; we could just wake him up and tell him the world is going to end. But—uh—"

"But it lacks the artistic touch," supplied Raymer.

Nick said, "Johnny, he just gets dronk, that's all."

"Would he?" Halloran said. "He's drunk all the time anyway. I'll bet it'd scare him sober. I'll bet it'd wake him up."

Raymer said, "I think Nick's right, Halloran. He'd just get a little drunker than usual."

Halloran was feeling good now. He said, "Okay, you mugs, I'll prove it to you. When I take lunch time at eleven, I'll bring in a doctored up— Wait, better, I'll give it to the kid sells papers down on the corner. After I'm in here—and we'll tell Johnny I don't work for the paper any more so he won't wonder why I didn't know already—"

"Johnny, he wouldn't wonder notheeng," said the Greek.

"We'll make it good anyway," Halloran told him. "So after I've been in here a while, the kid sticks his head in the door and yells . . ."

"EXTRA! Extra-EXTRA! ReadALL ABOUT—"

"Gimme one," said Halloran. He gave the kid a coin and got the top paper from the stack. The kid ran back out.

Johnny Gin had been leaning against the end of the bar. Nick had called him over there just before Halloran came in. Halloran had bought him a beer and he had lifted it in a grave toast to his benefactor. But he knew they wouldn't want him to join in the conversation, and that was all right with Johnny Gin.

He didn't have anything to say to them, or they to him. His world was different; his world was made up of things like the pattern

of smudges on the mirror, the feel of that little ridge in the wood of the bar as he ran his fingers back and forth over it, the smell of whiskey, and the strange and dreamlike thoughts he had sometimes—and could never remember clearly afterwards.

He took another pull at the beer. It was weak stuff, but—

"My God!" Halloran was saying, "Nick! Johnny! Look!"

Halloran sounded excited. Probably, Johnny thought, something about the war. People got excited about the war.

To be polite, he peered down the bar at the paper Halloran was holding up. He squinted, but it was just gray paper with a blacker strip running across the top. He had to walk closer, until he was almost near enough to reach out and touch Halloran, before that top line came in focus. It was in big black type, clear across the top of the front page:

"WORLD WILL END AT 1:45 TONIGHT!"

His lips formed the words, mumbly.

"Jeez," Nick said. "Tonight."

Halloran turned the paper around again. His hands trembled a little as he held it so he could read the fine type.

"Collision with—uh—Mars. Mars pulled out of its orbit by—by sudden gravitational shift in sun's power. Mars pulled toward the sun and coming for Earth like a bat out of hell, and it'll hit us at one forty-five tonight—impact will reduce both planets to fine dust—"

"Jeez," said Nick.

"Harvard Observatory, Lick Observatory, all of them confirm it."

He put down the paper. He looked across the bar. "My God," he said. "Nick, we'll be dead in—in two and a quarter hours! All of us. Dead!"

He sounded awfully worked up about it, Johnny Gin thought. But then maybe it would matter a lot to some people. Maybe Halloran had a lot to live for, although he didn't look like it.

So the world was going to end. Well, then there wasn't anything he, Johnny, could do about it, was there? Except, of course—

He sensed that both of them—both Mr. Halloran and Nick—were looking at him now, waiting for him to say something, wondering what he was going to say.

He cleared his throat. "Uh—Nick, can I have a bottle of that Brentwood? A pint, maybe. I'll—" He was going to offer to do some extra work tomorrow, and then realized how silly that was. There wouldn't be any tomorrow. "Uh—can I?"

Nick shrugged. "Told you so," he said to Halloran. "Well, you stuck my neck out. I gotta give it to heem now."

Halloran looked disgusted. "The God damn

bum!" he snarled. "Hasn't got the guts to be afraid." He stomped out.

Nick took a pint bottle from the back-bar and slid it along to Johnny. Johnny opened it with the ease of long practice.

He said, "Thanks. Looking at you—last time." He tilted the bottle and took a moderate swig. He didn't want to get *too* drunk; he'd make his bottle last him. He wanted to be able to walk out into the street a little before it happened, and watch the fireworks. Might be worth seeing.

He went back to the chair in the corner and sat down.

One comforting thought; he wouldn't have to sweep and mop tonight. Nick closed at two, and that would be fifteen minutes too late.

But just the same, he was sorry it was going to happen. It wasn't a bad world; it was a blurry, confusing one sometimes. But he rather liked it, except for those rather dreadful periods when things weren't confusing at all. The times when things were biting clear to him, and he knew what his name had been and what he had been—not that it was anything to brag about, much—and knew what he was now. And those times he drank a lot, and fast, and the memories went away and stayed away for a while.

Tonight, he didn't remember. And that was good. Tonight would be a bad night for remembering.

HE TOOK another drink and looked up. Halloran was gone. Nick was leaning against the back-bar, staring at nothing. Maybe Nick was worried; maybe Nick was afraid to die. Maybe he should say something to make Nick feel better. Nick wasn't a bad guy, except that he was crabby sometimes when there were no customers around.

Johnny said, "It's all right, Nick. We probably won't even feel it when it happens."

Nick swore at him.

So Nick was in that mood. Too bad; might be a good time to talk to somebody. But not Nick. Not if Nick felt like that.

Maybe he should go out. Out on the bridge a few blocks away, where he liked to walk once in a while, to watch the dancing reflections of the lights on the black water.

Sure, and why shouldn't he have a bottle of *good* whiskey—just for this once and last time—to take with him. Why not celebrate? Why not—except for the mood Nick was in—borrow that big automatic Nick kept in the cash drawer under the bar, and—about one o'clock, say—fire it into the sky and yell. Like New Year's—or better.

Hell, the end of the world came only once. A guy ought to do something.

He said, "Nick—"

Nick was coming past the end of the bar, heading for the door that led to the rooms back of the tavern. Nick said, "Back in a few meenutes, Johnny. Call me eef someone come in."

The door closed behind him.

Johnny Gin sat there maybe a minute before it came to him that this was his chance to do what he wanted. Nick was crabby; Nick would never give him a bottle of the good stuff, nor let him borrow the gun. But what did either of those things matter to Nick, when you thought about it? He'd never sell the good whiskey, nor need the gun, would he?

A bit fearfully, Johnny stood up and tip-toed around behind the bar. He left the pint Brentwood bottle, still more than half full, back on the table in the corner. He looked over the bottles on the back-bar.

A cognac bottle took his eye. A fifth, two-thirds full. That would be plenty. And cognac he had drunk once, somewhere. Paris, that was it. Paris on leave and he'd been in a uniform and his arm had been in a sling and he'd had to drink left-handed. He grinned, at the partial recollection. He bent close to peer at the label. Three-Star Hennessy.

He took the bottle gently and reverently, and then turned to the drawer and pulled it open. There was a lot of money there, but money wasn't worth anything now. Nick kept just small change in the register. This was where he kept the big bills for cashing pay-checks.

Johnny Gin reached across the money and picked up the gun. It was big, and heavy in his hand. A forty-five automatic. But it felt familiar. He'd had one of these once, and known how to use it. That had been in France, too.

He didn't hear the back door open, but he heard Nick's shout and turned as Nick, his face distorted with rage, was running toward him, reaching out huge hands. Black murder in Nick's face. And Nick only a few feet away.

The gun went off.

Johnny hadn't meant for it to. Panic had squeezed his hand tight on the gun as he had turned. That was all.

In the confined space of the tavern room, the roar of the forty-five was like—like the end of the world.

Nick stopped coming at him, and stood still a minute, his face stupid.

Johnny whimpered. "Nick, I didn't mean to— I wasn't stealing— Nick, it's the end of the world and I just wanted to—"

Nick fell down and lay there back of the bar and blood came out on the front of his white shirt and a little blood came out of his mouth too.

And Johnny Gin knew it wasn't any use trying to explain to Nick any more.

Blind panic hit Johnny Gin.

He couldn't walk out from behind the bar without walking over the thing that had been Nick Karapoulos. But somehow he was around in front of the bar, so he must have climbed over it. Then he was out in the street, the automatic still clutched in one of his hands and the other tightly gripping the neck of the cognac bottle.

He ran half a block before he stopped, panting. He leaned against a telephone pole until his breath came back.

He needed a drink and he pulled the cork of the cognac bottle with his teeth, spat the cork, and took a long pull. It was raw and fiery and yet smooth, too.

Yes, he remembered that taste now. With the pleasant burn in his throat he stood looking up at the sky and the stars seemed nearer and more fiery and he wondered if they were as hot as the cognac. And this was the last night the stars would shine—so anybody could see them.

The end of the world! You fool, Johnny Gin, what does it matter that you've killed a man when he was going to die within an hour anyway? What does anything matter anymore?

The end of the world. It's the end of the world! *The end of the world!*

Yell at the sky that's going to kill you and fire your gun at it once and maybe you'll hit a star. It's the end of everything, Johnny Gin, and the sky has killed Nick Karapoulos already and you'll never have to mop out his place again.

Windows were going up. Somebody yelled something angry at him. Maybe they'd been asleep, these people, and hadn't seen papers nor had their radios on. Maybe they didn't know—

Johnny yelled it to them as he ran toward the bridge. That was the place. Those lights on the black water, and the stars down deep in the water under the river. The fiery stars in the murderous sky.

Yell, Johnny Gin. But save your bullets until the fireworks really start. Only he was panting again and had to drop to a walk. And there were footsteps behind him now, heavy footsteps that ran, pounding against sidewalk.

They were coming after him, and he tried to hurry faster, and he heard the yell behind him, and then "Stop or I'll fire!" and the bang of a gun, and then the gun in his own hand went off as he whirled around.

And then the blue uniform was down on the sidewalk not coming toward him any more, and there weren't any more pounding footsteps on the sidewalk.

(Please turn to page 96)

Homecoming In Hell!

By Ken Lewis



CHAPTER ONE

Pleasant Dreams—Of Murder!

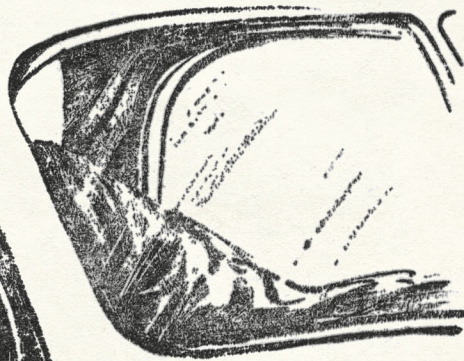
EVEN when I woke up in the taxi, throat parched, eyes bleary, and found Sam Richards' corpse in the seat behind me, I couldn't believe it was real. It was just a dream—vague, half-remembered, even with the evidence of my own guilt staring me in the face.

But the events that led up to that dream I remembered very well. . . .

The letter from Frank Estes was waiting for me when my ship docked. So naturally I caught the first train for Storm City. But it wasn't Frank or the letter I thought about mostly on the train; it was Elaine—how she looked when I saw her last—how she'd look when I saw her again, soon now. She was the *real* reason for this trip, I knew.

● ● Stirring Crime-Mystery Novelette ● ●

Instead of a warm welcome from his girl and his best friend at the station, Nick came home to a hackie who took him for a murder-ride and threw in the cab and the corpse free . . . with no questions answered!



That's all I could remember—even when I turned around and saw the corpse in the seat behind me. . . .



Of course, I had other reasons. Frank had sent for me, and I was willing to do a lot for Frank, after all he'd done for me during those years while we were growing up together. Then, the letter said Sam Richards needed help. And regardless of what had happened later, I still owed Sam a far greater personal debt than I could ever repay.

Third, there was that little matter to settle with Blackie Cerno. The matter of ignoring some pretty corny threats Blackie had made the night I left town.

But above all, this trip meant a chance to see Elaine—to talk to her, maybe hold her in my arms again for the first time in two years.

IT WAS dark when the train reached Storm City. I stood on the platform a minute, drinking in the smoke-tinged air, grinning idiotically at the remembered sights and sounds and smells. Then a redfaced little man in a cab driver's cap was standing at my shoulder, talking low in my ear.

"Sheppard?"

I looked down, tried to place him, couldn't. "Frank sent me. He'll join us later. He didn't think it'd be smart for you guys to meet in the open like this."

I felt my forehead turn into a washboard. I shook my head. "Nuts," I said cheerfully.

The little man laid his head on one side and lifted his shoulders. "Okay, boss. All I know is what Frank told me. But I got a little grapevine on you, bud. You're the guy Blackie Cerno promised to send out in a box, if you ever set your big toe in Storm City again."

If that was supposed to scare me, it didn't. I knew Cerno had come a long way since the night I fought with Sam about him. Then he'd just been one of the petty, chiseling racketeers I thought Sam tolerated too much. His threats hadn't had anything to do with my joining the Merchant Marine the next day.

But the war and its black markets had made Cerno big. If Frank didn't want him to know we were still pals, he'd have his reasons. I shrugged.

"Okay, boss," I mimicked. "Let's go."

I checked my duffle in a locker at the station and followed the little man to his waiting cab.

We parked in the lot of a flyspecked tavern on lower First, and moved through a foggy bar to a private room at the back. The driver motioned to a table and chairs.

"Frank may be a little late. How about a drink?" A bottle and three glasses stood on the table.

I nodded absently. My eyes had fastened on the phone against one wall. "Sure," I said. "In a minute. . . ."

My legs felt rubbery, crossing to the phone. My heart pounded so hard, I had trouble breathing. I had to grin at myself. It was just like the first time I'd ever called up a girl for a date. But a guy gets kind of out of practice with such things after two years.

Elaine herself answered the phone. My heart started pounding all over again when her drawled "Hello" came over. I tried to picture her there at the other end—brown hair swept above her ears the way she liked it, brown eyes, calm and level as her voice.

She'd never win any beauty contests—none except my own personal one. Her nose was a little too short, her chin a little too tilted for that. And there was always a dust of freckles around her cheekbones that makeup couldn't quite hide.

But she'd been my girl since we were kids. And as far as I was concerned she always would be, no matter what happened between me and her old man. I tried to think of something to say, settled for:

"Lainey? . . . Nick!"

"Nick? . . . Nick Sheppard! Oh, *Nick!*"

That made me feel better. There was no mistaking the emotion in those last two words. My own words tumbled out inanelly, like a

phonograph record, before I could stop them.

"I'm in town. Just got in. I couldn't wait to call you—it's been so long. Why didn't you write, Lainey? Why'd you send my letters back unopened?"

Silence. I could almost feel the tension straining back over the wires. *That's a hell of a way to break the ice!* I thought sickly. *That's a hell of a thing to say to a girl, the first time you talk to her in two years! The girl you love!*

Her voice was low, sort of dazed, when she answered. "Letters? But I didn't get any letters, Nick!"

Silence again. Mine, this time. Silence for the muscles to tighten along my jaw, and my stomach to knot up, and red flecks to bother my eyes.

"Sam," I said thickly. "Sam saw to that. Sam saw to it my letters came back unopened."

"Daddy? Yes—I suppose so. But he's not bitter any more, Nick. I—I think he'd like to see you. . . ."

I hardly heard her. I was too mad. "Well, we'll skip the letters," I said tightly. "That's over. What counts now is that I'm back—that nobody can keep us apart any longer. I'll be out, as soon as I talk to Frank."

The silence was longer this time. And the words, when they came, were low, heavy, drained of inflection.

"No. I don't think you'd better. Things have changed since you went away. I thought you'd forgotten me, Nick. I tried to forget you, too."

My heart stopped beating. "Oh," I said slowly. "Any luck?"

"No, Nick. Well, yes. Oh Nick, I'm trying to tell you—I was married two weeks ago. . . ."

I guess my head jerked a little at that. I know my fingers got white and rigid on the receiver. I didn't think to ask her who it was she'd forgotten me with. That didn't matter.

I just stood there a minute, while the phone dropped hollowly into its cradle, and my world fell apart and then arranged itself again. A strange world now—alien. A world without Elaine. . . .

The little redfaced taxi driver looked up quizzically. "I guess Frank's been held up," he said. "We might as well have a drink. You look like maybe you could use one, buddy."

I nodded frozenly. "Sure," I said. "Let's have a drink. Let's have a lot of drinks. Let's drink to Sam Richards. Long may he live!"

And some time later, right there in that little back room waiting for Frank, the dream began.

WHEN I woke the next morning, cold and sick, and found myself slumped over the wheel of the taxi, all I could remember at first was darkness—long stretches of darkness, broken by intermittent shadows, half light—by vague, distorted images like those you see under water at night.

Then sounds—sounds that came and went. Far-off murmurings at times. Then raucous, staccato words. Voices jumbled together, meaningless.

And lacing the sounds and the darkness—movement. Slow and unreal, like figures in a dream. Quick, convulsive—fists hammering, fingers clutching, clawing, twisting.

Last of all, a face. A familiar square-jawed face. Gray hair above the temples. Gray eyes staring in sullen, unblinking horror. A face twisted grotesquely from the stocky body beneath it, with its square jaw pushed curiously to one side.

That's all I could remember—even when I turned around and saw the corpse in the seat behind me, the corpse which wore the face of the dream. I knew whose it was—too well.

That's Sam Richards—Boss Richards. That's the man who took me out of the slums when I was a kid, and brought me home and raised me as his own son—then turned around and cut me off forever from the only girl I'll ever love. . . . But hell, I didn't kill him! I—I couldn't have. . . .

I tried to swallow. My throat had the grating roughness of two files rubbed together. I pulled my eyes too fast to the open cab window beside me, and for a moment the landscape ran together like rain spattering an unfinished watercolor.

Then I saw the gray pre-dawn light fingering the upper windows of the big house a quarter of a mile away through the trees, and I knew where I was. Just off the highway, in the private drive leading up to Sam's country place.

Somewhere in that big house, Elaine lay sleeping, never dreaming that her father. . . . I snapped the thought off savagely, pushed open the cab door and staggered out, rubbing absently at a brown smear on my coat front.

It wasn't blood—just grease from the steering wheel where I'd slumped across it. There wasn't any blood. Sam had been knocked out by a blow that broke his jaw. Then his head had been twisted till the spinal column snapped.

It was just the kind of murder you'd expect from a strong, drink-crazed man carrying a grudge. I turned away sickly.

Half a mile to the west, at a crossroads intersection, the lights of an all-night filling station and lunch shack glimmered weakly in the waning darkness. I remembered that it used to be called the "Truck-Inn."

CHAPTER TWO

When a Killer Needs a Friend

IT WAS still called the "Truck-Inn." And at 5:30 a. m. it was littered with the tag-ends of yesterday's sandwiches and cigarettes, stale as yesterday's beer. I nodded to a dirty-aproned fry cook dozing on a stool beside the grill, ordered a bromo and black coffee, pointed to a rear booth, and slid into a telephone booth beyond it.

The phone rang twice before a sleep-clotted voice said, "What is it?"

It was the kind of voice you'd expect from a square, chunky guy with tan hair and eyes and a lopsided grin—and as good a head for business as you'll find at any board of directors meeting in the country; firm, cheerful, reassuring, even when it was irritated.

Only Frank Estes wasn't a member of any board of directors. Not officially. He'd grown up to be Sam Richards' assistant and confidential secretary.

"Frank?" I said thickly. "This is Nick. What—what happened last night? Have you seen that cabby?"

"Cabby? Where the hell are you, guy? I thought you'd missed the train when I couldn't find you at the station—"

"Then you didn't send that hacker?" My voice was harsh. Even through the dazed fog I'd been moving in, those words socked home.

"Hacker? . . . What the devil is this, guy? Where are you!"

"In trouble," I told him grimly. "The worst kind, Frank—murder trouble. Listen, I'm going to give it to you straight."

I did. When I stopped talking, the line was silent for a moment. Then quietly, gravely: "Did you do it, Nick?"

I groaned. "That's what I've got to find out. Lord knows I was mad enough—half crazy—after what Elaine told me. I guess I was drunk enough, too, from the way I feel now. I might have ditched that cabby, stolen the cab, made an appointment with Sam somewhere, then broken his neck.

"If I did, then I'm willing to turn myself in and take the consequences. Lord knows I'd deserve 'em. Only—well—I'd like to find out a little more, first. I'd like to talk to that cabby. He ought to have a few of the answers, even if I have to jar 'em out of him by force."

The line was quiet again for a minute. I could tell how Frank felt, how anybody would feel under the circumstances. Trying to decide—trying to believe in me, yet not quite being able to, maybe.

Yet the words, when they came, were firm, positive: "You didn't do it, Nick. You were

framed—probably drugged. And I think maybe I know why. If I'm right—if we can prove it—this'll be the best thing that ever happened to this town, much as I loved Sam Richards. For the third time, where are you?"

"'Truck-Inn'. Highway 72. Just west of Sam's place."

"All right. Hold tight, guy. I'll be right out."

THE bromo chased some of the spots away from my eyes, and as I sipped the steaming coffee I let my mind run back, remembering Frank.

I was sorry our reunion would be under these conditions. But as long as the conditions existed, I realized I'd rather have him see them through with me than any man I knew. We'd been raised together for one thing, and we made a pretty good team—he with his blunt good nature and shrewd hard common sense; me with my rangy lankness, blue wool-gathering eyes and tendency to go off half-cocked.

Frank's folks had died in the same explosion that killed my own mother and dad. Our families shared second-story apartments in the same North End tenement, and when a bomb blew up the speakeasy below, the floors had caved in, spilling them all to their deaths—all except Frank and me. We'd been playing in the street outside, and hadn't been hurt.

Sam Richards was just getting well seated in the saddle of Storm City politics at the time. He read in the papers about the two orphaned kids, came down and adopted us both.

That was Sam all over. He hadn't done anything about the mob who blew up the speak. They kicked through too much for protection. But he did his best, personally, to take care of the innocent victims—those who weren't dead.

Everybody in the North End knew Sam as a personal friend. That's how the machine'd stayed in power all these years. Hadn't he bailed their kids out of jail, got them jobs when they needed it most, sent out more Christmas baskets than the Salvation Army? Why shouldn't they vote for anybody Sam endorsed? I made a wry face and ordered more coffee.

Then the front door opened and Frank was coming toward me, sandy hair half-combed, round face flat and drawn, stubby paw outstretched.

He wasted no time in preliminaries. That wasn't Frank's way. He just let me see by the glow in his light brown eyes that he was glad to see me, but his voice was urgent, almost abrupt, when he spoke.

"To understand this, Nick," he said, "you'll have to let me give you a fill-in. And you're going to say, 'I told you so,' when you hear it. But to make a long story short, Sam finally woke up to the danger in Blackie Cerno and his kind. He was going to swing the machine behind the Good Government League this time, as you tried to make him do two years ago.

"My guess is, Blackie found out about it. I've suspected he had some kind of line into Sam's office, for a long time. Some of my personal mail's been opened, in fact. That's probably how he found out what train you were coming in on, so he could send that cab—"

My eyes began to burn. Sure, that made sense! If Blackie'd reached the point where he wanted to throw the town wide open, and Sam stood in his way, he'd want to get rid of the old man all right. Only—

I shook my head. "Blackie wouldn't kill Sam now," I said. "Not the week before election. Sam's murder would be a political bombshell, blowing the machine in a dozen pieces. Nobody'd have a chance of getting anywhere then."

Frank's eyes turned bleak. "You don't know how Blackie's filled out his britches since you left," he said bitterly. "He figures he can step in and take Sam's place himself, keep the machine in line. He's just cocky enough to think that by sewing up an air-tight case against you—one the public as well as the cops will believe—he can get away with Sam's murder and still swing the election—"

THAT was when I stopped listening. I was too busy staring at the counter up front. Four men had pushed through the door. And the first was a small, redfaced man with a taxi driver's cap and grease on his coat front.

I watched long enough to see that the man who followed him was heavyset, sourlipped, in a sagging, pinstripe suit; that the other two wore prowl-car uniforms. Then I pushed to the booth's far corner, as much out of sight as possible, and held a finger to my lips.

"What's this all about?" The little man's voice held just the right note of amiable curiosity.

The heavy man grunted, ordered coffee and doughnuts for four.

"Nothing," he said. "We got a tip that hack you reported stolen last night was out here some place. So we brought you along."

"Yeah? Who tipped you?"

"Nobody. Some screwball. Wouldn't leave no name. Said a cab with the number you gave was parked in the entrance to Sam Richards' place—with a body in the back seat."

The taxi driver tried to whistle with his

mouth crammed full. "Whoeee!" he said. "Yeah," the plainclothesman chuckled, dunking a doughnut. "Anything for a gag. Someday I'm gonna catch one of them funny boys and knock his teeth in. How'd you happen to lose this hack, anyhow?"

The taxi driver gulped coffee. "Jeez that's hot," he said. "Some sailor I picked up down at the station. Wanted to go to a bar. Seemed like a nice guy—just lonely. He asked me in for a drink, so I figured what the hell. Business was bad, anyway. What'd I have to lose?"

The dick laughed. "I know," he said. "Your hack."

"Yeah. Well, we went in and had a few drinks. He made a phone call. I noticed him actin' kinda funny after that, but I let it go. Pretty soon he wanted to leave. Then, when we reached the cab he went crazy. Grabbed the keys out of my hand, give me a shove, jumped in and beat it. That's the last I seen of him."

The detective wiped his lips. "There's our dead body," he said. "He picked Sam's driveway to sleep it off in, woke up before we got here and drove off again. Sailor, you say?"

"Yeah. Some kind of officer, I think."

The detective called for the bill. "Don't worry," he said. "Your hack'll turn up, all right, out of gas somewhere. They always do."

"I hope so," the driver said. "I sure hope so. Just had her over-hauled. Grease job and everything. She run like a dream. I sure hope you find her."

"We will," the plainclothesman said as the door slammed behind them. "We will."

I stared at Frank, my mind whirling like a pinwheel. The round oval of his face was as pale as I'd ever seen it.

"As soon as the cops turn him loose, I'm gonna look me up a taxi driver," I breathed. "I wonder how the devil they missed seeing that cab. . . ."

Then it hit me—like a delayed action bomb. They hadn't found that cab there in the drive entrance, in plain sight of the highway, because it wasn't there any more! Some one had driven it away!

My mouth dropped open and I looked strickenly at Frank. But the tan eyes didn't answer. They were vague, preoccupied.

"This is the screwiest of all the screwy things that've happened since I hit town last night," I murmured. "Who'd steal a cab with a corpse in it?"

His eyes probed mine. "Whoever did it gave us a little more time, anyway," he said oddly.

The morning sun was hot and bright when we left the "Truck-Inn" and started for Frank's roadster, parked in the lot. Black

spots danced before my eyes again as I swung into the sudden light.

Then Frank pulled open the car door and waited for me to climb in, and I saw that at least one of the spots was permanent. A dull brown smudge above the second button of his light sport coat. Somewhere this morning I'd seen a spot like that before—two, in fact.

Suddenly I knew what had become of the taxi!

I put a hand on his shoulder. "I wish you hadn't done that, chum," I said, my eyes fogging a little. "It took plenty of guts and plenty of faith in me. Don't think I don't appreciate that. But I doubt if I'm worth it. You know, don't you, that you've left yourself wide open now, too? Accessory after the fact, if they ever find out. . . ."

The tan eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you babbling about, Nick?" he asked harshly.

I nodded. "Okay. We won't talk about it. But I know about that fork in Sam's drive, a few hundred feet from the entrance. I know the right branch leads to Sam's private picnic grounds down by the river; and that the water's deep enough at the bank to cover a car."

He sighed. "If you stop to think, you'll know something else, too," he said softly. "Somebody tipped off the cops about that cab. Somebody who wanted you found with the corpse—who's probably all set to testify at your trial.

"Only there won't be any trial, without a *corpus delicti*. They can't even hold you for car theft, till they find the cab. Nothing like a little insurance, in case we can't break that frame."

I shook my head. "If we can't break the frame," I said, "ditching the cab won't help. I couldn't go on, knowing Sam's body was down there in the river some place—thinking I killed him. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

Strictly from Hunger

FRANK'S apartment was still cool, despite the gathering heat outside. I sat on a sofa in the living room, scanning the morning *Star-Journal* and trying to hold myself still till Frank got back. The ham and eggs he'd fixed made my stomach feel better, and the good healthy hate I'd worked up for that hacker and whoever sent him made my mind feel a little better, too.

I'd wanted to go after him right away, but Frank pointed out that he probably wouldn't be back from the cops yet, anyhow, and somebody ought to drive out and see Elaine. So I

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86

KEN LEWIS

tried to content myself with memorizing the cabby's name and address, which I'd found in a paragraph story at the bottom of page 13, about his cab having been stolen by "an unidentified sailor."

I was just sitting there, mumbling "Albert F. Fetts, 1372 South Twenty-First" over and over under my breath when the doorbell rang.

Then a key clicked in the lock, and I figured Frank must've returned for something or other he'd forgotten. He couldn't be back from Sam's place already.

But it wasn't Frank who stepped into the square of sunlight made by the opened door. It was a tall lithe girl with soft brown hair and troubled brown eyes.

I stood there and let my eyes drink in the tilt of her chin, and the freckles dusting her nose, and the way the brown hair swept above her ears. I saw the way the red print dress molded the long graceful lines of her body—fuller now, more mature. And I thought:

This is the moment I've been waiting for. Living for, for two years. And now that it's come I'd give every dream I ever had or hope to have to be back on a stinking tanker somewhere in the South Pacific!

She stared at me and a spark lit up, somewhere behind those brown eyes. Then she willed it to sleep again.

"Nick! I—I was looking for Frank. But maybe you can help me even more. What does it mean, Nick? Where's Daddy?"

I hope I never again have a question like that to answer. My eyes dropped sickly and my palms began to sweat. "I—I'm not sure."

"But he was with you last night. Wasn't he? The phone rang about midnight, and I heard him repeat your name. . . ."

I shook my head miserably. "You've got to believe me, Elaine. I don't remember. I don't remember any phone call, except the one to you."

She stared at me bewilderedly, her eyes clouding. "Oh—well, I just supposed it was you. A taxi pulled into the drive a few minutes later and he rode off in it. He didn't come back all night—then this morning I got this queer telegram. . . ."

My fingers were like wax, unfolding the yellow slip she handed me:

ELAINE HONEY. CALLED OUT OF TOWN UNEXPECTEDLY ON BUSINESS. MAY BE GONE SEVERAL DAYS. DON'T WORRY. LOVE AND KISSES.

SAM

I glanced at the time it was sent—6:30 a.m.—and pulled her shakily to the sofa beside

HOMECOMING IN HELL!

me. "I'm afraid Sam never sent that wire, Elaine," I said.

I told her the whole thing then, adding nothing, leaving out nothing. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do.

When I finished, her eyes were dry and bleak. She sat there a minute just staring dully across the room. Then she turned to me.

"You think you killed him, don't you, Nick?"

"Don't *you*?" I parried.

For answer I felt her arms slip around my neck—her breath warm and sweet against my face, her lips pulsant against my mouth.

I wanted to put my arms around her, crush her to me, keep her there forever. But I knew it wasn't that kind of kiss. This was just her way of showing that she believed in me. After all, we'd grown up together.

I wanted to hold her—to comfort her as I would have two years ago. But I let her go.

"Nick," she said unsteadily. "You couldn't have. I know that—even if you don't. Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

I looked at the clock across the room. Frank had been gone long enough. Anyway, this was my job, not his. I made my voice as light as I could.

"All I need's a chauffeur," I told her.

THE 1300 block of South Twenty-first Street centered a square half-mile of cheap rooming houses and walk-up apartments on the other side of town. As Elaine weaved her convertible through mid-morning traffic, I couldn't help noticing that she wore no rings.

"This husband of yours must be quite a boy," I tried to make it sound casual. "Anybody I know?"

The convertible swerved, threatened to climb the curb. She kept her eyes straight ahead, but I noticed that the fingers on the wheel were quivering.

"I—I can't tell you, now, Nick. He—we decided to keep it a secret for awhile. Even Daddy—" The words broke off abruptly.

I whistled. "You *must* be in love, to do that for him. That doesn't sound like you, Lainey."

Her face was rigid, fingers tense. "Love him? Yes. Yes—I suppose so. I thought I did, when I married him. And that was only two weeks ago."

She tried to grin it off. I tried to keep my thoughts out of my eyes and concentrate on the cab driver, as she swung the car to a rub-bish-littered curb and braked. I looked at the glazed-brick apartment house numbered 1372.

"You stay down here," I said. "I might have to do and say some things not fittin' for female eyes and ears."



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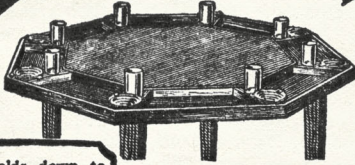
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KEN LEWIS

She nodded absently. "I'll wait. Nick—be careful, won't you?"

A block of glass-paneled mail boxes lining the front foyer showed that Albert F. Fetts lived in apartment 3-B. No one stopped me as I legged through the darkened hall beyond, climbed three tiers of shabbily-carpeted stairs.

No one in apartment 3-B answered my knock. I tried it again, then my fingers dropped to the glass knob, twisted. The door swung in and I stepped forward.

Then I stopped. Clad in blue and green striped pajamas, Albert F. Fetts was asleep on the bed—sprawled crosswise on top of the covers. His jaw lolled strangely to one side, and his stumpy neck twisted at an incredible angle from the body to which it was fastened.

I didn't try to rouse him. I knew that Albert F. Fetts could answer only one of my questions now. His was the sleep that knows no waking.

Nevertheless a great weight of despair and hopelessness and fear drained out of me as I stared at his curiously twisted corpse. I felt almost buoyant. Because now, for the first time since I'd waked up in his cab that morning, I was absolutely certain that I hadn't murdered Sam Richards!

I swallowed twice, crossed to the bed, fingered a pulseless wrist. I glanced around the tiny bachelor apartment, noticing that a window opening on outside service steps was thrown wide.

A small table stood beside the window. I pawed absently through the papers and writing paraphernalia littering it, poked into the lone closet, examined the bathroom.

Then I crossed again to the hall door, set the night latch with a handkerchief-swathed finger, stepped out and pulled the door to behind me. There was nothing in there that would help.

As I turned toward the stair-well again, someone stepped through the glass door opening from a second set of service stairs at the rear of the hall. I didn't stop to chin. The morning sun was behind whoever it was, making a meaningless silhouette of the figure, and I realized that if I didn't want my own face seen here I couldn't very well wait to memorize his.

ELAINE was behind the wheel of the convertible as I came out the front door. "You didn't stay long," she said, her eyes full of questionmarks.

"And I didn't find out much," I said wryly. Before she pressed the starter, I told her about Albert F. Fetts.

I guess what happened next is the inevitable result of lingering too long in the vicinity of

HOMECOMING IN HELL!

a fresh corpse. Because just before Elaine threw the car into gear, a gaunt, musical-comedy type character in a modified green zoot-suit whipped around the firebrick corner of 1372, darted behind the convertible, and came up at Elaine's elbow.

"Hiya, kids," he grinned, and his mouth made a wide gold-studded V beneath his sharp hooked nose, "I'm gonna give ya a chance to be patriotic and share the ride."

As he spoke, the muzzle of a flat little automatic in his right hand crept up and made a chrome-rimmed O above the open window opposite Elaine and a skinny left hand reached in and closed over the keys in the ignition.

"Course I could herd you around the corner to my jalop," he rattled on. "But why should I waste my gas? First, though, let's work out a little better seatin' arrangement. . . . You git out, sis. Bud, you take the wheel. Miss Richards and me'll go around and git in the other side."

The skinny fingers came away with the keys in them, and he moved far enough to one side to let the driver's door swing out. But the angle of the gun remained the same.

Elaine's eyes were blank. Slowly, like an automaton, she put out a hand, pushed at the door, stepped woodenly to the pavement. The green zoot suit swung behind her.

I slid stiffly under the wheel. The character with the reet pleats prodded Elaine in beside me, followed her, slammed the door. He rested the automatic on one bony knee and tossed me the keys.

"Okay, kids," he said cheerfully. "Let 'er flicker!"

"Where to—headquarters?"

He chuckled. "Mebbe, later. If you live that long. . . . Sis, you ain't interduced me to our friend here."

Elaine stared leadenly at the dashboard. "This is Zeke Selfridge, one of Blackie Cer-no's friends, Nick," she said tonelessly.

I sniffed. "How'd you happen to be Johnny-on-the-spot just at the wrong time?" I asked.

"Why, I dropped around t' call on my old friend, Al Fetts. And who should I find goin' outa his room but you. And what should I find when I git inside but that Al's gone out, too—for good."

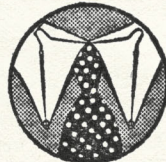
My eyes narrowed. "You still haven't told me where you want us to drop you off, I reminded him dryly.

He slapped his knee. Not the one with the gun on it. "Bud, you're a card!" he chortled. "You must be Nick Sheppard. Blackie was tellin' me just this mornin' that he ain't had a chanct to welcome you home yet. 'If you see Shep,' he says, 'bring him around. For him I'll dig up the keys to the city morgue!'"

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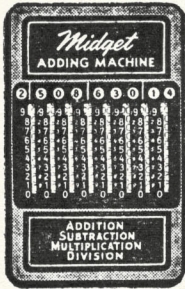
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KEN LEWIS

CHAPTER FOUR

Letter From the Corpse

THE three-story brick warehouse was windowless on three sides. "Cerno Enterprises, Inc.—Importers" stood out in weathered gilt above the absurdly small front door. The sign should have said "Importers of Black Market Commodities, Needled Liquor, Dope, and Murder."

Zeke had me swing the convertible up a deserted loading ramp at the rear.

We stopped before a steel door half way down the shadowy second floor corridor while Zeke knuckled the panel, shoved it back, and pushed us into a luxurious skylighted office.

A dapper little man, half handsome, with dark wavy hair, buncy shoulders, and the barest suggestions of dimples in his olive cheeks, sat behind a big desk centering the room. A radio droned at his elbow.

"Well, Zeke," he said speculatively. He had a black velvet voice with just that touch of accent a lot of women go for. But before he got any further the door opened again and three men came in.

One was short and heavy, with ring-battered features. One was graceful and wispy in a lavender suit and polka dot Sinatra tie. Between them they held Frank Estes.

He was stripped to a pair of blue swimming trunks and he'd been pretty well worked over. Assorted lumps that didn't belong there sprouted from the oval face, his sandy hair was sticky, and there were marks about his head and shoulders that might have been made by an indelible pencil with inch-thick lead.

"Found this monkey takin' a morning plunge in the river behind Sam's Place, Blackie," the ex-pug rasped.

Cerno motioned Elaine to a divan along one wall, and had Pretty Boy and Gargantua stand Frank up beside me. "You boys keep an eye on things outside," he told them. "Zeke'll look after everything here."

They left and Zeke found a chair in the opposite corner, where his automatic could cover everybody. Frank finally recognized me and tried a grin. It was even more lopsided than usual.

"Maybe we shoulda stood in bed this morning, guy," he mumbled through swollen lips.

Blackie looked us over like a schoolmaster surveying a couple of eraser throwers.

"I don't know what to do with you boys," he sighed. "You have certainly been trying to play horse with my election. I can't leave you loose to get into more mischief. But I can't turn you over to the police yet, either."

HOMECOMING IN HELL!

Zeke chuckled. "Mebbe we can jug one of 'em without tippin' our mitt at that, Blackie," he said. "I fergot to tell ya Shep here killed that hacker this mornin'."

Blackie let his eyes widen. "So?" he said. "That makes things ever so much simpler, doesn't it? The police can hold Sheppard for this Fetts thing. Then, when we "permit" them to find Sam's body after the election, they will discover that Sheppard killed the old man, too. You might as well turn him over to them now, Zeke."

MY EYES narrowed. "Wait a minute," I snapped. "Do you just want to toss somebody to the cops? Or do you want to give 'em the real murderer? Somebody they can hold more than twenty-four hours?"

"The gag," I said, "is that I can prove I didn't kill Fetts. The M.E.'s going to find that Fetts was dead quite awhile—half an hour, at least—before Zeke saw me leave the apartment. And I've got an airtight alibi for all the time this morning until a few minutes before Zeke joined us."

Blackie smoothed the hair back down again. "Visiting a sick relative, no doubt?"

"Better than that. Sam Richards' daughter was with me!"

Elaine nodded dully. Blackie turned back to me. "Of course, we could 'eliminate' your alibi. But that would be messy. And I do not like messes. Perhaps you have some other suggestions?"

"Perhaps. First, two sets of conflicting interests have been lousing this thing up almost from the start. One interest sent Fetts to shanghai and drug me, made an appointment with Sam in my name, loaded me in the taxi, drove out and picked up Sam, killed him, left the corpse in the cab with me, then tipped the cops where to find us.

"In other words, the murderer wanted the crime discovered right away, wanted me framed for the kill. He'd have gotten away with it except for two things: First, I woke up too soon and scrambled. Second, this other interest found out what was going on. It was this second interest which drove the cab into the river before the cops got there, and sent Elaine a phony telegram to cover up Sam's absence."

I nodded. "You were the second interest," I said. "You or one of your boys heard the police radio dispatcher assign a prowler car to investigate the taxi tip. You decided to high-tail out and have a look, yourself, because you knew that anything which might involve Sam this near election, also involved your own interests.

"When you found the corpse, you knew

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KEN LEWIS

what would happen at the polls if the news of Sam's death got out before election. Most of the voters were loyal to the machine because they owed allegiance to Sam. But if he turned up dead, half a dozen lieutenants and ward bosses would start fighting to take over and the whole setup would collapse. That would leave the reform party a wide open stretch to the tape and wreck your own illegal little playhouse.

"Meanwhile, the prowl car boys had stopped by to pick up Fetts before making their checkup, and that gave you time to drive the cab into the river and get away again. Later you sent Elaine the telegram in Sam's name, so she wouldn't go running to the cops about his disappearance and start them nosing around all over again."

Blackie studied his fingernails. "Fetts was killed, too," he mused.

"Sure. When the killer found out his frame against me had gone blooey, he knew he had to get rid of Fetts before anybody else had a chance to put pressure on him. Because Fetts alone knew who had hired him to set up the first part of the frame."

BLACKIE thought about that. "Any suggestions as to this mysterious murderer's identity?" he wanted to know.

I shrugged. "The steering wheel of that cab left a little smear of grease on the coat of anybody who slid in or out beneath it," I said. "I saw a smear like that this morning—on the coat of Frank, here. I thought then that he'd got it when he ditched the cab in the river—and he was plenty glad to have me go on believing it.

"Yet why should the boys you stationed out there to keep an eye on things later find him swimming around in the very spot where the cab was hidden? There's only one answer. He was trying to verify my guess about the cab's whereabouts, before he tipped off the cops.

"In other words, he got that grease on his coat driving out to pick up Sam and kill him in the first place. And he still wanted the body found and me framed for the kill!"

Frank looked at me regretfully and shook his head. "It won't do, guy," he said gently. "I admit it wasn't I who hid the cab. I never said it was. But that doesn't make me a murderer. What possible reason could I have for killing Sam, or trying to frame you?"

"Several reasons," I said. "As Elaine's husband, you'd indirectly control a good share of the personal fortune Sam left. And that wasn't hay."

His good eye blinked. He swung it accusingly toward the couch. I shook my head.

HOMECOMING IN HELL!

"No, she didn't tell me. It might have saved a lot of trouble if she had. I should have known, anyway, when I found out she had a key to your apartment. But it wasn't until some other things added up, and I realized the murderer had been planning this frame against me for a long time, that I finally caught on.

"Then, you always dreamed of some day stepping into Sam's shoes as boss. And you recognized Blackie's growing threat to supremacy. You figured that Sam's death just before election would automatically make the machine leaders turn to you, with your background and knowledge of Sam's deals and methods—that they'd have to compromise on you as head man. After that, it would be easy to get rid of Blackie."

Blackie's eyes had narrowed obsidianly. "But why bring you, his best friend, clear back from the coast for a fall guy?" he asked. "If he wanted to kill Sam and hang the frame on someone else, there were a dozen people here in town he could have used."

I nodded. "That takes us back to Elaine again," I said. "He'd talked her into a spur-of-the-moment elopement. But he must have realized that down deep the torch she'd been carrying for me wasn't quite out yet. If he could convince her that I'd murdered Sam, any feeling she might have had for me would have died. That's why he made her keep their marriage a secret. He knew if I found out she was married, I wouldn't have come back at all."

Frank reached over and put a hand on my shoulder. His face was gravely sympathetic. "I'm afraid it still won't do, Guy," he said quietly. "You're just wishing, and you know it. Of course it's hard to make yourself believe you could possibly have done what you did. But don't blame yourself too much. Remember, you were out of your head at the time. It shouldn't be too hard to convince a jury of that."

I let the hand stay where it was. "No," I said grimly. "It shouldn't be hard to convince a jury—of the truth." I turned to Blackie.

"Tomorrow," I said, "you'll get a letter from a dead man, Albert F. Fetts, telling the details of his part of the frame against me, and naming his 'employer.' He didn't know he was letting himself into a murder plot when he signed for the job.

"When he found out, he decided to make a clean breast of it—not to the cops, but to you. I gather that in exchange for the information, he was relying on your influence with the cops to keep his slightly illegal part in the mess covered up."

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KEN LEWIS

Frank stared at me inscrutably, the round flat face hardening into a brittle mask which looked as if it might shatter into a million fragments at any moment.

"What makes you think so, Sheppard?" Blackie's words seemed slow, almost lazy.

"A new desk blotter on the table in Fetts' apartment," I said. "He blotted the letter on it before he mailed it. I could make out enough to guess the rest."

Blackie's slitted eyes fastened on Frank. Frank's lone eye faltered. The tension in the plaster face burst abruptly, as though the flesh had been remolded into a dozen intersecting planes. He dropped to all fours, scuttled around the big desk before Zeke could focus the automatic.

Then the chunky shoulders heaved up again. An elbow slashed at Blackie's jaw, and I realized how Sam and Fetts had been knocked out before their necks were broken.

Blackie's head flipped to one side. He dropped a hand into a coat pocket, didn't bother to take it out. There was a muffled roar; the bitter smell of cordite and scorched fabric.

Blackie stepped back. Feeble thrashing sounds came from the carpet behind the desk. Then silence.

ELAINE began to sob quietly. I crossed to the sofa, put an arm around her quivering shoulders. Blackie looked at us and sighed.

"You two," he said, "are a problem. If only you hadn't been so bright about that taxi cab. There is only one thing for me to do, now. You see that, of course. If I let you leave here alive, you would merely go straight to the police and help them locate Sam's body. I can't have that."

I looked at Zeke. Zeke looked right back. So did his gun.

"Too late, Blackie," I murmured. "Listen."

Words spilled softly from the desk radio: "We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a special news bulletin. The body of Sam Richards, North End contractor whose career had been linked to control of Storm City politics for more than two decades, has just been found in a taxi submerged in the Zee



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river near his country estate two miles north of town. . . .

"Police are seeking Roger A. 'Blackie' Cerno, Richards' erstwhile associate and alleged political rival, for questioning. . . ."

I looked at Elaine. She nodded confirmation shakily.

"I phoned them from that apartment house, while you were still upstairs, Nick," she said. "It didn't seem right, leaving Dad's body down there any longer. . . ."

Blackie looked suddenly old, tired, sick. "There goes the ball game," I told him. "You might as well start packing. The reform boys are as good as in. You're finally through, Blackie. You and Sam and Frank—all washed up in one day. A nice day's work, if I may say so," I smiled.

The door burst in and a voice roared hoarsely: "Cops outside, Blackie. I got the front door barricaded, but they won't listen to reason. What the hell are we payin' protection for?"

Blackie studied his fingernails. I crossed to the desk. "Keep Elaine and me out of this, when they get here," I said. "We just dropped in for a social call. It was all Frank's work. He murdered Sam with the hacker's help, hid the cab, then killed his accomplice. Tell it that way, and we'll swear you gunned him in self defense."

Below, the pounding on the front door had acquired the measured rhythm of a battering ram. Blackie stared at me, eyes flashing. "Damn it, I did shoot him in self defense! He was after my gun. He would have killed us all to get away!"

I grinned. "But it might help if somebody besides Zeke swore to that for you," I told him.

AFTER the cops had trundled out their wicker basket, taken our statements, and left again, Zeke looked over at me with that twinkle in his eye.

"Funny," he said. "I went over that little table in Al Fetts' place pretty careful. I would've sworn there wasn't no blotter on it."

I grinned again. "Maybe you're right, Zeke," I said. "Maybe Al wrote that incriminating letter in pencil."

Zeke chuckled. "Prob'ly, Al couldn't even write," he said.

I turned back to Elaine. "It'll be a lot easier to forget all this," I said gently, "if we get out of this stinking town for good."

She nodded. Her hands found mine and she held up her face like a lost child who has suddenly found someone it loves and trusts.

"But I'm glad I came back," I finished unsteadily, minutes later. "I'm glad I came back. . . ."

THE END

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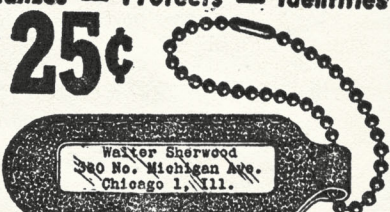


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FREDRIC BROWN

(Continued from page 79)

HE HADN'T meant to do that, either. He hadn't known that he could—or else that shot had been uncannily lucky. He hadn't meant to—but he couldn't let them stop him now. Not with the fireworks, the big fireworks, so near.

He stumbled on, then had to rest a moment again, leaning against a building. He put the cognac bottle to his lips, gulped, then choked and coughed.

He was stumbling on again, and there was the long approach to the bridge and he was going up, and then there was water under the bridge and he stopped and leaned over looking down into the star-spangled blackness of the water and the rippling lights and the quiet silver wake of the sailing moon.

He put the gun in his pocket to have a hand free and he lifted the bottle again. There was only a little in the bottom; most of it must have slopped out while he ran. It burned his throat, and his throat and his soul felt raw, and there was no surcease in the quiet of the water below him.

You've killed a man, Johnny Gin. Two men, probably, and one of them a policeman. And the end of the world is sour on your stomach and you remember the blood that came out of Nick Karapoulos' mouth, and you're beginning to remember other things, too.

It's messy, Johnny Gin. It's not a good end to the world, and you know it. And you may not even last till it comes, because they'll be sending the squad cars for you, and they are sending them, because there is the far wail of the siren, shrieking closer.

And here on the open bridge, no place to hide.

Shrieking closer. They'll shoot you, Johnny Gin.

Shrieking closer.

And the black water not far below, and he was climbing over the rail. They'd never find him there, in the black water.

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The awful shock of the black, cold water. And floundering and drowning—only then not drowning for he was standing on the bottom, once he'd righted himself, and the water was only chest-high, and his teeth were chattering. Chattering so that he wondered that the squad-car shrieking overhead didn't hear the sound.

Cold, deathly cold, and cold sober. The shock, and then the worse shock as things came back to him and he knew what had happened.

With the shock of the cold water, the curse of clarity was upon him. Slowly, the man who had been Johnny Gin worked his way toward the shore of the black, icy water . . .

THE voice of the girl at the downstairs switchboard sounded strange, very strange: "Yes, Mr. Halloran, he says to tell you he's coming up to see you."

Halloran bellowed, "Tell him *no*, I said. It's almost deadline. This edition goes to press at one forty-five and you know it. He'll have to—"

The voice of the switchboard girl was stranger still. "I—but Mr. Halloran, he's got a gun. He says he won't be stopped. But he wants you to *know* he's coming."

"Huh?" said Halloran. "*What'd* you say his name is?"

"John Wilcox, Mr. Halloran—and—" Halloran heard the girl hesitate and another voice say something to her. "—and he says he's got to see you by one forty-five. He says the world is going to—uh—end, at one forty-five. I—uh—think he's—uh—serious, Mr. Halloran."

Halloran's face went pale. He looked up at the clock.

"Get the police," he said, "the minute he leaves to come up here!"

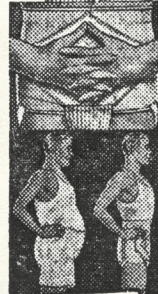
"All right, Mr. Halloran, he says to tell you now he's com—"

Halloran slammed down the receiver and ran.

And it was nice timing. He made his deadline—though not the way he intended.

It was just exactly one forty-five when Halloran ran out of the back door into the alley that led to the end of his world. John Wilcox, who had been Johnny Gin, was waiting for him there with a passport to Hell.

Too bad, really, that Halloran didn't live to appreciate it. At that, he might not have. I told you he wasn't very subtle.



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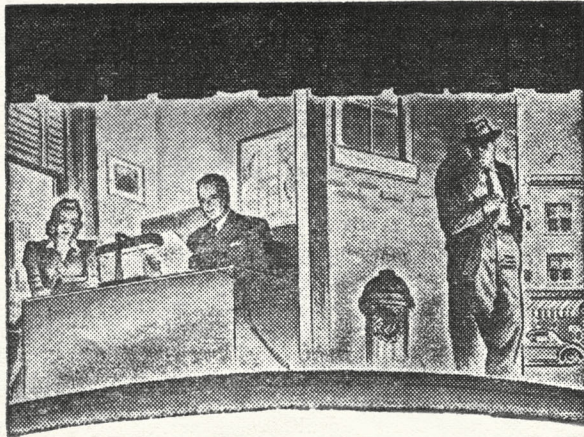
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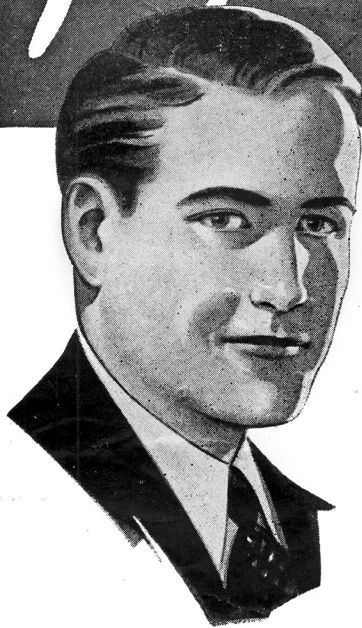
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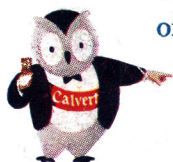
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