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BY MYSTERY



**WHAT
MAKES
SAMMY
KILL?**

64

**FRANCIS
K. ALLAN**

**DEATH-DANCE
OF THE
BROKEN DOLLS**

by **ARTHUR LEO
ZAGAT**

PLUNKETT-CLARK

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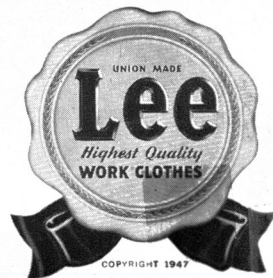
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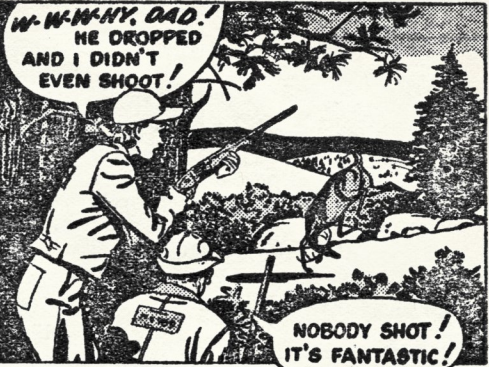
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Volume 34

March, 1947

Number 3

TWO GRIPPING MYSTERY-MURDER NOVELS

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 For Sammy Lane, that girl was the beginning of the end. Each hour he knew her put him farther away from the altar—and closer to a slab in the morgue!
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—AND—

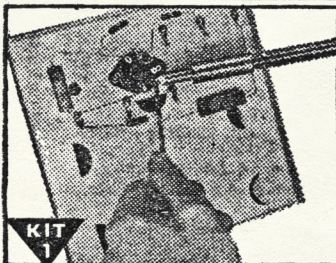
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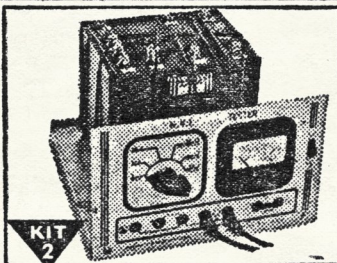


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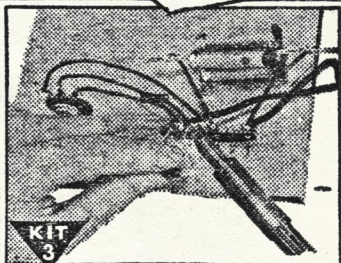
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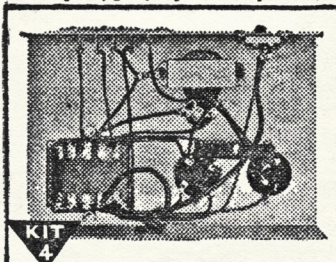
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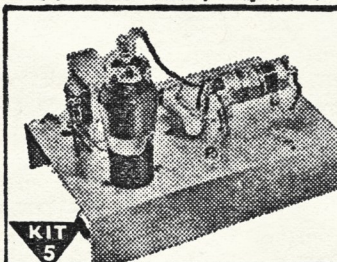
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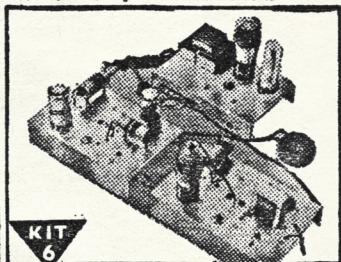
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Macabre Museum

Mayan & Jakobsson



In Hoosick Falls, N. Y., there's a monument → immortalizing an ancient crime. A grave-stone inscription reads:

RUTH SPRAGUE
 dau. of Gibson & Elizabeth Sprague,
 died Jan. 11, 1846; aged 9 years, 4 mo's &
 3 days. She was stolen from the grave by Dr.
 Roderick R. Clow & dissected at Dr. P. M. Arm-
 strong's office in Hoosick, N. Y., from which
 place her mutilated remains were obtained &
 deposited here.

Her body dissected by fiendish men
 Her bones anatomized,
 Where few physicians rise.
 Her soul we trust has risen to God,



If the sun shines a little brighter now over → Hampton, New Hampshire—well, it could be the ghost of Goody Cole smiling at last. Goody used to let the sailors stock their ships with water from her well and they swore the water never grew tainted. But as she grew older, her sharp tongue prophesied disasters—some of which came true—and Goody was convicted of witchcraft, flogged, and finally buried in a roadside ditch with a stake through her heart and a horseshoe dangling from the grisly monument.

This was 300 years ago. Recently, the town officially reversed the decision, burned all the evidence against Goody and restored her official-ly to the voters' rolls!

← The Busche brothers, Clarence and Freddie, were literally kill-crazy. Their first victim was an Arkansas law officer, Hiram Potts, who objected to their loitering near some railroad tracks. Next they shot to death an acquaintance, Gene Wier, in order to examine his new pistol! After that they killed two men at a dance because the affair was breaking up before the brothers wanted to go home. Their following victim was chosen to try out a new shotgun!

Their capture was equally fantastic—farmers throughout the vicinity, hanging on to party-line telephones, followed all the brothers' move-ments and directed police to a showdown shoot-out in which both died!



← Once upon a time a handsome Hungarian baron named Podmaniczky presented his sweetheart with a pair of opal earrings. She wore them for three days and died. The baron married somebody else, and hid the earrings where his daughter found them after his death. She wore them once, tripped, broke a leg and died a cripple. Young Count Ferenc Vigyazo, a member of the family, inherited them—and promptly jumped out of a high window.

Well, sir, Budapest's museum inherited the earrings. The curator promptly staged a theft to get hold of those damned—pardon, cursed—ear-rings, which were found to be relatively cheap baubles!



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By
FRANCIS K. ALLAN



"Now! It's going to be
now!"

CHAPTER ONE

Blackmail Bait

HE WAS part of that Broadway world where legends are built on rye and rumors and blondes and diamonds—and yesterdays have no mourning. They gave him a dozen names: The Mouthpiece, Sammy Silent, Brains Lane. . . But the one that stuck was the one that fitted him closest: The Golden Sphinx.

Remember him? . . . Lean and cool as steel wire in winter. Golden-bronze hair like the

mane of a lion, and brown eyes that were older than stone. A custom-made suit, always brown, and white silk shirts and soft ties. He never wore a hat, and he never raised his voice.

Quiet and hard was the thing you thought about him. His face was thin with a lonely, listening look, and sometimes his lips made a smile. But he got his name from his eyes. They looked like they'd lived forever, watch-

WHAT MAKES SAMMY KILL?

Powerful Broadway Murder Novel

You don't hear of the Golden Sphinx nor of Sammy Lane any more. You never will. For the clocks ran too fast in the world he lived in, and time ran out when Sammy tried to buck the rap that no man ever beats!



ing every fraud and double-cross in Manhattan. There was nothing they'd ever forgotten, and nothing they ever told.

You don't hear of him anymore. You never will. The clocks run fast in the world where he lived, and the clocks have hungry hands.

But he wouldn't say it was luck—the thing that ended him. He believed that everything—every break and drop of rain, every buck and kiss and bullet was stacked in the deck of cards. It was there. You took it when it came. And never did you cry.

It started—the end of the Golden Sphinx legend—in a warm Irish bar on Third Avenue, just a month ago. It was the hour of whispers and cocktails and winter twilight when he walked in. A little blonde watched him wistfully, and a tired reporter sighed. The bartender polished a place for him and asked how he was, Mr. Lane? And beside him at the bar, this slender girl with the midnight hair swayed and touched his shoulders. For a moment he saw her dark and frightened eyes.

"I . . . Sorry but . . . it hurts so terribly," she said very quietly. Sam Lane caught her as she fainted. Her purse fell open. Maybe he saw the six dollars and the pawn-ticket, or the half sandwich in her handkerchief. Or maybe it was the stillness of her in his arms.

Whatever it was, he rode in the ambulance with her to Hudson Hospital. Appendicitis, the doctor said. Sam left three hundred dollars and his name, in case. And that was the start of the end. A girl.

Her name was Joan Martin, and her mother taught school in Tulsa. She'd come to New York a month before, with a hundred dollars and a sack of songs. She still had the songs. She was twenty-two. She'd been lonely that night, and frightened. She'd never been in a bar before.

Her voice was low and shy. Her face was lovely and pale. She told him those things when he came to see her in her ward. And he came again, with orchids. They talked, but not much about him. Somewhere Raggy West tried to call him and cursed to himself. Nick Angel wanted him in Brooklyn, but Sam Lane had forgotten. They say it's always a girl. . .

And somewhere, too, Dolly DeSautels was calling and tapping her fingers. And thinking, just wondering, behind her green eyes.

The night she left the hospital, Sam gave the cabby a new address. "There's something I want to show you, Joan," he said.

THEY went up in a self service elevator to the penthouse on the twelfth floor. The windows looked across the East River and the rugs hugged your ankles. "Do you live here, Sam?" She didn't know much about him. That was the part they had skipped.

"Not yet. Look, Joan. . ." He touched her

chin, lifting her eyes to meet his. "Here it is. And here is this. You know what I'm saying. . ." And then she saw it—a wedding ring, thin and silvery, there in the palm of his hand.

"Sam. . . Oh, but Sam. . ." she breathed. Funny, the times girls can cry. "But you don't know me. You couldn't be sure that you want—"

"Couldn't I?" His voice was low and ragged. "I can't even tell you. Me—the guy with the silver tongue. But there's a lot I've got to tell you. About me, and not very pretty, Joan. Sit down and—"

"Sam. . ." She held his chin in her soft fingers and her eyes were like summer stars. "Don't. Not tonight. That can be . . . Let it be part of later. The part that doesn't matter and never will."

He kissed her. Sam, the lawyer whose brain was a graveyard for a thousand crooked deals. Sam, the Brain for Nick Angel, the Fix for Big Eddie the Rose. Sam, the guy who trusted nothing. He kissed her and closed his eyes, for the penthouse wall held a mirror for a face he hated to see.

It was midnight when he took her home. He walked a while in the hushed whisper of snow-fall, and his eyes were far away. He wanted to see the new place again. To touch the clean walls and tip-toe through the stillness. He wanted to think alone. He bought a paper and took a cab.

It was clean here. And nobody knew. Eddie could not call. Nick Angel could sweat while Paddy stayed in jail. They would never walk in here. *Never*. Joan would never see them. The walls would always stay clean. He stopped in front of the mirror and his eyes got narrow and cold. "Golden Sphinx. . ." Then he laughed, low and bitter. "Sammy, you're too lucky to be alive. . ." He turned away. It was a funny thing for a guy as good looking as Sam: he had always hated mirrors.

He was reading the paper when he found it—the second paragraph in Lon Denny's Broadway Peeps and Sighs:

We get it from the East Side pigeons who fly along penthouse-way. The Golden Sphinx (Sam Lane, you dope) is in a ring-and-slippers mood. In fact says here, he's been trying penthouses for wedding-size. Are you listening, Dolly? Ummm? . . . You and you might double-check at the Tower Arms, Penthouse 2-B. And once again, Are you listening, Dolly? . . .

The ageless brown froze in his eyes. He sat there, and that was when the door opened and closed behind Dolly DeSautels. She leaned back against the door, swaying a little, with the snow melting in her gold hair, and wearing the short mink jacket he'd given her last Christmas.

"Lo, Sphinxy," she said huskily. She was breathing soft and fast. Her ivory cheeks were flushed. There was a restless beauty about her that made you think of a summer storm. "Sphinxy. . . Got himself a penthouse." Her green eyes roamed slowly.

"You're drunk, Dolly," Sam said quietly.

"Dolly's drunk." She started to laugh. Abruptly she stopped and her beauty was stained with sudden fury. "Where's your little corn-fed tramp? I can sweeten her ears with a few things that she—"

"Shut up!" He caught her as she touched the bedroom door. "You're keeping your hands off this place, understand?" It was barely a whisper.

Her eyes sparkled into his. Her lips curved. "You damned skirt-hungry rat!" There was a fast sharp smack, and her fingers left their prints of red on his cheek. She stepped back. "Say something! Give me your gab about how—"

"Shut up and get out forever," he said quietly.

"Get out! You're dusting me off like that?" She laughed, high and drunk-like, until her voice cracked and she just stood there, her eyes blazing and her hand against her throat. "Look, Smart Sammy," she whispered. "You're not so smart, see? . . . You've left papers around at your place. Plenty for little girls who know when they're double-crossed. I said it to Lon Denny an hour ago, and I'm telling it to you. You're not saying a good-by. You're getting ready to buy one, see? . . . Or else."

"Or what?" The quietest of smiles hinted around his lips, but never reached his eyes. His fingers twitched once at his sides.

"Or Nick Angel might get mad because I know things. Like the framed rap you pinned on Rabbit Hickson. Maybe Nick would decide you should stick around not so long. I . . . Quit feeding me that silent stuff!" she screamed. She kicked at the coffee table. "I can get you disbarred! I can tell things to little Corn-Fed! I can muss your pretty hair plenty, just like this—" She reached out toward him.

"Stop it, you drunk fool!" He grasped her elbows. She fought against his grip, ripped at his tie, scratched his face. "Get out!" He sent her stumbling against the door. The golden waves of hair fell across her eyes. Suddenly she began to cry in wild choking sobs.

"You can't . . . do it! You and somebody else! I'll—" She saw the long bronze letter-opener on the desk. With a scrambling lunge, she grasped it. "Pretty damned chairs!" She ripped at the gray upholstery and the padding foamed out. "You think it's so pretty! You think you can throw me out!" she screamed.

She slashed at the drapes. She was half insane.

"DAMN you!" Sam grasped her wrist and twisted. Dolly dropped the knife with a scream. Slowly he picked it up. For a full minute he stood there, holding her and staring into her eyes. "Dolly, I swear to God I want to kill you," he said in a whisper.

"You— You—" she panted. Suddenly her face was gray with fear.

"Get out forever!" He threw the knife against the wall and turned. Dolly sank down on her knees in a ball of faded gold and began to cry softly. Sam stared at her, then opened the bedroom door and closed it behind him. His face was wet with perspiration. His fingers shook. He could still hear the sound of her sobs. He went into the kitchen, closing each door behind him. He raised the window and leaned out where the snow and cold washed his face. He breathed again and leaned at the window, smoking a cigarette. And at last he listened. The penthouse was silent. Dolly was gone. Slowly he walked back, wondering in a thin corner of his brain what had kept him from killing her.

But she was not gone. She lay there on the deep carpet like a tired doll gone to sleep. One silken leg was curled under her, and she lay on her back with golden hair tumbled in her face. With her hungry fingers open, palms-up. There was the darkness of blood at the deep curve of her breast. The bronze letter-opener was buried in her heart, and the room was empty.

A low wordless sound came from Sam's lips. His eyes tilted toward the door. He tiptoed like a wary dancer and knelt beside her. His lips parted to speak her name, then closed without a sound.

With a strangely gentle motion, he pushed the fallen waves from her eyes. They were closed forever. And he thought of the times they had laughed and cried, and yearned and tempted. And he looked at her lips and remembered. Nothing changed in the lean mask of his face, but his eyes were sad for her. It was over in less than a minute. He started to rise. He heard the sound of footsteps in the hall, hurrying nearer. They stopped outside the door.

A fragment of decision hardened his features. He slid across the room, snapped open the light, and passed into the bedroom. It was done in an instant and the door was closed. He was breathing lightly, swiftly. He heard someone enter the living room. He glided on into the kitchen and knelt in the pantry. His eyes were black with listening. He flexed his fingers and wiped his lips with his tongue. In his mind he measured the time. Five minutes. . . Ten. . . No sounds. Perhaps the person was gone. If so, there was a job to do.

Swiftly, before the body was found by someone.

Gradually he straightened and opened the bedroom door. Still no sound. He worked through the darkness to the living room door and listened. Still no sound. . . Inch by silent inch he edged the door open. Slowly the emptiness of the room spread out before him.

The unknown visitor was gone.

He wiped his hands against his coat as he stepped in. He stopped still. His jaw loosened. His brows jerked upward.

The letter-opener had been taken from the body. Now it rested in its place on the blotter of the desk—wiped perfectly clean of blood.

Sam started to touch it, incredulously, then pulled his fingers back. His eyes were stormy with thought. This was something else; an added element beyond pure murder. So why? . . . *Why* had the death weapon been removed and cleaned? *Why*?

There was some trick to it, he thought coldly. His eyes swept the room furiously. Anger born of uncertainty and suspicion grasped his brain. More than murder itself, the mystery of ignorance taunted him. Someone was plotting something against him!

"But whatever you planned, maybe it's not going to work," Sam whispered. "Maybe you left fingerprints. Maybe. . ." He slipped out his handkerchief, lifted the opener deftly, and with one twitch of lips, he drove it back into the death wound. "So now, it's not like you wanted it, anyway," he said with finality. He swept the room with a last glance, then looked into the hall. Quickly he closed the door behind him and used the stairway.

It was two o'clock when Sam passed through the chrome-and-mirrors lobby of the Mandolin Hotel where Dolly had lived. It was no better or worse than a hundred other places where the broken dreams of Broadway got to sleep. Just a half-block off Times Square—gaudy mirrors with neon lights at each side, glassy-blue walls, and ten floors of dusty cells above.

The elevator was up. The lobby was empty. He used the stairs and his key. Yes, he still had the key.

Her glossy photographs crowded the dresser and walls, broken links of the past, before gin had broken her lilting voice. The bed was unmade. A filmy nightgown was thrown over a chair. The dresser drawers were open, their contents spilled. A string of imitation pearls was broken on the floor.

"Too late," Sam whispered. Too late to save whatever blackmail bait that Dolly might have had. "But somebody came on time. Somebody, maybe, who knew?" He sighed and shrugged. For some reason, he knew not why, he picked up the phony pearls and laid them on the dresser. He looked at the almost empty gin bottle in the bathroom. "Goodnight,

kid. I hope you get a good spot in the next show," he said quietly.

There was something about him that wasn't strictly Broadway.

HE WANTED to see Lon Denny, but that would have to be later. Not now. Not until the body was found, until somebody tilted a hand.

That was the way he'd always worked, understand? Quiet, smooth, waiting somebody out. It was the only smart way. And yet . . .

There was a sharpness in the night that made him cold, and a restlessness in his nerves. What time was it? He fingered his watch. Quickly he glanced down. It was gone! Not the watch; you could buy watches anywhere. His luck was gone. The fob chain was broken, and his luck was gone.

It couldn't have cost more than two dollars, and that was years ago. But his dad had given it to him the night he graduated from high school. The night he made the speech from the dusty flag-draped stage. That was in Indiana, in a town ten miles from a railroad. Samuel Lanleski, Class Orator. He'd go somewhere, that kid. Smart and even tempered. And quiet. His mind on his work, see? And after the speech, his dad had given him the imitation gold watch fob. Lanleski had been his dad's name; he couldn't read and his hands were like worn stumps. But the ditches he dug were *straight* ditches.

"For the Luck, boy. Joost for Luck," he'd said to Sam. The next year he had died, and Sam had come to New York on the five hundred dollars in insurance. It was a long time ago. A long way away—too far back to reach again. But the Luck had been with him always.

Tonight it was gone.

And standing there in the night and snow, Sam whispered something to himself very quietly, "You never find the good things that are lost."

Call it superstition. Call it anything. But there, on that corner and in that minute, he knew that his luck was through.

It was long after three in the morning when he entered his old apartment west of Columbus Circle. He shucked his coat and tie and reached for his collar. The doorbell gave a long blast. First he lit a cigarette, ran his fingers through his bronze hair, then slowly he walked through the silent apartment toward the front door.

"Yes? Oh, hello, Radford." He knew nearly all the dicks. He knew they all hated him, and there was a two-jump promotion waiting for his number. That's why he was surprised to see Radford, this big, loose-boned, sleepy guy. It really should have been Captain Vaden.

"Got time for a ride downtown?" Radford's voice was dry and ironic.

"Anytime you boys need me. Let me get my coat." He dressed again and reached to stroke The Luck. Oh. . . Yes, it was gone. For a moment he'd forgotten. And he felt tired as he went down in the elevator. "What's going at this time in the morning?" he wondered in the car.

"An old friend of yours got it tonight. Dolly DeSautels."

Sam turned, just slowly and deliberately enough. "You're telling me bad jokes."

"You can write your complaints to the morgue. They said it." He pushed a stick of gum in his mouth. "That's a pretty plush layout you found yourself. That penthouse job, I mean."

"It'll keep the rain out. Why?"

"That's where Dolly was killed."

Now it was time to be surprised. "The Hell she was! In my place?"

"Kind of mussed-up a pretty rug, too." He chewed awhile. "I guess you've got certain places and times for everything tonight?"

"I'd have to think. But I *didn't* kill Dolly."

"Nope. . ." Radford sighed. "We know it. In fact, we've got the murderer." He gave Sam a tired sideways glance. "You've messed-up a lot of lives in your life. You could have left this kid alone."

"What do you mean?" Sam said fast, soft.

"Just what I said. For a kiss and a fast buck, you make a kid go dreaming. She starts thinking you're holy. A penthouse and wedding rings. So another gal walks in and—"

"What in Hell are you talking about?" Sam rasped.

"Joan Martin. Oh, sure. She killed Dolly. Confessed it. But you could have left her alone. Broadway has a million, and smart enough—"

"You stupid idiot! Joan Martin couldn't kill a joke! Hurry up! My God, and they call you people detectives!"

Captain Vaden was sitting on the corner of his desk, swinging his leg, when Radford took Sam in. He was a tall man, Vaden, with thinning black hair and chill black eyes and in-sunken leathery cheeks.

"What kind of poppy vine are you smoking down here tonight?" Sam said angrily. "Let me talk to her. Confessed the murder!" He stared at Vaden. "Have you ever looked in her eyes."

"And so have you, Sammy," Vaden said drily. He reached into his wire basket and picked up a sheet of paper. "At approximately one a. m. this morning, Patrolman D. Basrick of the East Fifty-fourth Street Station observed a woman as she ran from the Tower Arms apartment building on East Forty-ninth Street. His curiosity was aroused by the ob-

vious anxiety of her movement. At the corner of Forty-ninth and Third Avenue, she was seen throwing something white into the gutter. When Basrick picked it up, it proved to be a woman's handkerchief with the initials J. M. in the corner. And it was wet with blood." Vaden paused and glanced brightly over the top of the paper.

"What crushing evidence! One entire handkerchief that—"

HIS suspicions further aroused," Vaden continued deliberately, "Patrolman Basrick secured a cab and followed the woman to the Wescott Hotel on West Twenty-fourth Street where he learned her identity from the night clerk. She was Miss Joan Martin. She had returned once before midnight with Mr. Sam Lane, and then had left alone. Thereupon, Basrick called his station and Detective Radford was sent to join him. They returned to the Tower Arms, where Radford established the fact that Mr. Sam Lane had become the tenant of Penthouse 2-B. Acting upon his own initiative, after failing to obtain response to his knocks at this penthouse, Radford opened the door. In the living room, and upon the floor of this apartment, Radford discovered the body of a woman whose identity he was able to establish. She was Miss Dolly DeSautels, a former singer and a person of some—"

"You're not in a court room! Just tell me what happened."

Vaden gave him a long ebony look, then dropped the paper back into the basket. "Dolly had been stabbed to death, Sammy. A letter-opener in her heart. It was still there. Radford left the cop and went to Joan Martin's room at the Wescott. Apparently she'd done nothing but stand there since the murder. Blood was still on her hands, under her fingernails. There was a diamond bracelet on the dresser. There was blood on the outside, and Dolly's name on the inside. In fact," he said, "the words went like this: To Dolly, For Smiles On Your Birthday, From a Guy Named Sam." He paused. "Remember?"

"We're talking about murder, not ice. You said she confessed?"

"It wasn't needed much. Her prints were a foot thick on the death weapon. The cop had seen plenty. Radford found plenty more. Also we waked up a few people at the Tower Arms. We found a woman who swore she'd ridden up in the elevator with this Joan Martin. She placed the time at about twelve-thirty. It. . . Well, she confessed anyway. Said she was jealous of Dolly. She'd come back to the penthouse to get a purse she'd left when she was there earlier with you. She found Dolly there, drunk and mad, threatening to start trouble. She hated Dolly, anyways. Was afraid Dolly

would whistle you back. So she gave Dolly the end of the knife, then took the bracelet. She'd never had any diamonds. She wanted them. And because you'd given them to Dolly, it gnawed at her. She . . . Well, that's it. It was a lousy, clumsy, damn job. A mewing kid could have pulled it neater, but a girl . . . Hell, you should know about girls," he said sarcastically.

"I know about *this* girl," Sam said quietly. "I want to see her. Alone." They looked at each other—Vaden coldly, and Sam with his eyes in brown embers. Finally Vaden shrugged.

"I don't give a damn. You can't hurt her any more." He got up and led the way through a door, along a concrete hall, up a winding steel stairway, and along another hall. He unlocked a grill and nodded.

"Down there. Lock the gate when you come down, Sammy."

She didn't hear him when he stopped at the bars. Her back was toward him, and her midnight hair was trembling against her shoulders as she looked out the tiny window. She was crying without a sound. Sam tried to say something. It didn't come out. He tried again.

"Jo . . . Joan." A thick tearing sound. There were tears in her eyes. Then there were tears where her cheeks touched his between the bars, and she was saying his name, over and over again.

"Why? . . . Why? . . . Why did you tell them those things?" he whispered.

"It's better this way. Don't ask me why. But it *is*. I know. And Sammy, I *do* understand. I do."

"You *don't* understand. I don't understand. Listen! Look at me!" He reached through and held her chin. She looked straight into his eyes; not afraid, not sorry. "You didn't kill Dolly," he said, measuring out each slow word. "I know *that*. But you think that *I* did. Isn't that it? You think I killed her, don't you? And you're trying to cover for me. Answer me. Answer me!"

"Sam . . . Sammy . . ." She whispered it like a question, while her eyes moved from one of his to the other, hunting, struggling to find something there. And then she gave a sob. "You *didn't!* I . . . I can see it! Oh, Sammy, I was so afraid, I—I left my purse. I went back. Just when I reached the penthouse door, I heard a terrible quarrel inside and then . . . then I heard you say something. Something about, 'I swear I want to kill you, Dolly.' I . . . I heard it, see, Sammy. I—"

"But I *did not* kill her," he repeated harshly.

"Oh, I believe you. I do, I promise. But just then, just that moment, I was so upset, I . . . Well, I started back downstairs. When I got to the lobby, I couldn't go any further. I had to go back. I didn't want to. I waited,

but finally I *had* to go back. And the door was open. You were gone and she . . . was dead. I'd waited too long . . ." She swallowed. Their clasped fingers were hurting each other's. Their eyes were locked together. Her voice was swift and low.

"Sammy, I'm not dumb. I mean, not as much as you think. And tonight, you know, when you said there were things you had to tell me? You didn't need to. I guess I know, and it doesn't matter at all. There was a nurse at the hospital who told me about you. So you see . . . But what I'm trying to say is this." She swallowed again. "I *thought* you'd killed her. And if you had, I knew you wouldn't have a chance. The nurse told me how the cops hated you. Her brother is a cop. You wouldn't have a chance. But I . . . I would. It's different with me, don't you see. People will be sorry for me, and nobody hates me and . . . It'll be just a few years with me, maybe. It would have been everything to—"

"Oh, God," he whispered rawly. "And *you* pulled out the knife and cleaned it, I guess?"

SHE NODDED. "And I had to take her bracelet. That funny watch-fob of yours was caught in it. I couldn't get it loose, get the fob away. And I'm sorry, Sammy, but somewhere I lost it. You called it your Luck, remember?"

"So we both lost our Luck . . ." And he tried to think. "First, someone came in and killed her. He left. Then you came back and—Joan, how many people passed through that lobby while you stood there?"

"Why, I don't . . . At least a dozen. Somebody walked a poodle, and there was a drunk man and . . . I didn't notice, I was so terribly upset."

"But if—" Then he shook his head. "If I hadn't played with that damned knife again, maybe. I framed you, darling. Me—the guy you were trying to cover. We could have fought the rest, but the—"

"Sammy, please. Please, don't. If it hadn't been me, then—"

"But I won't take it that way! Listen to me, Joan." He held her wrists and drew her close against the bars. "I'm no angel. I hate myself and every damned day I've lived. Except for the days with you. You're the only thing that hasn't been crooked and stinking and rotten, and you're not going to pick up my bad checks. I won't—"

"Please, Sammy! I know what I'm doing. Can't you understand. Look at me. Can't you see?" Her eyes were pools of dark moonlight.

He looked at her. It was a long time, then slowly he drew her dark hair through the bars and held it against his lips. It was the first time he'd ever cried.

They said goodnight. He went away without once looking back.

Vaden was swinging his leg and sitting on the corner of his desk again. His black eyes hunted into Sam's, finding the tears. His lips twitched and his leg ceased swinging. "Well?"

"She didn't do it. You know it, Vaden," he said stonily.

"I'd like to think so. No dice."

"Maybe . . . Maybe I did it," Sam watched the cold eyes.

They smiled. "I'd like to think so. No dice."

"I framed her, maybe. I didn't know she'd handled the knife."

"I'd still like to think so. Sorry, Sammy."

Sam lit a cigarette and broke the match into many pieces. One by one he let them fall.

"When do you figure the trial?"

"Quick. I don't want her eyes around me."

"Vaden, I know you hate me like ten brands of Hell, but . . . But she didn't do it. I'm going to get the man who did."

"I'd like to think so, Sammy, but I'm sorry. And take it careful. We're not swallowing any frames on this deal."

"No. No, of course not." His voice was low and slow. "This time you're going to make it hurt. Good night, Vaden."

CHAPTER TWO

Better Forget a Loser

THE SNOW had stopped and it lay sleeping under the thin light of the street lamps. The streets were wide and serene in the hour before the dawn, and the wind was gone. As Sam walked, the gentle crush-crunch of his footsteps whispered back from the darkened doorways. His hands hung empty at his sides, and his eyes were set straight ahead.

In Greenwich Village he turned into the modernistic foyer of an expensive apartment building. The automatic elevator bore him slowly to the ninth floor, and there he pressed the button above the name: Lon Denny.

He'd probably been home less than an hour, Sam thought. He might even be typing his sex-and-secrets for tomorrow's column. From twilight till sickly dawn, Lon Denny softened his way through the lights and smoke of whippers of the Broadway glamor-traps. Listening, always listening, with a glass of white wine perspiring in his long pale hand, with a bead of moisture forming on his drooping lip.

And then the door was opened. He stood there in a silken robe, his hairless white chest showing. His face was soft white—a face that lived by night. A big limp face with a big limp mouth and devouring hungry eyes. He was big—but big like a boy who has grown too fast. His hips were soft and broad, and

his shoulders were thin. His long arms hung crookedly in front of him, and his long head was utterly bald.

He blinked and said, "Oh, hello, Sammy. Couldn't imagine for a minute, so late you know . . . Come in." His voice was soft, plaintive.

Sam had never liked this room. It was a soft room, a crowded room, reminding him of a china shop. An antique shop, perhaps. The chairs were fragile. Tables were crowded with countless figurines. The air was moist and over warm, and Lon Denny's face was reflected in a dozen mirrors. It was like a hundred white limp faces drifting through a haze, guided by the black huge eyes, and lost from the misshapen body.

"I saw your item about me in the paper tonight. I don't like rating a spot from you, but we'll skip that part. I'm here to learn something else, and I have a hunch you're the boy to tell me." He looked straight at the vast eyes as he lit a cigarette. Denny was starting to perspire.

"I happen to know," Sam continued slowly, "that Dolly DeSautels saw that column, too. I know she was drunk tonight. I know that she ran into you somewhere and raced her tongue. To be concise, she stated that she would get into the blackmail business if I married the girl named Joan Martin. Am I right, Denny?"

"Well, really, I can't recall the precise wording of her—"

"You can recall the precise words of anything you hear!" Sam snapped. "You heard her say that, didn't you?"

Denny tongued his lower lips uneasily. "Frankly, yes. Of course, we all understand Dolly. She's emotional and sometimes—"

"Don't tell me about Dolly. I'm going to tell you something, and you're going to give with the truth. After Dolly made that crack, and after she left you to go somewhere, you repeated her statement. Now, answer that! You repeated her blackmail crack!"

"Now, really, old man, we are both able to understand a—"

"Answer me before I knock your damned face off! Tonight is just the night I'd do it!"

"I . . . But I . . . I did, I suppose, mention—" He was swallowing convulsively. Sam reached out and grasped his moist, soft wrist.

"Who did you squeal to? And so help you, God, you better tell the truth!"

"It— He just happened to come in. He—I actually didn't intend—Oh! Don't twist—It was Angel. Nick Angel. He came into Lusco's and—"

"You rattled to Nick Angel!" Sam breathed. "You yellow tongued rat! You've been around town long enough. You know what's play and what's poison! I—I—" His cheeks twitched.

His eyes seemed on the verge of igniting. Then suddenly, with scarcely a visible movement, his palm flashed through the shadows and smashed against the limp mouth.

Lan Denny stumbled back, his fingers leaping to his cut lip. A soft moaning sound slid from his throat. He kept backing away.

"You were dirty and yellow enough to pass out drunken blackmail gab to Angel! Angel—the guy in all New York who would get hit by the blackmail! The guy who doesn't take chances on maybe it won't happen. The guy—" Sam choked. He grasped Denny again.

"Oh, shut up. I'm not going to hit you. Not this time. This time I am telling you, and I won't tell you again: Our little talk is off the record forever. What you've told me about Nick is something that never happened. Remember that. Because if you should ever forget it, Denny, I don't think they'll read your column that next day."

In every mirror the vast black eyes floated toward him as he turned toward the door, and one thin line of darkness stretched down the night-white face from the bleeding lips.

He slammed the door behind him.

UNDER no conditions could his purpose be obvious. First, he would sleep three hours. He needed the sleep, and Nick Angel never appeared in his office before eleven, anyway. He would sleep, shave, drink a pot of black coffee, and drop in on Nick. For advice. Yes . . . That would be the key-note. There would have to be some motive.

He drank two straight brandies before he lowered the blinds against the foggy dawn. But it was hard to sleep. Images roamed his mind like actors lost on an immense stage. Joan, her eyes and midnight hair. Dolly, her silken leg curled under hair and her golden hair in her face. The moist loose skin of Lon Denny's wrist. And the opener in his own hand, the blade gliding back into a death wound.

He turned fitfully and pulled the pillow over his head. Finally he slept, his muscles stretched stiff through his body, his fingers balled into fists. Luck . . . Luck's lost . . . Tonight . . .

He whispered the words through his jagged sleep.

It was eleven-thirty. A feeble sun was struggling with the clouds when Sam entered a dusty theatrical building just west of Times Square. The elevator groaned its way to the fifth floor, and he touched the gilded knob of Suite 54: Nicholas Angel, Investments. There was one moment of long recollection as he turned the knob. Fifteen years ago he had turned this knob for the first time, and found his pot of gold. This time he had a strange feeling: The rainbow was gone . . .

Doris was reading a movie magazine. First a smile, then swift speculation raced through her bright eyes. Sure, it was lousy weather. Just a sec. She plugged in. "Mr. Lane," she sang. Then she tilted her bright curls toward the inner door. "Go right in." Her eyes yearned to follow. Sam opened the inner door and closed it behind him quietly.

It was a vast room, crowded with pictures—fighters, singers, politicians, jockeys—all dedicated to that wonderful guy named Nick.

The wonderful guy was sitting there, hunched forward like a battered elf in his great chair. Feathers of gray hair huddled behind his big ears. His eyes and nose were narrow, giving his face an intense expression. His mouth and cheeks were sunken, and his fifty-dollar teeth were resting, as usual, at the bottom of a glass on his desk. He looked like he hadn't a buck to his name.

"Hello, Sammy Boy." His voice was waspy but kind.

"Hello, Sam." This came from the window, from a guy even smaller than Nick Angel. Joe Coney. Gray glassy eyes, like chilled concrete. A midnight blue shirt, no tie. Bowed legs and one knocked-down shoulder. They said Joe had once been a jockey, until something happened. Things often happened if Joe was there, and people were never quite sure . . .

His concrete eyes drifted to Nick. "Guess I'll go eat." He went out. Sam had never seen a man who could move so silently. When the door closed, Nick sucked his lips. "Rest yourself, Sammy. You don't look so good to me."

"I'm not. Have you read the morning papers?"

"Yeah. Just now." He reached down somewhere and pulled up a crumpled handful. Sam had read them twice. His pictures, Joan's, and a brutal shot of the body, the opener, and Dolly's closed eyes. It had made page one everywhere in town. Nick pushed his little finger over the print. "Too bad. Too bad everywhere. Publicity is bad." He peered up suddenly. "How much is true, you think?"

"Everything but the most important thing, Nick. Joan Martin didn't kill Dolly."

"No? . . ." His gray brows shuttled upward. "You are here to tell me that, Sammy?"

"Not exactly. I'm worried." He wet his lips. Playing with Nick was like peeping down rattlesnakes' throats. "I want you to help me—"

"Sammy Boy," and Nick moved his little hands widely, "leave us not double-talk. I do not sit here because I am dumb. You do not stand there, likewise. I am thinking to myself like this: Sammy has heard of last night when Dolly was drunk and said things. Very bad things, for even a drunk lady, yes. And now

Sammy is standing here, wondering where I, Nick Angel, was when Dolly was killed. I am right, yes?" His smile was almost apologetic, his voice very kind.

So it was out—naked between them in the silence of the room. "All right, Nick. So I'm wondering. Where were you?" he asked quietly.

Nick chuckled. "You have been my lawyer so long for nothing, Sammy? Wherever I was, yes or no, I could have witnesses."

"Did you kill Dolly?" Sam demanded softly.

"To such a question, I always answer No." He leaned forward, his fingers tapping gently. "And now I will give some advice for you to listen, Sammy Boy." The kindness was gone from his voice. "In this world there are many girls, you will see. In this world it is smart to forget a loser, otherwise maybe you lose, too. See? Now. We are friends, you and me. And we will forget this murder thing, yes? Murder is bad to play with."

"You know what you're telling me?" Sam exploded. "You want me to let that kid take the rap?"

Without a moment's hesitation Nick answered. "Exactly so, Sammy."

He knew, in that inevitable instant, that his fury was suicidal. His brain screamed out his folly, but his lips threw the warning away. "Then you can take your advice and go straight to Hell, Nick!" he rasped. "She's my client. She's going to be my wife, and she's not going to pay for my own garbage. Somebody killed Dolly. Maybe you. Maybe Eddie the Rose. Maybe a dozen guys whose dirty washing I've done. But that guy has a date with me."

"I am very sorry, Sammy." The voice was kind and very gentle again. "It is a great deal to lose, for just one girl."

"No, Nick. Not a great deal. You see, I lost most of it a long time ago. Good-bye, Nick, I hope you didn't do it."

Nick Angel shrugged and closed his eyes. Sam left.

IT BEGAN that moment when he stepped into the street and wondered if Joe Coney was following him. One life died and another life began. The life, the endless waiting, of a man who knows he is marked. It is a cold and lonely corridor, twisting and bending, but ceaselessly winding its way toward a dead-end nowhere.

Everything changes, Sam realized with a curious stillness in his brain. Now I must look carefully into each face. Everything I do, everywhere I go must be *planned, thought out, risked*. And it's strange, the sunlight feels very cool now. Buildings seem to have changed overnight, like I'd never been here before. I

don't know where to go. There's a lot of empty time this way. There'll be more.

And it changes the way you think. Everything is brittle. Things aren't worth much. You're nervous between the shoulders. You want something to happen—fast! Move fast. Talk fast. Not much time. Not much time . . . Fast! Fast!

He stopped abruptly. His face was drenched with sweat. His fingers had locked themselves into fists. He'd been talking aloud.

"This is what they all do. This keep you from thinking. This won't get it done," he told himself harshly. "Think slow. You've got a brain. Think . . ."

"I'll have to move. I'll need money. My gun's in the bottom dresser drawer," he whispered softly. "Must not forget the keys. Keys to Eddie's club. Clothes. Will need clothes. God, I need a drink . . ."

It was five o'clock. The wind was cold again. Snow was leaking out of the gray-black sky when Sam left the subway at the Ninety-sixth Street station on Broadway. The swift crowd knocked his suitcase against his knees. He moved into a doorway and waited, watching each figure as it climbed from the stairs. That man? . . . No. He only looked like Coney.

He moved across Broadway, hesitated again, then entered the shabby lobby of the Marwood Hotel. A few elderly people were sitting in the chairs. The elevator was clamoring high in the shaft. The sound of shaking ice came from the tiny bar off the lobby. The odor of warm food filtered out of the dining room. An ancient clerk was sorting through some letters. All in all, it was a quiet decent place. The elevator boy took him to his room, took the tip, and said, "It's Freddie, any time you need me, Mr. Samuels."

Sam turned off the light and the room was almost dark. He stood at the window, looking at the street five floors below. That man over there . . . What was he hunting for? Why was he waiting? Why did—

Then a girl came along and the man took her arm. Sam breathed softly. He unpacked. It took five minutes, making it slow. He checked his .38 automatic, then pushed it under the pillow. What time was it? It should be—

He took off his coat and stretched out on the bed. Funny, how tired you could get. Just being nervous, maybe. He closed his eyes.

The dreams came back. This time he was back in Indiana. Graduation night. His ice-cream pants, and he was making the speech from the stage. There was his dad, fingering the press of his only suit, striving to catch every word. Hello, dad. Hello, from across the years.

When he waked he was hot, as if he had a

fever. He washed his face, combed the thick bronze hair, and put on his coat again. It was after midnight. He slid the .38 in his pocket. He wanted a drink again. That was something else. In the other life, he hadn't needed drinks.

He was the only customer in the little bar. The bartender—a hungry-faced kid, not very old—was polishing the glasses. He wanted somebody to talk to, and his eyes clung to Sam's face. "I've seen you somewhere, mister. Did you ever go to Fritzie's on Fourteenth?"

"Sure. That was the place. I remember you." And he finished the drink quickly and went out into the frozen night. He went to the all-night newsreel theater on Fifty-ninth. It was two-thirty when he came out. Here and there a cab crept across the frozen snow. A lonely cat huddled at a doorway, mewing weakly. There was plenty of time before Eddie's Club would be closed. Maybe the cat's feet were frozen.

He picked it up and carried it under his coat. It was very light and finally it quit crying. He kept hunting a warm building where he could put the cat. He was superstitious about cats, particularly black cats. Once his dad had told him that all cats had once been people. If a cat died, something half human would trail you with a curse. Funny, those old superstitions.

He found the right building. There was a thick carpet inside the closed door. He opened the door and gently put the cat down. It lay there, thin and stiff, just as he had placed it.

The cat had died in his arms.

Fast . . . Fast . . . Walk fast. Think fast . . . It began to fill his brain again. His fists tightened. He rubbed his hands hard against his coat, trying to knock off the feel of a cat. He tried counting as he walked. One step. Two. Three . . . One hundred. Two hundred.

"This is what they mean. This is going crazy!" he whispered. "Sam, you're going crazy. Crazy, Sam. Crazy, Sam." He walked faster and faster. Sweat poured across his face. And then he was there.

EDDIE'S CLUB. An old remodeled brownstone on West Forty-fourth Street. It was three-thirty, and the building was dark. He used his key and entered the service door at the back of the loading alley. The scent of steaks and lobsters hung in the darkness. He felt his way down the narrow hall to the rear stairway. Slowly he climbed, past the second floor where the private gambling rooms were, on to the third floor and the front of the wider hall. Here was the office of Big Eddie the Rose. Numbers, dice, lottery, anything—and what do you want?

Sam closed the door behind him and leaned against the wall, breathing hard. He wiped

his lips and crossed the room to tilt the venetian blinds. Next he turned the desk lamp to dim. Carefully he took down the large painting of the Brooklyn Bridge that hung behind the desk. Next, with his handkerchief over his fingers, he pushed back the oak panel. There was the glistening dark metal of a wall-safe.

So many times he'd sat here, waiting for Eddie to get cash. A jury fix in Queens; five hundred to send a witness to Montreal. Five to the left . . . Seven right . . . Twenty was next, wasn't it? . . . Then fourteen to the—

His brain slammed to a halt. He turned swiftly, his hand moving towards the gun. It was a footstep—slow, heavy; deliberately ascending the stairs.

He flipped off the lamp. There was no way to get out—none! The safety of the gun clicked quietly beneath his thumb. He pressed himself against the wall behind the door. And as he waited, he thought of the strangest thing: The smooth stiffness of the cat. How black it had been.

The door opened and closed and the overhead light came on. The broad back of Eddie the Rose started across the room toward the desk. Suddenly he stopped. He had seen the safe. "Uh," he grunted.

"Slow, Eddie," Sam said flatly. "Don't touch your pockets."

Without haste the big man turned. His face was large and weather-beaten. A limp black hat half concealed his eyes. He didn't look like a gambling boss. He might have been a broken, a lawyer, a big time insurance guy. His face was intelligent and perfectly controlled. He kept his movements slow as he pushed back his hat, letting the lights glisten in his dark eyes.

"I don't have a gun, Sammy," he said quietly. "What were you looking for?"

"Can't you guess?" Sam could hear the raw edge in his words.

"No, I can't guess. Are you going to shoot me?"

"Open that safe. Put the stuff on the desk and stand against the wall. Hurry, Eddie." Fast . . . Fast . . . It was there in his brain again. And he knew he was doing this wrong.

"This is too bad, Sammy," Eddie said quietly. He opened the safe and tossed three packets on the desk. "The money's in the red envelope."

"Where is the blackmail bait you stole from Dolly's room?"

"Oh, so that's it." Almost insolently he took cigarettes from his pocket and lit one. His dark eyes burned through the smoke at Sammy. "You're not being smart, Sammy. You could have read the papers and known I was in Buffalo last night. My mother died, and I don't make alibis like that."

Sam knew he was telling the truth.

"But I might have killed her," Eddie continued quietly. "If I'd been here. Look at this . . ." He pulled an envelope from his pocket and flipped it across the room. "I found it at my apartment when I got back tonight. That's why I'm here—to get the ten grand."

Slowly Sam knelt down. With one finger he cupped open the envelope and pulled out the sheet of paper. His eyes touched the first crude words: "If you don't want—"

His ears caught the gentle sliding sound. His eyes flicked up in time to see Eddie's hand coming out of the desk with a revolver. For one instant their eyes locked across the deadly space. Then Eddie's cheeks twitched as he squeezed the gun. Simultaneously Sam fired. Two thunders merged and splintered against the oak walls. A tiny stinging fire raced through Sam's shoulder, and he saw Eddie's lips crack open. He fired again, but his arm was drooping. The muscles felt dead all the way down. And Eddie was leaning across the desk, fumbling at his chest.

A sick cheated feeling swam into Sam's stomach. All of this for nothing. He hadn't hated Eddie. Eddie hadn't hated him . . .

He staggered against the door, wrenched it open, and stumbled into the hall. He dropped the gun and picked it up with his left hand. By the time he reached the alley, his fingers were warm and wet. He pushed them into the crusted snow. The coldness drove away the fire. He rubbed snow over his face. He put his right hand into his pocket with his left hand. It felt better that way; the pocket was like a sling.

The red neon sign of a bar broke the darkness down the street. No one noticed him as he shuffled toward the telephone booth. He found the number and kept repeating it as he dialed.

"Yes . . . Shot . . . I don't know how bad. On the third floor. The door on the loading alley is open. You better hurry . . . You don't need my name."

Two blocks nearer Times Square, he found the little all-night drug store. He had to get bandages. He could feel the blood, warm and trickly, all the way down his arm. Get gauze. Tape. Iodine. Something like that. Don't let the clerk notice. Stand up straight.

THERE was a kid behind the soda fountain and a tall man with thick moist glasses behind the big counter. No customers. A radio was bringing in an all night recorded program. The kid was whistling. Sam's feet felt far off the floor. It was too hot in here. It made his head start drifting again.

"What? Oh, yeah. I wanted a pack of cigarettes." Had to talk slow. Keep from mumbling. "And a deck of cards." Lots of

people bought cards. "Toothpaste. Any kind. And . . . Yeah, some first aid equipment. Bandages. You know."

Hold to the counter. Stand up straight. Damn, is the guy wrapping up the whole store back there?

"How much? . . . Is what? . . . No, I feel great. What about what? . . . My arm? What about my arm? What the Hell difference does it make if—"

The ambulance came whining across Times Square and drained away toward Eddie's Club. Sam stared out the window. Would it stop? Would it get there in time?

"It stopped," he whispered. But he had whispered aloud. He saw the clerk's eyes behind the thick glasses. Saw them harden and retreat into guarded decision.

"Just a minute for your change, sir," the man said gently. He walked stiffly toward the rear of the store, and there he slipped into the telephone booth.

Fast . . . Get away fast . . .

Sam's brain began the frantic rhythm again. He seized the package and stumbled towards the door. Like a nightmare. Nightmare, with weights tied to your feet. Can hardly move . . . Fast . . . Faster . . .

Down in that subway hole over there. Subway. Millions of people in subways. Slow, now . . . Must act normal. Nickel in the slot. Walk slow, now . . . Funny. Not so many people. Oh, yes. Late at night . . . Hard to remember everything. Keep thinking I'm dreaming. Going to wake up in a minute. Oh, God, wish I'd wake up soon . . .

The turnstile banged behind him. A little guy in a brown trench-coat slid through the gloomy shadows, through the thicket of massive steel beams. A little guy with a sagging shoulder and eyes like frozen concrete. Sam saw him and stood still.

Yeah . . . Coney. Joe Coney, sure, he thought laboriously. Funny, finding him here. No . . . Not funny. Look at his hands, down against his pockets. Look at his eyes. No, not funny . . . Understand? . . . He was watching at Eddie's Club. That was it. They figured I'd go there. He's after me. So? . . . Think. Fast. Walk. Fast.

Still a dream. Nightmare. Can't move fast. Can't think. If only . . . Down there—down in that darkness! Subway tunnel. Hide in there . . .

The platform was empty. There was only Joe Coney, coming relentlessly through the shadows. Sam struggled to the end of the lighted platform, hesitated a long moment, then stumbled down into the pit. Something—it felt like ground glass—smashed against his face as he fell. In slow-motion nightmare he crawled erect and lurched into the darkness where the rails curved out of sight. Little

green and red lights twinkled through the haze of his vision. From somewhere in the distance came the mounting thunder of a train.

It was coming this way, Sam realized. Suddenly the lights gleamed out of the distance. It was coming fast. Swaying, roaring.

Fear splashed through his brain, dispelling the stupor of pain. He glanced back. Coney was dropping nimbly into the pit. There was something bright in his hand, now.

He was stopping. He saw the train, Sam realized. What would he do? . . . He crossed the track upon which the train was approaching and came slowly forward along the next track. He was smiling, wasn't he?

All of this took scarcely a moment. Sam threw a glance back down the track. The train began to scream at him. The thunder hurled itself against the cave-like walls. Sam stumbled from the tracks and onto the next tracks. Joe was lifting his hand. The gun was glistening in the shadows. Yes, he was smiling, and there was something hypnotic in the wrinkled little face. An expression of incredible ecstasy, a ravenous delight.

Sam struggled to draw his own gun. The ecstasy of Coney's face seemed to ignite in flames. The subway plunged past Sam, the whistle screaming like an angry bird. And then—out of the darkness behind Coney—loomed up the swaying lights of another train, bearing in from the opposite direction.

Strangely Sam's lips parted to scream. But no sound would come. The murderous delight of the wrinkled face robbed his throat of sound. He could only stand there and watched the train thundering down, and the sound of its coming was obliterated by the thunder of the first train. The gun kept twinkling. Joe Coney's fingers moved.

Now! It was going to be now! And he couldn't speak! He—

The first train screeched to a halt, leaving the solitary roar of the second. The second whistle began to rage. Suddenly Coney realized. He twisted around. The rapture spilled from his face, leaving gray veins of terror. He leaped.

The train had ten feet to travel before it could halt. In those last ten feet, it caught Joe Coney, rolled him limply, then gnawed him under into the blackness of grinding wheels and rails. His last mortal sound was lost in the scream and screech of the burning brake shoes.

Men came pouring down into the pit. Light sprayed under the train. But no one came toward Sam. He stood there, forgotten or unseen, on the fringe of death. And at last, still unnoticed, he dragged himself from the pit and pulled his sweat-drenched body up the stairs toward the cold night.

He moved like an animal, broken and sick and homeless.

CHAPTER THREE

You and Me and Fifty Grand!

IT WAS five-fifteen when he staggered into his room at the Marwood Hotel. He locked the door and dragged off his coat. He had cut his cheek when he'd fallen into the pit. His eyes were bright and glassy.

"Got fever," he whispered thickly. "Cold. Hot and cold. . . Tear off this damned shirt. See what the bullet . . ." He managed to get the shirt off. The bullet had gone in below his shoulder on the right side. It was still in there somewhere. He leaned against the wall as he bathed his wound. When he poured in the medicine, sweat blinded his eyes. His teeth brought blood to his tongue. "Can't. . . Can't faint. Got to think. . . Joan . . . I framd you, you hear me? . . . I put the letter opener. I did it. . . Didn't know . . ." he whispered. He laughed. A hot laugh, raw and shrill. "I did it! Me, I did it! And the little black cat! It died. It—"

He caught his distorted image in the mirror. His lips sagged limply. "Oh, God, what am . . . am I doing?" he sobbed. He staggered back to the bed and fell.

God, I'm going to pass out, he whispered. And they're going to find me sometime. It won't be Eddie or Coney, but somebody. They'll get me, and nobody will be here to help Joan. I've got to do something. Fast . . . Fast . . . Not much time left . . . Can't last long . . . Fast . . .

He pulled himself to his feet and held to the bed, shaking his head, trying to clear his brain. Finally he picked up his coat and reached into the pocket for the cigarettes. His hand came out with a crumpled sheet of paper. Slowly the crudely printed words took form and meaning in his fevered eyes.

Eddie:

If you don't want some government publicity, maybe silence is worth ten grand. Look at it this way . . . Sam Lane did some nice work for you, but lawyers have a weakness for evidence. They keep notes around. And little blondes have a weakness for picking things up. So Dolly picked things up, and Dolly got killed. But she left a nice pack of legal-bond evidence. The grand jury would like it. Maybe the income-tax boys would like it. Maybe you'd rather have it. So . . .

A certain pack of evidence will be on sale at noon tomorrow, Saturday. The price is ten grand. If you want to buy before the income-tax boys put in their bid, just wait around DeRusse's cocktail lounge for a phone call at noon tomorrow. Okay, Eddie?

Just a Pal.

Sam ran his hand across his eyes. "This . . . The letter Eddie threw me before he went after his gun. And I held it. *I held it!*" he repeated slowly. "One thin thread of a chance—and I held it!"

His eyes burned brightly through their glaze of fever. His chest rose and fell. "Noon. Saturday . . . Today is Saturday! DeRusse's cocktail lounge. A phone call . . ." He stopped and his eyes locked on the telephone. His fingers twitched against his sides. Finally he leaned forward and lifted the telephone. He gave a number. As he waited, he wiped perspiration from his lips.

"I want to talk to Captain Vaden . . . I don't care. Tell him Sam Lane is calling. Hurry." Again he wiped his lips and closed his eyes. A dead dog couldn't feel this bad, he thought to himself.

"Vaden? Yes, this is Sam. I . . . We'll talk about that later. He didn't die? . . . I'm glad. You won't understand that. I . . . Listen, Vaden, I'm coming down there to see you. No reporters. No nothing. Just you and me. I'll explain when I get there. And do me one favor. It's damned important. Keep the Eddie Rose shooting out of the papers. Don't let it be known until after noon today. I'll explain. I'll need a drink too, if you don't mind."

He ran the tub full of steaming water and lowered himself in. Gradually his knotted muscles loosened. He pulled out the plug, letting the hot water drain out, and turned the shower on cold. The icy needles stung through his flesh. Some of the ache left his head. He dressed slowly, guarding his shoulder. It was eight-thirty when he put the gun in his pocket, folded the blackmail note carefully, and left the room. It was nine o'clock when he reached Captain Vaden's office.

The Captain was alone in the gray, gloomy room. He was sitting on the corner of his desk again, swinging a long leg slowly, and his eyes grew coal-bright as Sam closed the door behind him. Then the leg ceased swinging. Vaden's thin face puckered slightly.

"You won't rate a whiskey-ad portrait today, Sammy."

"Do I get a drink?" he asked stonily. He braced himself, feet wide apart, and took a long pull on the bottle of rye. It turned to hot tar in his throat, and he coughed his eyes full of tears. Vaden just kept staring at him, a light of lean curiosity playing over his features. Sam put down the bottle and dragged down a deep breath.

"You're still betting on Joan Martin for the murderer?"

"Hell, you know the facts. A blind man could see."

"Let's don't waste time, then. I want you to read this." He held out the blackmail note. "It was sent to Eddie. He threw it to me

last night . . . this morning. It was just before he reached for his gun."

Vaden unfolded the note and frowned slightly as he read. When he finished, he folded it again and handed it back with a smile. "Do you *really* think I'm that dumb, Sammy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. I told you I wouldn't take any legal hokus. I won't take any red herring, either. Look." He gestured wearily. "You laid a slug into Eddie, and not far from the jack-pot. He can't make speeches now, and maybe he never will. So you drift in here with this note. Look! Big blackmail and ten-grand stuff, you whisper. Which makes Joan Martin innocent and everything is perfect, yes?" His eyes hardened. "No," he terminated flatly. "And now, leave us discuss the small matter of you shooting Eddie and—"

DON'T be a granite-headed idiot!" Sam pounded the desk furiously. "We have twenty years to talk about me and Eddie, if I last that long. We have less than three hours to clear Joan Martin. I want—"

"Sammy, you've always wanted, and gotten. This time you just plain want." Vaden stood up. "That's all I have to say about—"

"Stop! Listen!" Sam cried desperately, reaching out. With the sudden motion, he jerked his shoulder. Raw pain fired up and down his chest. He cried out softly, catching the corner of the desk as his knees buckled. Vaden twisted around to stare at him strangely.

"What in God's name is the matter with— Hey, Lane," he broke into a whisper. He reached forward and opened Sam's coat. The wound had begun to bleed again. Sweat streamed down Sam's cheeks. "I think you could use a doctor. You can't do business with a slug inside—"

"Listen to me. Listen, please," Sam begged between clenched teeth. "You've always wanted to put something on me. Okay. Okay. I'm going to make you a gamble. And I'm going to tell you the truth, too. Joan didn't kill Dolly. I didn't kill Dolly. But I framed Joan. I stuck that letter opener into Dolly. I didn't know Joan's prints were on the handle. I . . . Okay, laugh some more. It's so funny, sure!" He coughed and hung onto the desk. "Joan confessed because she was trying to protect me, thinking she could get a lighter rap. Can you get that through your head? She was lying, and I'm going to convince you! Listen. Plant a microphone in here. Send her down. Leave us alone, but listen in. I'll prove she was lying. I'll prove she didn't—"

"Sammy, you can prove the moon is cheese, but I don't—"

"For God's sake, take this gamble! It's not costing you anything. And if you're not con-

vinced she's telling the truth, I'll do the last thing I can. I'll turn stool. I'll sing on the deals you've been wanting to hear. That's the last thing I've got to offer. Now . . . Will you do it?" He stared at Vaden, and slowly the man's dark eyes began to twinkle. Abruptly he smiled.

"You have suddenly become very interesting, Sammy," he murmured. He reached under the desk. Sam heard something click. "I'll send her down. Ten minutes should be enough. And Sammy . . . no lovely walks in the pretty snow. Remember."

Before she came in, Sam smoothed down his hair and mopped his face. He took a deep drink of the whiskey. This was going to be hard. So damned hard. And it would have to be good. Very good, he kept telling himself. Then the door opened and closed behind her.

Her eyes were shadowed and sleepless, but her lips were trying to smile. They whispered his name, and her arms opened. She kissed him and he stood there, her dark hair against his cheeks, and his fingers clenched at his sides. Slowly she drew back. "What is it, Sammy? Something that—"

"I'm okay, baby. Just been up all night, that's all." His voice was lazy, almost insolent. "I wanted to talk to you in here, privately. Sit down there. There at the desk. Okay? Now, listen, baby." He'd never called her that before, never talked to her this way before. Her eyes had never looked at him this way before.

"This may be hard for you to follow, after, well, feeling the way you do. You won't mind?" She shook her head. No, she wouldn't mind. And Sam dragged in another hard breath. "The truth is, baby, you put your finger in my pie when you gave with that murder story. I had it fixed a different way. There was supposed to be another guy tagged for the killing. Get it?"

"I don't—No, I don't even understand what—"

"Look. Like this, baby. I wanted you. But I was married to Dolly." Something happened in Joan's eyes. Sam kept talking, low and hard. "It was a secret affair. So why not get rid of her. Plus another angle. There's a guy around here that needs to take a long trip. So . . . If Dolly got murdered and this guy's prints were on the weapon, then two birds and one stone, see? Okay. Okay, until you started playing with the knife and being so sweet about it. Now—"

"Sammy! Sammy, stop, I—I don't believe what you're—"

"We're wasting time. I can still put the frame on this other guy. That is, if you'll tell the dicks the truth about what happened. And don't worry about me. I don't leave my cards around those jobs. It'll be okay, and it's

worth fifteen grand to me to get rid of this other guy. Fifteen grand, baby! And after that—you and me, see? No Dolly. Just you and me and fifteen grand and a trip to Florida and—"

"Sammy . . ." She was whispering, slowly rising from the chair. Her eyes were like wells of desolate midnight. "Don't. Please. Please. I just can't stand—" Suddenly she covered her eyes and began to cry.

"Hey, baby, what goes?" he demanded. "What's the matter with—"

"And I thought . . . thought—" She choked and backed away. "Don't touch me! I loved you. I tried to understand how it might have happened and I wanted to help, but—but to think! Your wife, and you never told me! You killed her, and now—now, for fifteen thousand dollars you're going to send some innocent person—"

"But baby, think of you and me! I wanted you. I needed the—"

"Oh, God. I loved you, and now I . . . I hate you! I hate you! I—" Her voice broke. She turned and twisted at the door knob. Captain Vaden opened the door and walked in. His face had a flat gray expression.

"Time to go back, Miss Martin," he said quietly. They went away.

AS THE door closed, Sam sank into the chair and closed his eyes. He was sitting there. He hadn't moved when Vaden came back. "Well? What next, Sammy?" he asked slowly. "You picked the hard way."

"But you liked it, huh?" Sam just stared at him and his eyes were bleak with contempt. "So now you have a feeling she *didn't* do it. But the proof is still there, a million pounds against her, and the jury will believe it. So we need the most important thing, still."

"We need the actual murderer," Vaden said flatly. "That's all that will save her, story, honest eyes, nice face or anything."

"In other words, Vaden, we need the guy who wrote this." And he held out the blackmail note. "So that's why I asked you to keep the Eddie Rose shooting quiet. I'm going to be in DeRusse's cocktail lounge at noon. I'm going to be Eddie, see?"

Vaden gave him a long appraising stare. "Something has happened to you, Sammy," he said slowly. "Do you know what this will mean? Even if you tag the killer-blackmailer, it means that your dirty deals will get splashed. You'll be through, in every way."

"For a dick, you are sometimes almost smart." He looked at his watch. "Ten-forty," he mused. "You know, I lost my Luck. The little cat died. I'm overdue. Hell, you don't understand." He stood up and looked directly at Vaden. "I'm going to DeRusse's."

Vaden's lips twitched slightly. "There will

be a gray sedan across the street from DeRusse's. You might need a ride or something."

"Thanks," he said, and he walked out slowly.

Again he was brutally tired, and little fires of quick pain kept racing around his ribs. It tickled. Did blood-poisoning tickle? He laughed. Did you laugh when you were delirious?

Funny. The sun on the snow. Made the snow look pale green.

Her eyes. Oh, God, let me forget that last moment in her eyes.

At a cigar store on Forty-second Street, he bought a heavy manila envelope and a bottle of ink. In the telephone booth he took out his money. Carefully he soaked the bills in the blue ink and tucked them in the envelope. He sealed it carefully and put it in his pocket.

DeRusse's was filled with that damp-cave gloom of a bar before noon time. It stood a few doors east of Madison Avenue on Forty-ninth Street—an overly dainty place, with a six stool, semi-circular bar and a cluster of pale-blue tables and chairs in a mirrored alcove. It was the first time Sam had been here.

"Rye, double with plain water," he ordered. He was the only customer. The bartender was a thin, anxious faced man with a wisp of blond moustache and pleading eyes. He said it had been a lovely snow. Sam said it had been wonderful. An old man was sweeping up the trash of the night before. It was twenty minutes after eleven.

Forty minutes . . . Sam looked at the dark phone booth at the end of the bar. Whose voice would call to ask for Eddie? He wondered and tried to think. It was no use. There were a thousand people on Broadway who would fit any pattern.

Thirty minutes, now . . . You could measure this time like the last drops of water in the desert. Like Vaden had said, whatever happened, this was the end of him in every way. And yet, it seemed unimportant. Only her eyes . . . Those were the only important things.

Twenty minutes . . . Another rye.

There was the gray sedan driving up across the street. Vaden, wearing a limp blue hat was lighting a cigarette.

Ten minutes . . . Funny, the way a guy's mind works. Keeps going back. That damned speech that night on the stage. His dad's eyes, and gnarled fingers. The corny little watch-fob. Two bucks of tin.

And the little cat. Cold. Silky. Dead.

And then the eternal blast of the telephone! "I'll take it. I'm expecting a call," he said abruptly to the bartender. He closed himself in the booth, wet his lips, swallowed, and took

down the receiver. "Yeah?" He kept his voice low, thick.

"Is a man named Eddie there?" a low, swift voice asked.

"You've got him. I'm ready, pal," he added ironically.

"Walk across the street to the Brill Building. Take an elevator to the top floor. At the back of the hall there's a window. Drop the envelope down into the court. Do you understand?"

"When do I get what I want?"

"When I get what I want—and see I've gotten it."

"Maybe you'll decide to play the whole song again," Sam protested.

"I am afraid you will have to take that chance, unless . . ." And he left it hanging.

"Okay," Sam said heavily. "I'm on my way." He walked across the street and motioned guardedly to Vaden. Presently the detective joined him in the lobby. "Not good," Sam said tersely. "I'm supposed to toss the money down into the back court. Or maybe it is good. If—"

"IT'S GOOD," Vaden assured softly. "I'll form a reception committee for Mr. Pick-it-up. Go on."

Sam stepped into an elevator. "Top floor," he said. The boy glanced at him. "You sure? That's number nine. It's all vacant."

"I might be interested."

The boy shrugged. They went up and Sam walked slowly along the narrow, dust-scented corridor past darkened doors to a narrow window. And there on the dusty sill lay a piece of paper, weighted with a ball of twine. On the paper were these words:

Eddie:

Good plans should be changed frequently.
Tie the string to the envelope and lower it
down the stairwell at once.

Just the same Pal.

Sam cursed bitterly. It wasn't going to work. The killer would get away!

Suddenly he hurried back to the elevator and pressed the bell. He kept his finger down until the boy reappeared. "Now, listen," Sam whispered furiously. "Here is a hundred bucks. All yours. Take this string. Tie it to this envelope and lower the envelope down the stairwell. Understand? For a hundred bucks. No questions. Hurry!"

The kid gulped and grabbed the bill. "Yeah, sure. I get it, mister." He started unrolling the twine. Sam ran to the front window, threw it up, and slipped out on the fire escape. The cars, the people wandered along the street far below. Down, down he clamored, pausing at each window to glance down the corridor of each floor.

At the fifth floor he jerked to a halt. Far down at the end of the narrow corridor loomed a bulky figure.

He reached out, snatched at something, jerked, and thrust something into his pocket. Then he turned clumsily and rushed toward the elevators. In that moment Sam saw him!

The elevator came. The man departed. Sam hurled up the window and dropped into the corridor. Swiftly he took the inside stairs to the lobby. Vaden was standing at the rear.

"Come on! Hurry!" Sam called. "He changed plans. He's got the envelope!"

"But how—" Vaden started. Sam was already at the front door, staring up and down the crowded walk. And then he saw the man again as he bent to enter a cab.

"That cab! The one with the torn back fender! Follow it!" he said furiously.

Five seconds later Vaden crashed the red signal and slid into the down town traffic.

"He's going home," Sam realized. "Take a right here to Sixth. We can beat him. Hurry!"

"Who is this guy, do you know?"

"The name," Sam said, "is Lon Denny."

"The columnist! Are you crazy! He—"

"That's why I'm giving you proof. Hurry!" Sam snapped. "Turn. Now, stop!" He

crossed the street with Vaden on his heels. The elevator crawled to the ninth floor. "Can you jack this lock?"

Vaden took a look, hesitated a moment as he frowned, then took out a ring of keys. One minute later the lock meshed. They stepped into the shadows-and-mirrors room.

"And now?" Vaden asked.

"Get in that closet." Sam lit a cigarette. Nervously he listened. He wandered through the shadows followed by his countless mirrored images. Then came the sound of the elevator, and finally a key in the lock. Across the shadows Sam saw the soft bulk of Lon Denny as he closed the door.

"Hello, Lon," Sam said quietly.

"What are you doing in my living room?" he demanded.

"I'll give you a guess."

"This is outrageous!"

"On the contrary, it's blackmail and murder. Or maybe you've forgotten what's in your pocket?"

The huge soft face began to form heavy folds. The eyes began to sink inward. The throat shook. "What . . . do you . . . want?" he whispered.

"Maybe we can get together. I know you killed Dolly. You followed her to my penthouse. You'd made her sore. You had it planned. Maybe you wanted to stick me for the murder. If—"

"No! No, you're wrong. It was . . . She had been blackmailing me, understand? Small

sums, but dangerous. It . . . An unfortunate affair that took place one evening when I was intoxicated. I was driving my own car. She was with me. I happened to hit a man. I . . . I couldn't stop—a man in my position. So—" he swallowed convulsively. "So I was afraid. Had to dispose of her. You do understand, old man?" His eyes seemed to melt. "I'm sure we can reach an understanding."

"We *have* reached an understanding, Denny," Sam said very gently. "Okay, Vaden. You heard him."

The door of the closet started to open. Lon Denny twisted.

"Watch it, Sammy! Stop, Denny!" Vaden shouted. "Don't try—"

Sam ducked and pawed for the gun. His right hand was slow, clumsy. A roar and spit of flame erupted from Lon Denny's hand. Then the thunder became an incessant roar as Vaden's gun began to blast. Sam dragged out his gun at last. As he brought it up to fire, Denny gave a choked grunt and his features began to soften and melt. His fingers twitched. His gun fell and he settled on his knees like a tired Buddha. He whimpered and hugged his stomach and rolled on his face. Vaden wiped his face and walked to the telephone.

Sam vaguely heard him giving the address and instructions. That was all.

And then there was Vaden's lean face above him, bending down. "The doctor looked inside your throwing arm. You'll have to miss the next inning," he said. "But there's someone here, and . . . Well, all the doctor said was, 'Stay quiet.'" He went away and presently there was dark hair above him. Dark hair and dark soft eyes.

"Sammy. Sammy, Sammy." It was Joan.

"No, don't . . . Just listen to me, Sammy," she whispered. Her lips were brushing his cheek. "He told me—Vaden told me. About why you lied to me. He told me. And he asked me to tell you something for him. He said he was naturally a very cynical guy, and he would give his best ten years to put you away. He said he hated you, and you'd understand. So he said for you to hurry up so we could get the Hell out of New York before he gets any ideas."

"Tell him for me. Tell him thanks. And Joan . . . Your eyes that last moment . . . They'll never be that way again?"

"Not ever again, Sammy."

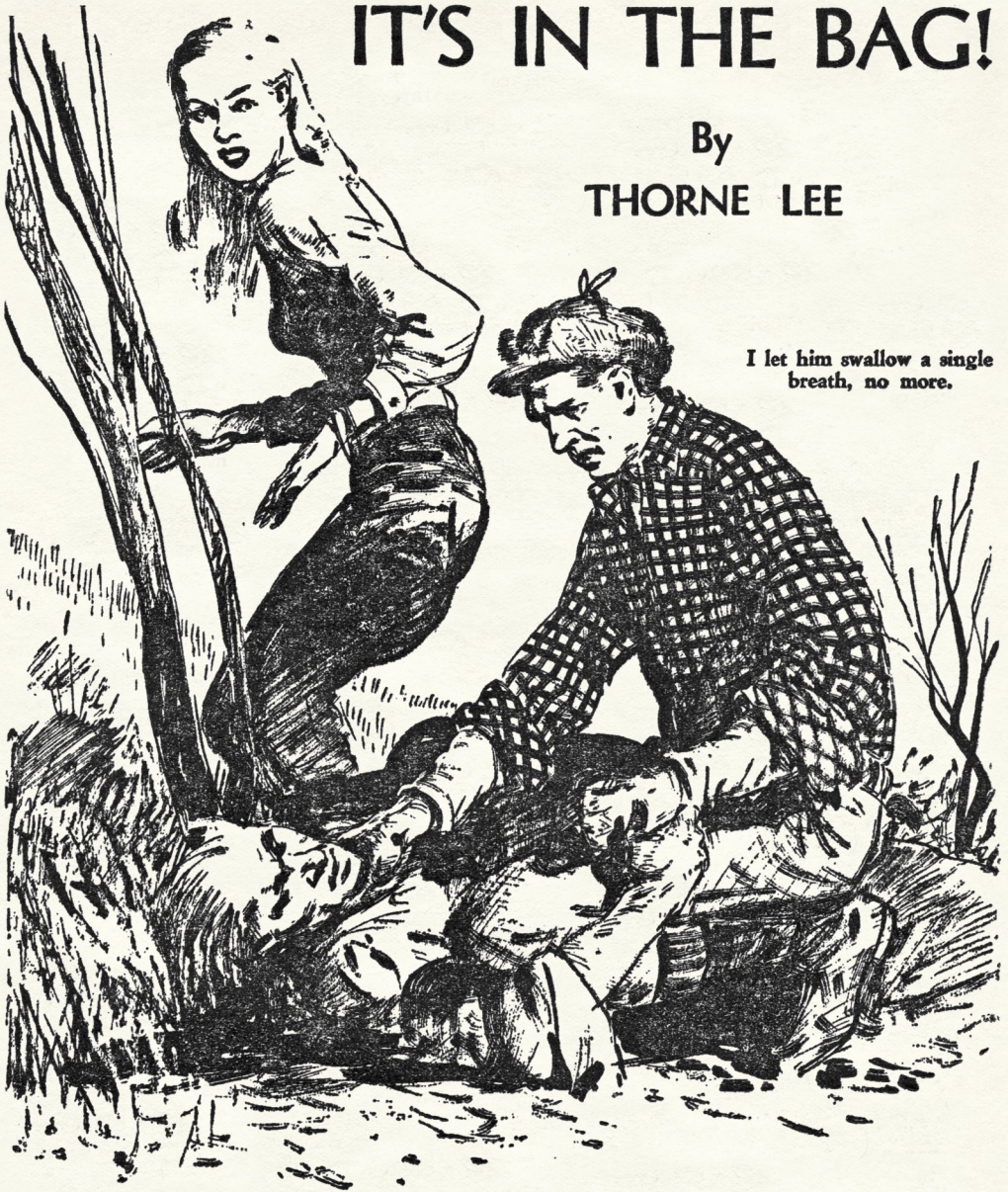
So you never hear of Sammy the Brain. Sammy of Broadway, Sammy the Sphinx, or any of the other names. You never will. Somewhere, probably in a place not very big, his name is plain Sammy Lane.

He will never come back to Broadway. For the clocks run fast on Broadway and the clocks have hungry hands.

IT'S IN THE BAG!

By
THORNE LEE

I let him swallow a single
breath, no more.



"You're so lousy rich," I told myself, "you've nothing to offer your wife except boredom!" But that night I found I could give her also, the romantic interest of my best friend—plus my own water-logged corpse!

I ATE a lonely supper, scoured my dishes, and watched the tiny campfire die. My little square of night, walled by black pines climbing to a sullen, starless sky, was as dark as the bottom of a grave.

My wrist watch said nine o'clock. I swore evenly through the tight clamp of my teeth. "Mighty late," I muttered. "Mighty late to be trout fishing."

Eunice had gone downstream and Paul had gone up; but I knew they could get together

anytime they pleased, simply by fording the river and meeting on the other side.

I squatted on a rock, knees to forehead, and a shudder worked up the long curve of my spine. "If Eunice wants romance, I guess she has it coming," I told myself. "You're so lousy rich, Harlan Metcalf, that you have nothing to offer a wife except boredom."

I snapped up my head to break the tight chain of suspense at my throat. If Eunice and Paul were together, there was nothing I could do about it. Each one, no doubt, would have a perfectly innocent story to tell me and I would have nothing but my suspicions to swallow in silence.

"But why the devil should they *both* stay out so late?" I grumbled.

I mentally applied a boot to my own pants and settled the argument. To comfort myself I took a short stroll down to the river which broke abruptly from the strangulation of the canyon to form a deep, smooth current at my feet.

There was one star in the sky after all, a warm, immediate star, just across the river and up the slope of the butte—another campfire. It was so close in the measureless vault of space that I could see the shoulders of a man beside it. I felt drawn to him in my loneliness. I waved, but he did not respond.

Okay for you, brother . . . I thumbed my nose and stalked back to my own fire and my ugly thoughts. It sure was late! Eunice should have more sense. She might know I'd go a little queer in a situation like this.

My fire was dying and the eternal chill was drifting down from the high snows. I couldn't seem to find the energy to go after wood and yet I wanted more fire. A man has to have warmth. Hearth-fire, wife-fire. If he lets the fire go out, he may not get it lighted again.

I swore at the constant trend of my ideas, walked over to the duffel pile and kicked at it in search of some trash to burn. A slab of redwood burst out of a sack. On one side was the natural surface of the wood but on the other was an odd smear of colors sealed with shellac.

An oil painting, it was. Done by that artist chap I met yesterday at the Trading Post. His name was Sturdevant. For years he had haunted the North Pacific woods, daubing pictures of nature on wood plaques sawed from the fallen forest. I bought up his stuff every summer when I ran across him, mainly because I have more money than I can use and the guy always had a hungry look.

The painted slab was good stuff to burn, so I tossed it into the fire. One thing I had to admit—that painting was in tune with my emotions. The artist saw nature as a thing of mood and change and sometimes ugly behind its outward beauty.

I had four of the redwood plaques. They served to keep my fire going for half an hour. In that time my jealousy changed to sharp disgust.

"Can't send out a posse," I snarled, "so I might as well go to bed."

I unrolled my sleeping bag which was a brand new canvas affair that unzipped on three sides to make a double mattress. Tonight I would not need it double. I opened only the throat and wriggled down into the soft woolen padding without even removing my boots. I sank into it right up to my scalpline to shut the unhappy night from my eyes.

I went to sleep chanting my misery.

I AWOKE, startled, in absolute night—a darkness without shape but with a strange, gliding motion. The night was actually rolling me, tossing my body as the black river would toss an idle chip.

I was more baffled than alarmed. I simply couldn't place myself. I was being dragged, it seemed, and yet I felt no dragging grip upon my own body.

I thought briefly of a dark bunk on a storm-tossed ship, but bunks have squared, hard outlines and this had no outline at all, except the surface grating along my back. I reached out stiffly and dipped up deep handfuls of some downy stuff, soft as a woman's hair.

I didn't fight because you only fight reality, and this was not real. Let the dream subside and bring me back the true darkness of the forest night.

Forest? . . . Oh yes, this was a fishing trip, wasn't it? . . . Well, a fish might feel like this riding in a man's pocket!

Let's see, now, where did I leave off? I was sore at my wife and Paul Foley for stringing me out like a poor, dumb sucker, and I crawled into my sleeping bag and went to—

"Good Lord, my sleeping bag! I'm inside my sleeping bag!"

I fought the thing then, squirming, twisting and wrestling an enemy without a body. I couldn't find the top of the bag. Why wasn't my head outside the bag? This hot, dry air could not possibly be the mountain night.

"I'm shut inside!" The fact screamed at me. "The zipper is closed over my head!"

Strangely, I felt suffocation only with the thought of it. Until then I had not missed the fresh air. Now I was suddenly fainting for the lack of it.

The force of this weird locomotion seemed to be my feet, at the top of my upward slanting legs. I kicked at the enemy, lunged, heaved, but the effort only served to pound my lungs against the earth and force deep gasps from my lips. Gasping was stealing, cutting short the life-line. . . . "Save the air! Save the precious air!"

If I could just get my hands into something solid, not this blasted inhuman bed padding—

I wriggled around, trying to worm my head up there where my feet were now. I could crouch and leap even inside the bag. I was still a free agent with arms and legs to fight the enemy. . . Enemy? What enemy? Why? What's this all about?

I made the shift somehow, by a terrible snake-like contortion of the body. I was facing the thing that dragged me. I was balling up my body, driving with my toes, throwing myself, bag and all—

A whipping side motion of the bag cut my leap in half, broke the balance and swung me in a wild somersault. I whirled in space without top or bottom, hugging my head to get an extra cushion of flesh and bone between my skull and the impact, whatever it would be, but it never came.

How long can a man fall before he hits bottom? How long is an instant? It seemed to me there was never an end of falling. There was a certain resistance to my progress, a twisting, slapping element that was neither solid nor air.

I thought of cradling pine branches slowing my passage, and another scream burst in my chest. . . "He's thrown me over a cliff!"

I dissolved that madness immediately. Cliff? What cliff? There was no cliff near camp.

I screamed again. Now I knew this half resistance for what it was. . . "Water! I'm in the river! He's thrown me in the river!"

I think there was only one thing that saved me from clawing myself to shreds in sheer panic. That was the utter bewilderment of my situation. It slowed me up like a drug. This didn't make sense. Whoever heard of zipping up a man in a sleeping bag and throwing him in the river?

Must be a dream. It had to be a dream! If I could only fight my way out of it and break this phantom crust into reality!

I let myself go again, relaxed and drifted. I was floating easily now. Most comfortable bed I ever knew.

A drop of moisture hit my forehead, dipped down the bridge of my nose, circled an eye. . . Rain? Why was there rain on my face with my head inside the sleeping bag? The drop spread into the taut grooves of my cheek like a forked river—

"River!" . . . Fear had me again, by the roots of the hair. The river was outside! The river was seeping in!

That second terror blasted me wide awake. This was no dream. This was horror—real, alive, personal! "What can I do? I'm buried alive! Death is inside the grave with me and death is outside waiting to get in!"

It was the word *death* itself which finally

cooled the raging fever of my brain. This was the instant of death drawn out to a fine, unraveling thread, and it wasn't so bad, at that. There was no real pain. The torture was inside me, not outside. It is the fight itself which hurts, not the final defeat.

So I didn't fight. I refused to be strangled or drowned by a mere idea. I chilled the straining muscles of madness with a kind of mental anesthesia. I let myself drift again, trying to select a sense that was still logical, still right side up.

I DEPENDED mostly upon touch and balance. Sight was dead, of course. I might as well be blind but I could *feel* my passage along the river. Sometimes the churning roughness of it seemed to be all riding beneath me and then I would pile against a rock, damming the flow of water. The crushing shock of the flood melted somewhat against the sinuous, cushioned shape of my cocoon.

The outer canvas of the bag was amazingly waterproof. There was a thin seepage through the links of the zipper, but that was only a half-threat compared to the suffocation lurking inside the bag itself. I had no idea how much time had passed, but the air was dry and stifling as a gag in the mouth.

It came to me vaguely that I had no hope at all. I had only a choice between the lesser of two agonies. If I clawed through the bag or burst the zipper, I would let the water in faster than I could let myself out.

"What do you like?" I groaned. "Slow asphyxiation or the swift rush of drowning?"

"Damn it, I'll take the drowning!" I roared in answer. "I'm not a man to lie down and die!"

With that decision I squirmed my feet around to the spot I thought would be the mouth of the bag. The zipper was most likely to burst open at the top and my legs would have more explosive power than my arms.

I discovered that the bag itself seemed to follow the wriggling motions of my body. I had a brief sensation of moving against the flow of the river.

"I'm swimming!" Hope shrilled out of me like steam from a locomotive. "I can make this damn bag swim!"

I worked the thing out then in a furious rush of mental geometrics. If I could navigate to shore before I broke out of the bag, I would have only one enemy to fight—the bag itself.

"This thing I can lick!" I challenged. "No canvas bag can beat me on solid ground!"

Swiftly I reasoned my position in the river by the flow of the water. My head was pointing towards the north bank and that should be the closest, unless I had drifted entirely across stream. I'd have to take a chance on that.

I wasted no time on idle calculation. I shoved off from the rock that held me. Gripping the sides of the bag in my hands, I thrashed out with my right, then my left. That gave the bag a kind of twisting, eel motion. I kicked with both feet at once to wave the tail of the bag like a flipper.

The action had to be adapted as I moved. Sometimes I only tangled myself up, but mostly there seemed to be a definite cross-current progress, and then, at last, I struck hard against unyielding surface. That was no minor obstruction. The river dragged me along it. I could hear the canvas scraping.

"Shore!" I squealed.

I dived and clawed at it, trying to trace an outline through the padded bag. The current tugged, but I churned my legs like a sprinter, charging against the shore until I found a single projecting lump I could embrace with the tight pincers of my arms.

I was finally anchored, but the breath was burning in my chest. I seemed to feel the dead air closing tighter, knuckling my throat. Worst of all, I was wheezing from the effort, devouring the stuff wholesale and wasting it.

I balled up the weight of my body, trying to drag down the trailing buoyancy of the bag. Slowly, inch by inch, my feet sank downward beneath me and struck solidly on the bed of the stream.

I dug with my toes and leaped forward upon the shore with all the shapeless energy of a jumping bean. I sprawled full length and shrieked in positive delight at the solid impact all along my body. I wormed around the limits of the bag, pounding with my fists to make sure my landing was secure.

"Time!" I breathed. "Just a minute more is all I need!"

I was topsy-turvy in the bag by this time. I didn't know one end from the other. I clawed desperately through the padding until my fingertips grated on steel zipper. The metal was wet, but water was no longer needling through the grooves.

I traced the zipper down its length, around a corner to an abrupt end. If this was the mouth of the zipper, then freedom would be there beyond a tiny chain of steel.

I clawed up handfuls of canvas, right and left, brought a knee up to my chin and probed downward with my boot, socketing the heel of it into the very end of the zipper. I strained back on my arms, pulling against the power of that single leg.

Something had to give, canvas, or steel, or man. Time was no longer a part of it. Strength was the thing. I poured it out like oil. It was the canvas stitching that lost the fight. My mind recorded the ripping sound and my lips dived greedily for the tiny opening, sucking at a clean, cool stream of fresh air.

OUT in the chill wind of night I felt miraculously cleansed and free. Escape from death makes all other human trouble seem as light as dust on the shoulders.

I wondered if my panic had really been justified. Was any zipper really tight enough to suffocate a man? Well, that I would never know. I, for one, would not play guinea pig again to find out!

Guinea pig? That's another angle. Who's guinea pig was I?

Murder? Was that it? I spat the thought out like a mouthful of mud. Murder only happened to vicious people in a vicious world. It didn't happen to men like—

But it had happened! That experience in the bag was as real as this solid earth, this dark night.

Take the reality of earth and night, and what else must you have for murder? . . . Hatred! You've got to have hatred! Who hated Harlan Metcalf to the extreme of murder? You have to know a man to hate him. Who in all this primitive corner of the universe knew Harlan Metcalf anywhere near well enough—

Well, there I was back to the old theme, the old jealous melody. Paul Foley and Eunice. My best friend and my wife!

It must have taken me an hour of stumbling indecision to trace the river back to camp. I had no matches. The night at my feet was as treacherous as a tar pit. I located the spot finally by a single live coal gleaming like a deep, red eye. I found a long punk of rotted wood and lighted it on the hot, smoldering coal.

The torchlight flickered over a scene of frank desertion. Our camp had marvelously vanished, except for the ashes of the fire. Bedrolls, utensils, fishing gear—

"My own stuff, too! Didn't leave a scrap! Was it Paul Foley by himself?" I hissed. "Or did you help him out . . . *my dear, my sweet, my angel?*"

For a while it was too much for me. I wandered around the camp in a daze. What more evidence could you ask, Harlan Metcalf? Who in these woods would want your life except the two people directly concerned with it? Why break camp except to break the link between themselves and your death?

Murder and retreat! How easily it had worked out! No one had known about this trip except the three of us. I had done all the shopping at the Trading Post. No one had seen us around the camp. There was no evidence of Paul and Eunice in the ashes of the fire. Back at our lonely cabin they could take Paul's car, leaving mine behind for the eyes of the law.

That's why Paul insisted on driving his own car! Said he didn't want to intrude too

much on our privacy. That was a neat one! Boy, how he slid that past my eyes!

I actually beat on my chest like some defeated ape challenging its loss. . . Got away with it, did you? Nobody saw you—

Wait a minute! I swung on my heels, peering up at the black slope of the butte beyond the river. I had seen a campfire over there! It was gone now, but it had been there before. If I saw a man beside it, then he could also see me. He may have seen—

Without so much as a breath, I ran down to the river and plunged into the dark, sweeping current. The river had no terror anymore. I was master of that element. I had licked the river without arms or legs.

I came out on the far shore, dripping and chilled, but the scramble up the hill quickly warmed me. I tripped, clawed and scoured my flesh with the delight of raw earth. Blood ran from my hands and face and I laughed with it, because it was live blood and warm.

I found the other camp only because my cursing, thrashing advance aroused the man himself. He rose up suddenly before me, black against the grey haze of dawn. "Who is that?" he demanded.

"Metcalf." I panted. "The name is Metcalf."

"Wait!" He kneeled and came up quickly, and light burst in my eyes from the palm of his hand.

He played the beam from my face down to the boots and back. I must have been a spectacle. "Trouble!" I said shrilly. "I need help!"

"What happened?"

"Murder!" My finger speared down toward the river. My hand was streaked with blood. "Over there!"

"Whose murder?"

"Mine!" I roared. I advanced a step, extending a shaking hand. "But I'm alive! You see the life in me. The murder failed."

"You're mad!"

"Did you see my fire down there last night?"

"I saw a fire."

"How many people?"

He hesitated. "Two. I saw two people."

THE next one choked up in my throat. The next one was it. Two people together or two separately?" I panted.

"I saw . . . I saw one alone, then later there were two."

"Men?" I hissed.

"One man. The other . . . I'm not sure. The hair was like a woman's."

I felt my knees going. "What were they doing?" I asked hoarsely.

"I don't watch other people's doings!"

"You saw a woman's hair!" I snapped.

He shrugged. "Maybe I saw them drag some things around. Guess they were clearing out."

I leaped at him and clawed his shirt front. "What things did they drag around?"

He forked his hand into my face and forced me away. "Don't touch me!"

We stood apart, panting. My voice came out like a whimper. "What were they dragging?" I repeated.

"The usual camp stuff, I guess. I remember one long, heavy thing shaped like a sleeping bag, but loaded up full. Equipment, I guess. Chap had it by the foot, dragging it—"

"What chap?" I demanded. "I mean, what did he look like?"

"Look like? Really now, it was quite some distance, you know—"

"If you could tell a sleeping bag, you could tell a man." I snapped.

"Well, he was not a tall man. Earlier in the evening I had an impression of tallness—"

"That was me!" I cut in. "You saw me before I went to bed. Listen, just tell me this— When you saw the man dragging the sleeping bag, did he have help? Was the other person with him?"

"Don't recall about that. None of my damn business, you know. But I am sure they broke camp together, because they were suddenly gone and nothing was left but their fire."

I still didn't have a full answer. Was it Paul alone, or Paul and . . .

I slid down on a rock, blurted out my story, and then I felt a kind of relief.

"Your wife and your best friend?" the stranger commented. "Well, they say that happens. A man takes a woman for better or for worse. Most times he gets worse."

The bitter tone of his philosophy brought my feverish, swimming eyes back to the present. Darkness was dropping away from us and as I looked I saw something familiar about this man.

He might have been fleshy once, but under-feeding had drawn the skin like tanned leather across the bones. His eyes were dark, polished gems. Black hair was shaggy on his head and hands.

He was seeing me, too. "I believe I know you," he said. "Aren't you—"

"That's right. The man who buys your paintings. You're Sturdevant, the artist."

"And your name again?"

"Metcalf."

"Oh, yes. I had forgotten. It was written on your checks, but I am not a man for names. The forest has no names. It does not distinguish."

Our hands had reached out automatically, but the clasp was never completed. We withdrew them in embarrassment, as if some human nakedness stood between us. I had shown

my wife to him. I had brought a charge I could never recall.

He pulled on his boots. "You want my help, is that it?" he asked.

I nodded.

He began to strike his camp into a single neat pack. You know, a jury hearing your story would demand a motive," he said.

"Motive?" I roared. "I have millions of dollars to Paul Foley's thousands. Mix a million with a romantic woman—"

"That would do for Foley, but what about your wife?"

I was on the defensive. "Eunice may be innocent."

"Innocent?" He couldn't keep the sneer off of his lips. "Then we must assume she was so infuriated by your friend last night that she failed to notice your absence!"

"We'll find out. We'll have to find out!"

We did, at that. We forded the river and made a forced march upstream. We needed no woodcraft, because the only trail in that wilderness was the river. It had to be followed.

An hour later a deep gorge and waterfall forced us to make a detour. Sturdevant had field glasses; he let me climb a high boulder to use them.

I swung the horizon and spotted Paul and Eunice behind us! They must have tired or not dared to risk the passage by night, for they had pitched camp in a tiny clearing. Their sleeping bags were side by side and at their feet was a smoldering fire. Their heads—

I fought down a frantic impulse to shatter the binoculars on a rock. In the twin pools of sight the heads emerged—too real, too close. The lips, twitching in sleep, seemed to reach for each other. The fever was back in me, raging.

I GOT a grip on myself. Emotions froze under a steady current of anger. I scrambled down the rock and explained my plan to the artist: "Follow me at about fifty paces. Stay back in the trees and watch. Let me have it out with them. The shock of seeing me alive may yank the truth out of them. Don't mix in it yourself. You're not big enough for a rough-and-tumble. If they don't know that I have a witness, they may try violence, and at violence I'm a match for both of them!"

I crept up on the clearing. Paul and Eunice slept heavily, ignoring the sounds of my crude approach. I lumbered up on my palms and toes like a clumsy, shuffling bear and straddled the man's sleeping bag.

Paul Foley was small, blond, and handsome in a fishy, expressionless way. Eunice was dark-haired, pale, and very beautiful, no matter how my eyes tried to twist evil into her slumbering features. I laid a hand between their

faces, and the slumbering breaths warmed either side of it.

Paul's arms were buried in the canvas bag. I gripped the zippered edge that lay across his chest and brought it up to his neck. Simply by throwing my weight into it, I could knife short the breath in his throat. I pressed the zipper teeth into the flesh, deeper and deeper, until his blue eyes popped rudely awake.

"Don't talk! Listen!" I hissed at him. His eyes rolled over me in white-edged amazement and horror.

Eunice stirred but failed to wake.

I spoke in a whisper. "This is me! Harlan! Alive, damn you! Alive! *Alive!* It's you or me, Paul. I guess you know that?"

His tongue burst through his slitted teeth, a thin red rubber band. He worked words along his lips, but I strangled the sound in his throat.

"You tried to kill me last night, to bury me alive in the river. I was a match for you then, brother. Think what a match I am now!"

I let a word come out of him, like steam from a tea-kettle. "*Harlan! You're mad!*"

"I've heard that before, too," I said. "I'm sane, Paul, but right now I can fight like mad."

I came out of my blue fury long enough to realize that Eunice was sitting up. "As for you, my sweet," I said, "you can sit on the sidelines this time!"

She found a scream in the hoarse reaches of her lungs: "Harlan! Where in the world have you been?"

"Down in the dark grave, my darling! The grave would not hold me!"

She was wriggling to her feet, a tiny, supple figure in grey breeches and boots. "What are you doing to Paul?" she shrieked.

I loosened a hand long enough to grip her by the waist and heave her violently away. She sprawled into a scrub pine. "Sit down and watch!" I roared. "I'll deal with you later!"

Paul had squirmed halfway out of his bag. I leaped up and planted a heel on his chest. His cheeks were loose and white as ashes. "I'll smash your face with my boot! Now, you talk to me. Talk slow. Tell me why you wanted my life. What was it worth to you? A wife? . . . Or a fortune?"

Paul gagged and squeezed up the words. "I don't know what you mean! What happened to you?"

"So you're going to stall, are you? Well then, let me tell you. Last night I went to bed alone and I woke up zipped tight inside my sleeping bag. I was thrown into the river like Houdini in a sack. I'm not Houdini, but I got out of the sack. I'm back! You see me! *Not a ghost, a man!*"

"Harlan, I didn't—" He wormed up on his elbows. I leaned into my foot and cracked his head hard on the ground.

"Who else?" I roared, with a mocking sweep of my arm. "Who in all these woods would want the life of Harlan Metcalf? Now, you listen. You answer my questions. You came back last night and broke camp. Why did you do that?"

I let him swallow a single breath, no more. "You were gone . . . when we came back," he panted. "Bedroll and all. We thought you were sore . . . about us being out so late. We thought you'd left us flat!"

"You went fishing separately and you came back together!" I reminded.

"Eunice sprained her ankle. I heard her calling—"

I snapped, "I was between the two of you when you went fishing! If you heard her calling, why didn't I? How did you get together? Listen! No more lies now! The truth I already know—partly. I just want all of it. All of it, now!" I sucked in my breath, forcing the last, fearful question. I lifted my boot high above his writhing face. "You came back together. Did you do the job together? Was it you alone, Paul, or was it—"

I had the answer then, coming at me, running. My eye caught the motion and I whirled to meet it. Eunice was swinging a frying pan with both hands like a ball bat. I was late. In the brief time between the clash of steel and skull I knew I was licked. I knew Eunice was in it. They had me now. The two of them, together . . . but justice was out there, in the trees, watching. If my witness kept quiet and stayed away from them, he would make my revenge.

The skillet struck my ear and rang a deep, wild bell of bitterness and death.

THAT kind of sleep is dreamless. It passes like a black instant and the mind, if not totally shattered, takes up where it leaves off.

They didn't kill me, after all, because their voices still swarmed around me and we couldn't all be dead, now, could we? I started to turn.

I listened. There was one voice that didn't quite belong to this violence . . . Sturdevant, the painter. I told him to say out of it. Blast the fool! Sturdevant was speaking now, quite calmly, "That's the yarn exactly as your friend gave it to me."

"Fantastic!" Paul Foley replied. His voice was husky and uneasy.

A woman spoke. Eunice. "I don't know what got into Harlan. I've never seen him so wild!"

I risked opening my eyes. They had me lying on the ground with my head raised slightly on some cushioning softness. The three of them squatted in a circle at my feet. I might have been a dummy in a game of bridge.

"Tell you what I think!" Paul Foley said. "I'm no psychologist, understand, but jealousy can do funny things to a man. I think Harlan was so green with jealousy last night that murder worked into his mind like a drug, and under the influence of it he actually carried out the plot that his imagination conceived. I mean that Harlan himself threw the sleeping bag into the river and dreamed himself inside of it. You might call it a form of wishful thinking. He wanted me to be a murderer, so he let his subconscious mind mold me into one."

"Subconscious?" scoffed the painter. "Just a word. A word created to fit the unknown, to describe the indescribable, like Death is a word. Who really knows the depths of a man?"

Sturdevant worked a cold pipe along the warped brown flesh of his lips. "However, there may be something in your theory," he continued. "From where I sat I saw a man gripping the foot of a sleeping bag and dragging it. That could have been Metcalf himself. I recall the man as smaller, more your size,

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3 TUNE IN...2 NETWORK SHOWS! "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sun. evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Sat. afternoons, NBC Network.

but there was the distance, of course, and the false perspective of a glowing campfire could deceive—”

“*The foot of the bag!*” That new voice was mine. “*You said he dragged the bag by the foot!*”

Three startled faces swung towards me. The pipe toppled away from Sturdevant’s teeth.

“Harlan!” Eunice screamed and fainted at my feet.

I felt a tight knot of reviving strength. I gathered myself and staggered up. Foley and Sturdevant leaped to their feet. We faced each other, a tight triangle of faces. Foley made a motion to slap me, but I knotted a fist. “Let me alone, Paul, or I may smear you yet!” I swung towards the painter.

“Listen, Sturdevant, you just stated that the man you saw last night was dragging my sleeping bag *by the foot!* That’s what you said this morning, too, before you ever heard my story. I remember now. Stupid as I am, I do remember that! Listen, when my sleeping bag is zipped up tight, you can’t tell one end of it from the other! So how did you know from such a distance that the bag was dragged by the foot, unless you did the dragging yourself, unless you were the one who zipped it shut over my head!”

The artist’s face underwent the strangest transformation I had ever seen. It seemed to yellow and die before my eyes. He backed away, his head revolving jerkily, as if to find a lost avenue of escape.

I was still too weak to put up a real fight. Paul Foley was licking his lips, looking around for reinforcements which didn’t exist. He was helpless.

Paul’s rifle was ten feet away, leaning against a log.

We all moved at the same time. There was a wild, three-man scramble. I tangled drunkenly with Paul and Sturdevant wriggled out of the pile with the gun. He backed off, stiffly, on the heels of his boots.

PAUL and I edged apart . . . each hoping, I suppose, that the other would draw the first shot.

How shrivelled Sturdevant was, I saw with my clearing vision—small and twisted like the black root of a burned-out tree! “You’ll live out your time,” he said thickly. “I don’t intend to blast all three of you. It would be a pleasure, but you have your own petty hells right now, I leave you to them! They are enough.”

“Sturdevant, you have a pair of binoculars,” I accused. “You saw everything that I did last night. You sat up there at your fire and watched me.”

He shrugged. “Of course.”

“You hardly know me!” I protested. “What could you possibly have against me? How could you want to murder—a man you’ve seen only—”

“I know you very well, Metcalf,” he said, and his voice was like an echo answering a voice. “I’ve known you and your kind for years. You buy my paintings with your great air of charity. My patron saint! How comical you are! My patron fool! Your money, if you only knew, is a fraction of my paintings’ worth! But that I could stand from you. I despise you and your civilized values. What do you know of worth? Each year you have bought my paintings, all of my work, and I have thought to myself, ‘He will own them, this stupid one, but others will see. The world will find them. There are eyes that can see. Let this fool be my messenger to society. Let me remain with the good, enriching loneliness of my work.’”

The rifle hung impotently in the sling of his arm. We could have smashed him down, Paul and I, but we stood there, fascinated. We couldn’t move.

“. . . Last night,” the painter chanted, “for the first time I understood the depth of your stupidity. Before my eyes you burned my paintings to feed your campfire. I realized then the total indifference of your purchases. You thought your money was a gift to me. *A gift, to me?* Your appalling, abusive ignorance, your moneyed insolence—it was confounding! *A gift, to me?* Why, you incredible idiot, my paintings were the gift to you. Such a treasure as your century has never seen . . . and how did you treat my gift? *Destroyed, before my eyes! Burned! You burned my paintings, burned my life, burned my soul!*”

The man had dropped the gun from limp fingers and no one moved to touch it. My feet were sunk in the earth.

The artist was suddenly on his knees clawing into his own duffel, scooping out his painted redwood slabs, a dozen of them. He got them all up, somehow, in a great, trembling armload.

“These you shall not have,” he challenged. “Now I know you for what hopeless simpletons you are! All of you! Your world has no eyes for such as these. The river shall have them. The river will understand. They belong to the river and the forest. They belong to all—”

He turned and ran in short, awkward bounds, boots ripping through the brush, hurdling the rocks. A single furious leap carried him far out into the rushing stream. A white spume spat up around him and then his head alone rode the crest, redwood plaques swirling

(Continued on page 96)

COPS ARE BORN

By JIMMY NICHOLS

FOR Ernie Murphy, blue-coated member of Chicago's forces of law and order from 1897 to 1898, a policeman's life was not a happy one. From the day he pinned his badge on as a rookie cop, at the age of 23, bad luck dogged his footsteps, and by the time he resigned from the force not a single member of his family was speaking to him. And no wonder!

Murphy was an intensely loyal member of an Irish family that sprouted from Chicago's brawling west side in the 1870's. For a decade, these particular Murphys had been famed for their tempestuous behavior. Papa Murphy, a Civil War veteran, was given to tossing the Sunday roast beef out the window and into the street when it did not suit him, and the rest of the family was cut from the same pattern. All but Ernie.

Joining the force was the summit of Ernie's ambition. And by and large, the force was pleased with Murphy. He was a big, fine-looking man with a scrupulously honest face; "I'll stop at nothing to be a credit to my uniform," he told the Chief on the day he was sworn in. The Chief smiled indulgently, making allowances for Ernie's youthful enthusiasm. At that moment, neither knew how hard it was going to be for the young rookie to carry out his oath.

But by sundown of the next day, it was evident. Ernie had answered his first riot call at his own home address. There he found his brother, Tim, standing in the street with a smoking pistol in his hand and a terrified neighbor treed on a nearby roof.

"The blasted spalpeen went a-callin' on my gal," Tim Murphy explained indignantly. But the charge was attempted manslaughter, and Ernie had no choice. Deaf to his mother's pleas and his brother's curses, the determined young rookie brought in his prisoner. Tim Murphy went up for ten years. Young Ernie, testifying against his brother at the trial, wept openly but stuck to the facts.

Six months later, every Chicago policeman was alerted to watch for a young red-headed scoundrel who had stolen the Mayor's horse and buggy and was even now careening through the city streets, apparently running wild. Three pedestrians had narrowly escaped being knocked down and injured. The Mayor offered a fat reward for apprehension of the

runaway. Ernie, with orders to shoot on sight, patrolled the north boulevards with a sinking feeling in his heart. His younger brother, Henry, had always admired the Mayor's carriage.

His hunch was right. Down stately Michigan Boulevard, red hair flying in the wind, bellying exultant whoops, came Henry Murphy in the stolen buggy. The horses were lashed to a creaming froth; traffic scattered in all directions. Ernie grimly followed his orders to shoot on sight. It was not his fault if the bullet from his clumsy sidearm missed the thief and grazed one of the horses. At any rate, rookie Murphy again brought in his prisoner.

The police chief now began to hint to the distraught Ernie that perhaps he had chosen the wrong profession. He was at the moment more of an embarrassment than a credit to the force. And by the end of the week, Ernie was convinced that he was right.

Coldly, his mother and father informed him that they considered their Ernie a traitor to his family. "Tim and Henry are good boys," his father told him, "just a little wild, maybe, but they've no business in jail."

Ernie lay awake that night and overheard a conversation between his parents that made his ears burn and his heart ache. He tossed for hours, trying to make up his mind what to do. The next morning he rose, shaved, dressed in his black business suit and went down to headquarters to turn in his uniform.

The Chief seemed vastly relieved. "You really are a credit to the force, Ernie," he said kindly, "it's just that you weren't born to be a cop. I'll consider your resignation final at sundown."

Slowly and miserably, Ernie relinquished his grip on the blue uniform jacket with the brass buttons. "You said sundown, sir?" he asked. "Well, if I'm still on the force until sundown, I guess I'd better tell you—my mother and father are coming down today to help Henry break out of jail."

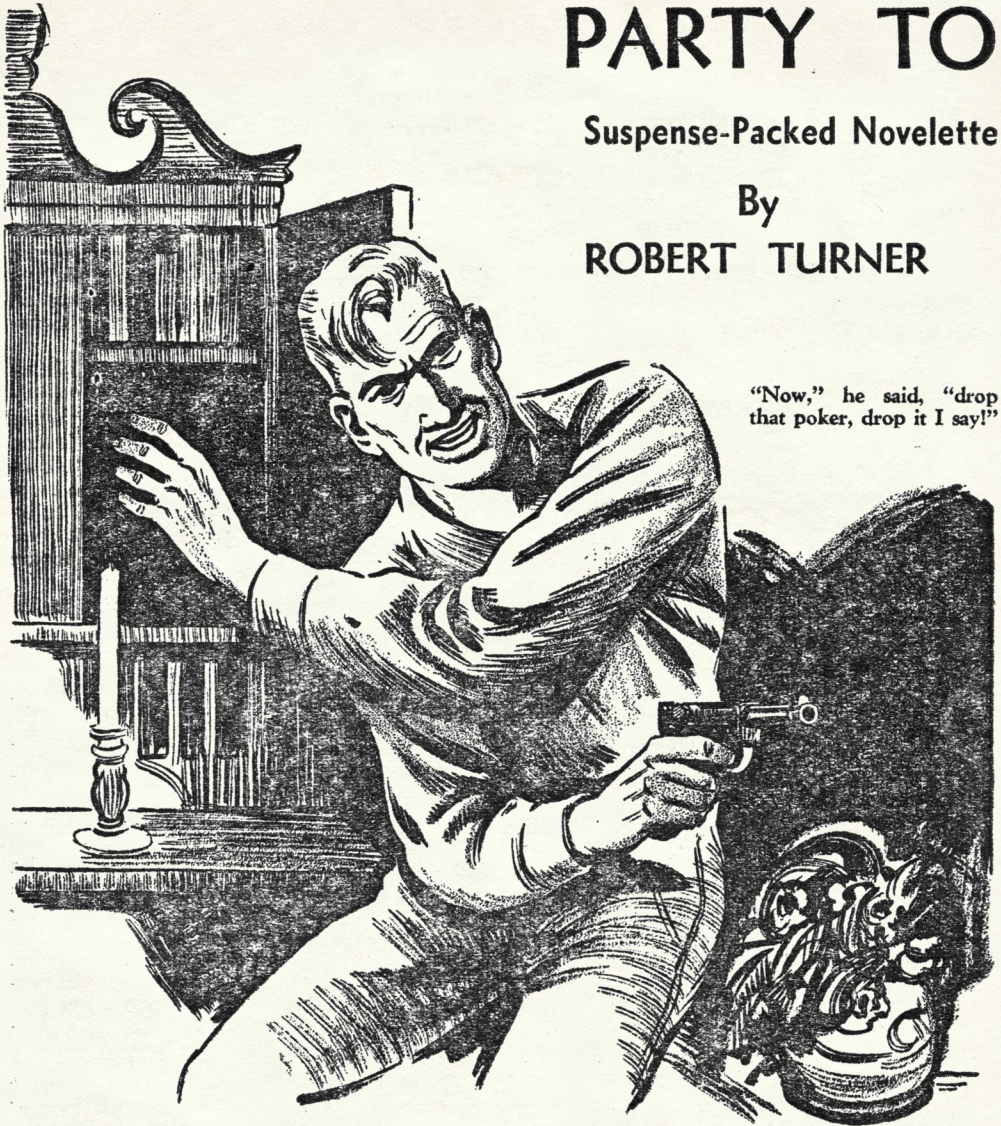
When the Chief recovered his powers of speech, he issued orders that thwarted the Murphy jail-break, then shoved Ernie, gently but firmly, to the door. The disheartened rookie realized that Fate had decreed that he could never wear brass buttons. Eventually, the honest Murphy became the successful but unhappy proprietor of a delicatessen store.

PARTY TO

Suspense-Packed Novelette

By

ROBERT TURNER



"Now," he said, "drop that poker, drop it I say!"

When the jitterbugging and the radio blare went berserk in the apartment upstairs, Wayne crashed Liz's farewell party in sheer self-defense. . . He stayed on for the same reason, when her faceless shroud chose him as partner in a breath-taking murder-time whirl!

CHAPTER ONE

Who's Got the Body?

HE STOOD it as long as he could. He didn't want to do this, but it had become too much to bear. Maybe it was because he had had that fight with Liz. Maybe

it was because Liz was moving, tomorrow, going home. Maybe it was just because he had been working too hard lately, that he couldn't stand all that racket going on upstairs in Liz's apartment. He didn't know.

All he knew was that he was trying to relax, in his own flat, with a drink and a good book. But he couldn't read; he couldn't relax. He

MURDER!

of a Trapped Killer



could hardly think, with a wild, noisy farewell party going on right over his head. The radio was going, up there, full blast. There were loud voices, laughter. And now there was the jump-thump-jump of a couple of heavy footed fools jitterbugging. That was too much.

He set the book down on the arm of the chair, finished his own drink. He got up and went out of his own apartment, and up one flight. He stopped in front of the door of the apartment directly above his own, and he felt a little foolish. Because now there was no noise coming from inside. No sound at all. They *would* calm down just as he came up to complain.

But it was probably only a lull. Somebody was telling a joke. Or they were playing some kind of a game. It would start up again any minute, unless he did something about it. He drew a deep breath and knocked on the door.

He only knocked once. That was all it took. Nobody answered. Nobody had to. The door swung slowly open under the pressure of his fist. It had been on the latch. He stared into the apartment.

It was pitch dark inside. No sign of light. What kind of a game was that, he thought. All the lights out. He called out, "Hey, in there! What's going on?"

Nobody answered. There was nothing but silence from inside Liz' apartment. He tried again. He called out, this time, "Liz! It's me—Wayne! Can I come in?"

No answer.

He took a step into the darkness of the hall that led into the living room. He fumbled in his pocket, pulled out a book of matches, lit one. In the light from that dull, flickering flare, he advanced slowly along the short hallway, calling out Liz's name. He came to the door leading off into the kitchen, stopped, reached inside and flicked on the light switch. Nothing happened. No lights came on. The darkness stayed and the match burned his finger. He dropped it, with a little cry.

A strange, panicky fear started to crawl all over Wayne, now. Quickly, nervously, he fumbled out another match, struck it. This time, he stepped farther into the kitchen to see that the room was empty. Really empty, nothing there at all but the sink, the washtub and the refrigerator. Liz's kitchenette set was not there. There were no dishes in the cupboard. The kitchen was completely bare.

"But there's a party going on!" Wayne told himself. "There'd be food, drinks, at least. I—"

Wayne dropped the almost burned out matchsticks, stood there for a moment in the total darkness and a roaring set up in his ears that he recognized as the pounding of his heart, the rush of blood through his head.

This couldn't be. There was a party going

on up here. He'd heard it. He knew it. That was what he'd come up here about—all the noise. And, anyhow, Liz wouldn't have moved today. She wasn't going to move until tomorrow. This was only the thirtieth. He was sure she hadn't planned to move until the last day of the month, tomorrow.

HE WENT to the doorway of the living room and this time he lit the last of the matches and the book, too. It made quite a bright glow for a few minutes, like a torch, almost. It made the room light enough for Wayne to see that it, too, was empty and that all the furniture had been moved out. There was no radio. There was no party going on; no games being played in the dark. The light was bright enough for Wayne to see that there was somebody here, though.

But this person couldn't possibly have been making all that noise. This person hadn't been playing a radio and dancing and singing and laughing. This person was sprawled out on the bare floor in the middle of the barren living room. She was dead; she was a corpse.

Just before the light burned out, Wayne saw and recognized Liz's green crepe dress. He saw the flaxen, soft-waved abundance of hair spread out on the bare boards of the floor. He saw the face of the dead girl, but it didn't mean much. There wasn't much left of the face. It looked like a shotgun, at point blank range, had done the job.

The book of matches burned out in his fingers and he hardly felt the pain of the burn. He just stood there in the inky darkness, saying over and over, "Liz! Liz! Liz!" and thinking about her, all the fun they'd had together, the times he'd danced with her, the times he'd kissed her. And he thought about the fight they'd had and some of the rotten things they'd said to each other. And he thought, "She's dead, now. Liz is dead. Somebody killed her." So he stood there in the darkness for a moment, in the vacant, abandoned flat. Just him and the corpse of the girl.

Suddenly, then, it was too much for him. He wheeled and went out of the room, in a stumbling run through the darkness towards the thin sliver of light at the end of the hall, from the cracked open door. He burst out into the hall, ran down the stairs to the basement, banged on the door of the super's apartment. He waited and when there was no answer, he raced upstairs again. He came to the apartment across the hall from Liz's, pounded that door.

A man came to the door. He was in his shirt sleeves. He was short and dark, with thinning black hair. He had small, green eyes and a heavy stain of beard on his jowled cheeks. A dead cigar stub jutted from his thin mouth. He was built solidly, and he had a

little pot stomach which didn't help him at all.

Wayne had never liked this Lud Folsom. He was a salesman of some kind, a little on the wise-guy side. Several times, Liz had complained about meeting him in the hall or on the street and that Folsom was always fresh. Wayne had meant to tell the guy off, several times, but had never gotten around to it. He didn't think about that, now, though.

He pushed past Folsom, into the other man's apartment, mumbling, "Sorry. Phone. Got to get to a phone. Call the police. There's been a murder. Liz, she—"

He got into the living room, was staring around wildly, looking for a phone. Lud Folsom came into the room behind him, the cigar removed from his mouth, now, his mouth gaping open, his little green eyes, wide with surprise. Several times his mouth worked to make words but none came out.

Wayne shouted impatiently, "Don't you understand? The phone. Where is it? The bedroom? I—"

Folsom got the words out, now. "No phone here. I don't have one. What in hell are you talking about? What's the idea, busting in here, like this? You drunk, or crazy? What's it all about?"

Wayne stared at him stupidly, stopped for the moment. No phone. He didn't know what to do, now. He couldn't seem to think, even. The police. That much he knew; the police had to be told about this. Something had to be done, quickly. He found himself blurting out the whole story to Lud Folsom.

When he'd finished, Lud stood watching him, narrowly, for several moments, stuck the cigar back into his mouth. Finally, he said, "You look sober enough. You look sick enough for what you say to be true. But it sounds screwy to me. An empty flat—a corpse. That Allison girl, you say? I don't see how it could be her. I saw her leave, this morning, right after the moving men took all her stuff out. I was looking out the window. I saw her get into a cab, outside. She was carrying a suitcase . . . Unless, she came back for something."

He went to a desk, yanked open a drawer, pulled out a flashlight. "Look, young feller," he said. "I don't know. Maybe you're seeing things, or something. Anyhow, you're going to have a time, selling the beat cop on that wild story. I'll go over with you and if what you say is true, we'll both go out and get him. I'll back up your yarn."

Wayne didn't know what to say to that. Reaction was beginning to set in and shock. He felt weak in the legs and tired and knocked out. He felt sick in his stomach. He looked at Folsom and at the flashlight. Finally, he nodded, dully. "All right," he said. Maybe the other man was right. Now, away from the dark, empty flat and the thing he had seen in

the pale ghostly flare of matchlight, he wasn't too sure, himself. He thought about the party noises. He must have imagined them. Maybe there was something wrong with him. Maybe he'd just imagined the whole thing.

He followed Folsom out of his apartment and across the hall into Liz's place. The white, bright beam of the flash cut ahead of them. As they passed empty rooms, Folsom flashed his light into them briefly, showing their emptiness. Their footsteps sounded hollowly along the hall.

They came to the living room and Folsom stopped in the doorway. He played the flash all around the room. Wayne stood behind, looking over his shoulder.

RIGHT in the middle of the floor, it was," Wayne said. "Put the light there. You'll see it."

But he was wrong. The light flashed all over the floor, slowly. There was nothing there; no corpse, nothing. There wasn't even a stain on the floor. Wayne leaned weakly against the wall.

"I saw it, I tell you," he said, numbly. "She—she was dead. She was wearing her green crepe dress. I saw her blonde hair and her face—it—her face—" He couldn't seem to finish.

Lud Folsom swung around on him, played the flashlight over his face. "Look, feller," he said. "Don't tell me. There's no dead body in that room. Corpses don't just walk away. You feel all right? You got a fever or something? Maybe you're delirious?"

"No," Wayne said. He was sweating now and chilled to the marrow at the same time. But it wasn't fever. He closed his eyes and he saw the scene all over again, knew he wasn't mistaken. "No. She was there. In the middle of the floor. Dead."

Folsom pushed past him. "Maybe it was some other room," he suggested. "In the excitement, you coulda made a mistake about the room."

Wayne followed him, behind the light, through the rest of the apartment. They didn't find the corpse. It was gone. He followed Folsom back out of the flat into the hall.

"I don't know," Wayne said, weakly. "I don't know what to say, what to do?"

Folsom's fat face was twisted a little, his eyes studying Wayne, narrowly. "Maybe you ought to go to bed, or go to a doctor or something. I think you're sick."

He didn't mean that, Wayne knew. What he meant was that Wayne ought to see a psychiatrist; he meant he thought Wayne was crazy, having hallucinations. Maybe he's right, Wayne thought. He turned slowly away.

"Yeah," he said, hollowly. "Maybe I ought to do that."

He walked woodenly toward the stairs. He

heard Folsom go into his own apartment, slam the door. With a million crazy thoughts whirling through his head, Wayne went back down the flight of stairs to his own floor, pushed open the door of his own apartment, that he had left ajar.

It was good to walk into the familiar surroundings, to see bright lights burning the way he had left them. Maybe after he'd fixed himself a good stiff drink, thought the thing out, he. . . .

He never finished the thought. He came into his own living room and he had company. Somebody was waiting there for him. She was sitting in the chair he had occupied when the whole thing had started. She was in that chair, with the bright reading light shining on her blonde hair and the horrible thing that had once been her face; the dead girl in the green dress that he had last seen upstairs in the empty flat.

He didn't know what it was, some instinct, some slight sound, perhaps, that made him start to turn around. Anyhow, it saved him from the full force of the blow. Whatever it was that hit him, it only made a glancing blow. But it was enough. The lamp pinwheeled before his eyes and the room went around like a room does when you lie down after too much to drink.

Wayne seemed to go walking into a wall. Only that was crazy, because it had a rug on it. And instead of bouncing away, he seemed to stay glued to it and couldn't pull himself away. Then the complete blackness came.

He came out of it slowly and didn't know what had happened or where he was at first. He heard someone pounding on the door. And his head was throbbing and aching. He put his hand to the back of it, but there was no blood, just a lump, under the hair. He sat up in the middle of his living room and turned towards the sound of the knocking, toward the hall that led to the front door.

Now, he heard someone call out, "Open up, in there. This is the police. Open up, or we'll break down the door."

Police. The word buzzed through his aching head. It brought the whole thing flashing back to his memory. He pivoted around on his tail and saw the corpse still propped up in the chair. He got to his feet, somehow, stood, swaying, trying to think.

He thought, "I went to Lud Folsom with a wild story about finding Liz's corpse in her empty apartment. When we went to investigate, it wasn't there. There was no sign of my story being true. But now the corpse is in here. Liz was my girl. She was going to move away, going back home, out west. We'd had a fight. We'd fought because she'd suddenly inherited a hunk of money from a cousin who had died recently. She'd figured that now

with that money, we could get married, even though I didn't have much of a job. But I'd said no."

He'd told Liz that that money only made it worse. He was proud. He wasn't going to marry any woman until he could support her, no matter how much money she had in her own right. So they'd fought. She'd called him a stubborn, hidebound fool. One thing led to another. He'd told her off, too, stung by her words. The last he'd seen of Liz, she'd said she never wanted to see him again, or New York, either. She was through. She was going back home where some man would appreciate the fact that a girl didn't want to stay single forever and be an old maid. She'd given notice to the landlord that day, two weeks ago, and Wayne hadn't seen her, since.

But nobody would believe that story, Wayne knew. He couldn't prove it. The police—everybody—under the circumstances would think Liz had jilted him because she'd suddenly inherited twenty-five thousand dollars. They'd think he'd tried to talk her out of leaving at the last minute, hating to see a suddenly rich wife-to-be slipping out of his hands. They'd think he'd killed her in a fit of temper, to stop her from going.

CHAPTER TWO

Blind Alley

WHILE the knocking and the angry threats of the police continued, all these thoughts whirled through Wayne's head. Then there was the crazy story he'd have to tell. It would sound fantastic. Nobody would believe that, either. He wouldn't have a chance. He couldn't let himself be arrested.

He ran into the bedroom, climbed out the window and onto the fire escape, started down to the blackness of the alley below. As he moved silently past the apartments of the other tenants, Wayne saw a woman mending in one place, a man rocking a baby to sleep in another. Just normal, everyday people, leading normal, everyday lives, oblivious to the thing that had happened in the same building. They didn't know that they were living in a house of sudden death.

Wayne thought how up until tonight, he had been like those other tenants. Tonight, right now, he should be sitting upstairs reading, listening to the radio, enjoying a drink. Or maybe, if things had been different, he'd be out somewhere with Liz, sitting in a theatre, or walking through the quiet darkness of a park, arm in arm. But it wasn't that way, now. Liz was dead. Crazy, weird, unexplainable things had happened. And the police were after him.

He dropped off the bottom rung of the fire escape, into the alley. He ran through the dark-

ness to the back yard, climbed a fence, headed down another alley and came out in the next block.

It was still early. He was on Eighty-Sixth Street, now, a busy, crosstown thoroughfare. The street was crowded. There was a lot of traffic and the people passing him were laughing or talking, casually. He expected everybody to be staring at him, but they weren't. Nobody paid any attention. Gradually, he became more at ease. He walked over to Lexington, entered a small bar and grille, ordered a double rye.

While he sipped the drink, let the fiery liquid warm his stomach, quiet his nerves, Wayne forced his mind to go back over the whole thing in logical sequence, to try and figure things out.

This much he knew. He didn't believe in the super-natural and earlier in the evening, there had been no reason for his mind to play tricks on him. There had been party noises going on in Liz's flat, but that didn't mean that there had actually been a party. Such things could have been faked.

He remembered, now, that there was a large closet in the living room. Somebody could have been up there and had a small radio plugged in, tuned up to full power. They could have done a lot of laughing, singing and loud talking. They could have jumped around and made a lot of what would seem to be a party noises, with the express purpose of making him go up there to complain. When he entered, whoever had been doing that, could have picked up the radio and hidden in the closet.

Then, he reasoned, when he ran out of Liz's place, the killer could have taken the corpse down the fire escape to Wayne's place, and planted it there. That explained everything. He felt rather pleased with his own logic.

Except, that it didn't really explain anything. It didn't tell him how Liz could have been killed with a shotgun, without his hearing the blast of the shot. It didn't tell him why she had moved a day early. Nor why she had left, as Lud Folsom said; then come back to be murdered.

Wayne thought then about Lud Folsom, and wondered what he had to do with it. He wouldn't put murder past Lud. Perhaps Lud had lied about seeing Liz leave. Maybe Lud had made a last attempt to get somewhere with her, just before she'd left. Liz would have resisted him. Lud could have lost his head and killed her.

It came to Wayne suddenly that the one weak spot in the murderer's whole setup was the shotgun. Not many people in the city owned one. If he could find someone who *did* own such a weapon—Lud Folsom, for instance—he'd probably have the killer.

One thing was certain, Wayne reasoned, he

wasn't going to get anywhere standing at a bar knocking his brains out. He had to do something. He gulped down the rest of the drink, went out onto the street.

On the way back to his own building, in the same circuitous manner by which he had left, Wayne did some more thinking about the shotgun. He figured that the killer wouldn't be dumb enough to keep the weapon. Probably the reason he hadn't left the gun with the corpse, was because it could be traced to the killer, as the owner. So most likely, the slayer had gotten rid of the gun, somehow.

As he reached the small yard in back of his apartment house, Wayne decided that the killer couldn't go out on the streets with a shotgun. He had probably stashed it somewhere in the building temporarily—perhaps in the cellar.

Wayne stood in the yard for a few minutes, looking up at the back of the apartment building. There were lights on now in the empty flat where Liz had lived. His own apartment was lit up, and so was Lud Folsom's. Wayne wished he knew what was going on in each of them.

He moved through the yard, avoiding the blobs of light from the windows, toward the door that led into the basement. It was a large building and the basement was vast, with long tunnels between storerooms. He passed the closed door of a recreation room and there was the *click-clock* of a ping pong game from inside. He passed the laundry room where Mrs. Rodriguez was using the Bendix, humming a lilting Spanish melody. He started to pass the furnace and incinerator room, but instead he stopped.

Standing in front of the great opened door of the incinerator, was a tall, stoop shouldered man in blue dungerees. He held a big piece of brown wrapping paper and inside the paper was the stock and the barrel of an old fashioned shotgun.

Wayne drew a startled, gasping breath and the tall man whirled around. He had a hollow-cheeked, cadaverous looking face, with huge, sad looking brown eyes. His thin lipped mouth came open, seeing Wayne.

"Mr. Morrow," he said, unbelievably. "Wayne Morrow. The—the police are looking for you."

I KNOW, Biggers," Wayne told the building superintendent. "They want me for murder." His eyes flicked to the shotgun and brown wrapping paper in Biggers' hands. "They want me for a murder I didn't commit. But I think they'll change their tune when they trace the ownership of that gun."

John Biggers stared down at it. He shook his long, bony head, slowly. "That was a bad place to throw it," he said. He had a deep, booming voice. "Although, ordinarily, by this

time it would have been burned and melted by the great heat of the incinerator. Only I didn't light it as early as usual tonight. I was out. I was out looking for my wife."

While the lanky superintendent had been talking, Wayne's eyes had flicked about the furnace room. Now, he moved swiftly toward a heavy steel poker. He picked it up, advanced toward Biggers, holding up the poker, menacingly.

"Don't give me that, Biggers," Wayne said. "You didn't just find that gun in the incinerator. You were about to put it there to get rid of it. You killed Liz Allison, Biggers. I can see the whole thing, now. You *hated* Liz, didn't you?"

Biggers shrugged his gaunt shoulders. A slight, sad smile flashed briefly around the corners of his thin mouth. "Not exactly," he said. "I just didn't approve of my wife, Angie, going out with Miss Allison. After all, Mr. Morrow, Angie was married and Miss Allison was a single woman. But they were both young and pretty and when two women go out, together like that, there's no telling—"

"They just went to a movie together," Wayne cut in. "There was nothing wrong with it. They went out together for an evening of innocent fun. Liz felt sorry for your wife. She was so lonesome, never went out anywhere—you were always so jealous of her. She thought it would do your wife good to be with her."

He stopped, thinking about that incident of a month or so ago. It had happened just like he'd said. Angie Biggers was about Liz's age, but for some reason known only to herself, she'd married a man almost twice her age. She used to go up and visit with Liz and complain about her lonely, dull life, how her husband never wanted to go out anywhere, wouldn't let her go alone. So Liz had asked her to go to a show with her one night. When they'd come home, old John Biggers was fit to be tied. He'd given Liz an unholy tongue-lashing, accused both women of hanging around bars and flirting with strange men. He'd slapped Angie and she'd cried and cringed from her husband and Liz had run away, back upstairs to her own flat. She wouldn't even see Angie anymore, after that. She was afraid of her husband.

Thinking about this, now, Wayne's face grew pale and he could feel the muscles of his jaws go knot-tight. Something like that must have happened again. Maybe Biggers' wife, Angie, had planned to go away with Liz. Biggers must have found out about it. There had been a big blowup and he'd killed Liz, maybe both women.

"Why did you kill her?" Wayne said softly. "You didn't have to kill her, Mr. Biggers. She wasn't doing any harm."

Biggers looked a little scared, a little puzzled, too, as though he didn't understand. He started to say something, but Wayne cut him short.

"That's why I didn't hear any shot," Wayne said. "Because you killed her down here, in your apartment, here in the basement. Then you took her upstairs, to the empty flat. How did you do it so that nobody saw you? You must've used the dumbwaiter, or something. Anyhow, you made out like a party was going on, to trick me up there, so that you'd have a chance to get her down to my place, while I was out, calling the police. Isn't that the way you worked it, Mr. Biggers?"

Biggers shook his head, pushed a wisp of sand colored hair away from the high, bony structure of his forehead. "Son," he said, "I don't know just what you're talking about, exactly. I was out all afternoon. When I came home I found a note from my wife, Angie, saying that she was leaving me. I almost went crazy when I saw that, though I've been expecting it for a long time. I rushed out to the bus terminals and railroad stations to see if I could catch her. It was a wild goose chase, though. When I come back from that, I ran into this murder business. There wasn't much I could do to help the police, though, so I came down here to tend to my chores."

"Yeah," Wayne said, "and now you're going right back up to those cops. Your story doesn't cut any ice, with me, it had to be you. You had a reason, because you thought Liz was a bad influence on your wife. And now I catch you trying to dispose of the murder weapon."

Wayne paused, hefted the poker. "Let's go, Biggers. Right now. Keep that shotgun just the way it is."

Biggers shrugged. "Suits me," he said. "I ain't got nothing to hide. This ain't my gun and nobody can prove it is. Like I told you, I was just about to light the incinerator, when I spotted the barrel poking out. Sometimes I get some pretty good odds and ends of stuff that people throw out like that."

"It's a good story," Wayne said. "All you've got to do is prove it. Let's go. Let's get upstairs to the police."

"I think you're crazy," Biggers told him. "You're walking right into the hands of the police, because I'll be able to prove I'm innocent and then they'll have you."

CHAPTER THREE

Dressed to Kill

FOR a moment, Wayne hesitated. What the super said made sense. And Biggers did seem pretty cock sure of himself, didn't seem afraid to go up and face the cops.

"You know," Biggers said. "You've got me sold on the idea that you aren't the killer. Because you're so sure that I am. I've got nothing against you. I'd like to help you. Look, you've got no place to hide out, no place to go. Why not use my apartment. I can be useful to you in trying to hunt down the real killer, too."

Wayne didn't answer right away. He couldn't figure this, didn't know how to take it. Biggers seemed sincere enough. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he was following a red herring and the evidence he had piled up against Biggers was just as circumstantial as the evidence piled up against himself.

"At least," Biggers went on, "I can show you the note my wife left me. I can prove that my story is true."

"Okay." Wayne took a deep breath. He didn't know what he was stepping into, but it wouldn't be much worse than walking into the hands of the police, if Biggers did turn out to be innocent. "You lead the way," he said.

He let Biggers precede him through the door of the furnace room and out into the basement. He followed him along the corridor to the door of the basement apartment.

Inside, Biggers threw the partly wrapped parts of the shotgun onto a sofa, went over to a desk. He started going through a litter of papers on top of the desk. "Don't know what I did with that damned letter," he said.

Then Biggers yanked open a drawer. "Ah, here it is," he said. He wheeled around. "Now, Mr. Morrow," he said. "Drop that poker. Drop it."

Wayne stared at the Luger John Biggers held in his right fist.

"I'm going to take you upstairs to the police. Maybe if I do the cops that favor, they'll pitch in and help me locate my wife."

But Wayne wasn't listening, now. He was staring at a woman's purse, lying on an end table.

"Wait a minute," Wayne said. "Is this your wife's purse?"

Biggers nodded. "Put it down," he said. "What are you doing, anyway?"

"Biggers, something's wrong, here," Wayne said. There was a throb of excitement and hope in his voice. "You say your wife has run away from you. She even left a note. Yet she didn't take her purse."

Biggers' eyebrows arched like black caterpillars. "She was in a great hurry, perhaps," he said, undecidedly. "Maybe she planned to buy all new stuff."

"And maybe she didn't run away at all," Wayne said, and the whole, wild, fantastic answer to everything that had happened, started to come to him. "Did you look to see if any of her things are gone? Her clothes? Anything that was of great value to her?"

"No." Biggers frowned. "I—I was so upset by the note and— No, I didn't look."

"Well, let's look now," Wayne said. "Don't worry. I won't try to escape. I think we've got something. I'll go ahead of you. You can keep the gun lined on me all the time."

He did that and Biggers followed him into the bedroom. Wayne went right to the closet, opened the door. The rack was hung with half a dozen cheap print dresses. On the floor were several pairs of shoes.

"Everything is still here," Biggers said, softly. "She would have taken some of it. Those red shoes. She was crazy about them. That fuschia dress. I—"

"Do you have a radio?" Wayne cut in. "What kind is it? A table set?"

"I—yes," Biggers said. "But it's not here. It was taken away, yesterday, to be repaired. Several of the tubes were blown."

"That takes care of that, then," Wayne said. "Now I know you aren't the killer. And I hate like hell to tell you this, Biggers, but I don't think it was Liz Allison who was slain. I—I'm afraid it was your wife, Angie."

While he was talking, Wayne started back out into the hall and along to the living room. Biggers, dazed by what Wayne had told him, followed, the gun held laxly now, in his big, gnarled hand.

As they stepped into the living room, Wayne started, wheeled to shout a warning, but he was too late. Biggers was too close behind him. The man, who had been standing to the right of the door, waiting for them to come back, struck. He knocked the loosely held gun from Biggers' fist. He held another gun in his own hand, a small, foreign looking pistol. Then he jumped back.

"Okay," he said grimly. "Both of you stand still."

Wayne stared at the killer. He looked at his beard stained face and at the dead cigar jutting from his small, cruel mouth. Only Lud Folsom wasn't in his shirt sleeves, now. He had put on a blue tie and a jacket.

OKAY, kid," Folsom said. "I heard you. So you figured it out. What good's that going to do you?"

"I guess it wasn't only Liz that you were after," Wayne said. "It was Angie, Biggers' wife, too."

"That's right," Folsom said. "I should have known better. She was a little fool. Just because I took her out a few times, showed her a good time, she thought she was in love with me. She wanted me to run away with her. She'd get a divorce later, she'd say, and she and I'd get hitched. That was a laugh. I told her so. She raised hell."

John Biggers was looking at Folsom, stupidly, shaking his long, narrow head from side to

side. He said, "Angie! She—Angie, she's dead. You—you killed Angie!"

"I didn't want to," Folsom said. "I had an old blunderbuss shotgun that I used years ago, hunting. There were a few shells left. I brought it down to the basement early tonight to throw away. I ran into Angie. She told me you were out and invited me in." He held out one hand, palm up, shrugged. "Well, she started to make trouble, make a big row. She said she was going to tell you. She got hysterical. . . . So I loaded the shotgun. So I killed her."

"And fixed the frame for me," Wayne put in. Quickly he outlined the thing, as he had figured it out. Folsom nodded in agreement. "It worked beautifully," Wayne went on. "Angie was about the same build as Liz, had the same color hair, copied Liz's hairdos. With her face destroyed, wearing one of Liz's dresses, it was a natural for her to be mistaken for Liz."

"Sure," Folsom said. His mouth was twisted around the cigar in what was supposed to be a grin. It wasn't. It was just a grimace. "It was the dress that gave me the idea. Liz gave Angie a couple of dresses before she moved. She was wearing one of them. All I had to do was clean up the mess in here, remove all traces of the shot and it was all set."

"Why did you come here, now?" Wayne said.

Folsom jerked his head toward the parts of the shotgun lying on the sofa. "The blunderbuss," he said. "It was the one thing that worried me. It could have been traced to me. I threw it down the incinerator, figuring it would get burned and the metal parts melted so that it would be unrecognizable. I came down a few minutes ago to make sure."

"It was a crazy idea," Wayne said. "Didn't you know that Liz would hear about the murder in the next few days or so, would hear that she was supposed to be dead and spoil your whole plan?"

"I didn't care about that," Folsom told him. "It would give me time to get away on one of my trips as a salesman, so it wouldn't arouse suspicion. I just wouldn't come back. And by that time, the police would be confused by the whole thing."

"I see," Wayne said. He turned toward John Biggers. The super was still staring at Folsom, his deeply sunk eyes, glittering crazily. "Well, Biggers," Wayne told him. "He'll have to kill us, now, to shut up our mouths. He's probably figured out a good scheme on that, too."

"Sure," Folsom admitted, grinning. "This pistol, I found, a couple of years ago. It can't be traced to me. I'm going to kill Biggers with that." He glanced quickly toward Biggers'

Luger on the floor. "Then I'll shoot you with Biggers' gun. The cops will think, you, the escaped murderer, tried to hide in here. That you had a little shoot-out between you."

Wayne Morrow acted like he hadn't even heard Folsom. He was still looking at Biggers. He said, "You heard him. You heard him bragging how your wife went out with him and how he killed her. There he is, right there. The man who killed your wife. Are you going to let him get away with it? What's the matter with you, Biggers?"

The big, rawboned super jumped as though he'd been stuck with a pin. His jaw dropped. He swung his wild eyed gaze to Wayne, then back again to Lud Folsom. "No," he said, stiffly, tonelessly. "Angie. My wife. He killed her. No, no. He can't get away with it."

Very slowly, planting his feet firmly like an invalid learning to walk all over again, John Biggers started toward Lud Folsom.

Lud Folsom backed against the wall.

"Get him, Biggers," Wayne said, softly.

"Yes," Biggers said.

Folsom made a sound, half sob, half scream just as Wayne hurled himself at him in a headlong dive. The pistol cracked sharp and loud in the room, just as Wayne hit Folsom's shaking body. Folsom went down. Wayne started to go after him. But he didn't make it. Biggers beat him to it. He landed on top of Folsom's squat figure. Biggers' huge fists rose and fell methodically.

After awhile, Wayne pulled Biggers away. The big man stood there dazed for a moment. Then he walked towards a chair and fell into it. He put his face into his hands. His big shoulders started to shake in silent sobs. Wayne felt sorry for him, but there was nothing he could do. It was perhaps better for the big man in the long run, he thought.

Wayne started for the door to get the police. But it wasn't necessary. They were entering the basement apartment, right then—two uniformed cops and a couple of detectives. There was also a girl with them. She ran towards Wayne.

He held her close in his arms and it was awhile before either of them could talk. Before Liz could tell him how she was forced to move a day early, because of an impending mover's strike had started on her bus trip home, but she had got to thinking about him.

"I couldn't stand it," she cried against his shoulder. "I realized that I was wrong, all wrong. I shouldn't have left you. I could never be happy away from you."

"Sure, honey," Wayne told her. "It's okay now, baby." Gently, he pushed her away from him. Right now, he knew, they had to get this murder business straightened out. There would be time for the other, later . . . lots of time.

THE END

TOO MEAN TO LIVE!

By JOHN D. FITZGERALD

IN AN eastern reformatory there was a guard whose appearance was grotesque and horrible. His neck was twisted to one side so that his chin rested on his left shoulder. His maimed condition was the result of an attempt by inmates of the institution to murder him.

It happened many years before humane treatment of prisoners was known. The guard was a guy who seemed to delight in beating his prisoners and then tossing them into solitary confinement. This insane cruelty probably resulted from brooding about his brother who, strangely enough, had been killed by inmates in another prison.

Each Friday night inmates were given a bucket of hot water and soap to do their laundry and clean their cells. On Saturday mornings, the inmates brought the buckets down stairs, emptied them into a drain and piled them in one corner of the cell block.

One Saturday morning one of these iron buckets, a twenty-pounder, was dropped from the top tier on the head of the guard who stood below in the cell block. If the bucket had hit squarely, rigor mortis would surely have followed. Fortunately, he was leaning forward so that the bucket hit with a glancing blow on the neck and shoulders.

The cell block Captain stopped the inmates from descending from the tiers and ordered all of them back into their cells. He sent for the Deputy and told him that he had the would-be murderer bottled up. All that was left to do was to search each cell until they found an inmate without a wash bucket and they would have the guilty man.

The Captain's logic was good, but the search revealed that every inmate had a bucket. The outsmarted Captain was stumped.

When the Captain learned that the doctors could not do anything for the guard, he became determined to solve the case. The blow had broken the poor man's neck in such a manner that any attempt to set it right would prove fatal.

Of course there were no fingerprints, but there was a small piece of string attached to the handle of the bucket. A microscopic examination of this proved that it came from the reformatory book bindery. However, this didn't help, because the guard had been in charge of this shop and at one time or another had beaten and put into solitary every

inmate in it. On top of that, all the inmates of this shop celled on the top tier.

It was several months after the incident that the Captain got a hunch. He noticed that the guards stationed in the cell block each morning, invariably stood on the same spot. Looking up he saw that a twelve inch beam ran directly above where the hated guard always stood.

He got a ladder and went up to inspect the beam. On top of it he found four electrician's staples and caught in one of them was a piece of lint. Under a microscope this lint proved to be from the string attached to the handle of the bucket.

He checked the work done by the electric gang and discovered that on the day before the attempted murder, they had put in ceiling lights in the cell block. He recalled that on that day the guard in charge of the gang had been on the other side of the block talking to him while the gang did the work. This had left the gang unobserved for nearly an hour.

He reasoned that one of the inmates had elaborated the plan. A wash bucket had been snatched from the corner and balanced on the beam. A piece of string was then attached to the handle, threaded through four staples and then run through the bar lock and into a cell.

The next morning a book-bindery inmate had merely pulled the string.

The Captain studied the case histories of all inmates in the book bindery and the electric gang and narrowed his suspects down to two brothers. One worked in each gang. Department records showed that the brother in the book bindery had often been beaten and put into solitary by the guard in question.

Confident that he had all the answers, the Captain reported to the Superintendent. At a conference with a member of the district attorney's office, it was decided that without a confession or an eye witness, the case would not stand up in court.

The Captain third-degreed all members of the electric gang, as well as the two brothers, but failed to find a single inmate who would admit anything. As a result the case was dropped.

The guilt or innocence of the two brothers is still debated in the reformatory. The Captain was convinced that he had solved the case even if he could not prove it.



DEATH-DANCE

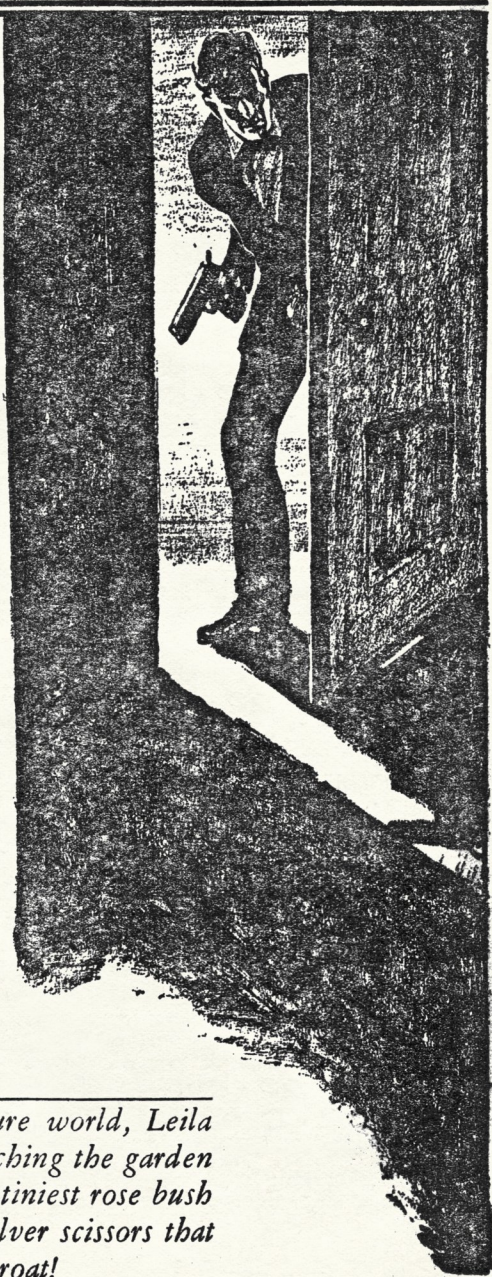
CHAPTER ONE

Older than Sin

I T WAS good Scotch and it was on the house, but I wouldn't be drinking it if I wasn't sure Paul Locker knew he couldn't buy me a drink—or a hundred cases. "Okay, Paul," I said, low-toned. "You know what I want." It was still early for the Silver Sandal. A tall girl sitting down at the other end of the bar was the only customer in the lounge and the attendant was mopping the counter in front of her. Neither was near enough to hear me. "What's happened to Stanley Forbes?"

Locker's fat-drowned little eyes went blank. "I don't know. So help me, Jim, I ain't—haven't got a notion."

"You lie," I murmured and took another sip. Someone, I thought, has taught him that the owner of a swank supper club doesn't say 'ain't.' Someone's dressed him up in a two hundred dollar tux instead of the barkeep's



In that strangely frightening, miniature world, Leila and I were chained to the ground, watching the garden where the toy-sized beauty pruned the tiniest rose bush you've ever seen—with the smallest silver scissors that ever could slit a man's throat!

OF THE BROKEN DOLLS •

Sinister Novelette of a Living Nightmare

By
ARTHUR
LEO
ZAGAT

apron that he used to wrap around his paunch. Someone's got him to scrape the stubble off his jowls till they're so pink they look peeled. But he's still a wrong finger, just like I'm still a dumb plainclothes dick in spite of the first-grade detective tag they've hung on me. "You lie," I repeated. "If you want a sucker who'll believe that the heir to the Third National Bank can disappear from your dive without your knowing how and why, try telling it to the little she-imp in the wall behind you."

"The—!" His head jerked around to that wall, jerked back to me. Pale blue ice filmed his eyes again but it had shattered for an instant to let terror peer through. "Why from here, Jim? Who says it was from here?"



"I do." Why, I wondered, had my casual mention of the carnival gadget framed in the silk-draped wall hit him so hard? "Stan Forbes was here, alone, night before last, Wednesday." Granted that thumb-size houri strutting around behind picture-frame glass is a little eerie the first time you see her, Locker must know that she's only a trick done with mirrors. "He was still sitting at this bar when you started to close up at five Thursday morning. He wasn't seen leaving here." Not at least by the doorman, who's a police stool. The Silver Sandal's one of the night spots we find it convenient to keep a close watch on. "He hasn't been seen since, here or anywhere else."

I leaned forward a little. "His old man's keeping that quiet, Paul, but it got whispered around and the whispers got to me. You knew it already. Are you going to be smart and tell you know or do I have to get tough?"

The old Locker would have crumbled at that, or got nasty. The new one just said, tonelessly, "You won't get tough, Jim Corey. You can't play that way with me no—any more."

He'd called my bluff. When this joint was just another rowdy roadhouse we could toss him around all we cared to and the worst flareback would be a whine from some local ward-boss. That was before I'd swapped a badge for chevrons and put in a little time knocking around a different kind of crook. Today, if we so much as scratched the furniture here, we'd have a half-dozen columnists ripping our hides off in the papers and that would be only the beginning. How he'd done it was a puzzle, but you weren't a big shot in Parling City if you didn't rate a Silver Sandal ringside table and it was Paul Locker who decided that. He was aces with the top brass, from the mayor on down—unless we got him with something putrid.

What he didn't know, I hoped, was what Commissioner Gershon had said a half hour ago, "No, Corey. Harlow Forbes swings too much weight for me to order an investigation of his son's disappearance when he denies that young Stanley has disappeared. All I can do is give you twenty-four hours leave for personal business. It's not my responsibility what that business is, so long as it doesn't involve me or the department."

That meant I was strictly on my own. It meant that if this thing went sour, Gershon would chop off my head to save his own. "Okay," I yielded Locker's point. "So you're dug in solid. What's got you scared white-livered?"

"Me scared?" His eyes rounded with a look of innocence but he couldn't stop the pulse-flutter in his left temple. "That's funny, Jim. It's a scream. Know any more jokes?"

"Only that you think you're kidding me," I came back but I knew I wasn't getting anywhere. I put my glass to my mouth and drank slowly.

It was empty when I set it down and so was my head of any new ideas. "Look, Paul," I said. "I'd be lying in a cave on Okinawa, very dead, if it wasn't for Stan Forbes. I owe him for that and I pay my debts." That was why I'd told the commissioner he could have my badge if he banned me from hunting Stan. "Stan's no playboy. When he got out of the army he went right to work in his father's bank, and I mean work. He's done no more stepping out than any other decent kid of twenty-three with a career to build. He came here a week ago last Saturday with a party. He came back the following Monday night and every night since, alone. That doesn't fit, so there's got to be a reason. You wouldn't be Paul Locker if you didn't know what that reason is."

I pulled in breath. "Or who. Is it a female?"

He took so long answering I didn't think he was going to, but he finally squeezed it out. "Yes."

"Okay. Which one of the floosies in your floor show is it?" I was feeling sickish. You get to know a kid pretty well when you've spent four years in the same outfit with him. I'd been sure Stan wouldn't let that wind of gal sink her claws in him. I'd been wrong and his father had been right, keeping the lid on the thing till the inevitable payoff. "Come on, Paul. Give me the name."

"Let me get you another drink," he stalled, snapping his fingers for the barkeep. The latter came to us fast, started making with glasses, bottles, ice right there. I could only keep a look on his boss's face, trying to hold him where I had him till I was free to talk again.

And trying to puzzle what was behind the fear under his skin. The layout didn't figure. Locker was no lily and he was smart. To risk the gold mine he'd built up here against a two or three way split of a breach-of-promise settlement, he'd have to be a dope or a gambler against crazy odds. I didn't think he was either.

Pondering that, I turned and reached for the new filled glass—I smashed to smithereens before I could grasp it!

The ash tray that had skidded down the counter and done that carrommed off the back of the bar. Liquid splashed over the front edge, was cold on my thigh. The little scream I'd heard became a rueful exclamation, "I'm so sorry," and the girl who'd been sitting down there was coming toward me. "I tried to hit that pretzel bowl and I missed. I'm a rotten shot." I was conscious of sun-bronzed

shoulders rising out of black froth, of dusky-red lips exclaiming, "Oh dear! It's spilled all over your leg," and then I was looking down at a honey-hued, sleek face as slender fingers dabbed the wetness on my thigh with a white wisp of lace.

"Okay," I said. "It's okay. Here, let me do that." I'd dug out my own handkerchief, bent to use it but she kept on dabbing and so my cheek touched the satin warmth of hers.

"Listen, he put something in your drink," and a cute little giggle covered that as she straightened up.

"I—It's perfectly terrible of me to laugh," she apologized, "but I can't help it. You looked so comical reaching for the little glass that wasn't there."

"I sure must have," I growled, wiping the last drops from my suit. "I must have looked like a dope." Under the smell of Scotch I caught another, faintly pungent trace of odor. Chloral. So Locker was desperate enough to have me slipped a Mickey.

I was burned up at myself for missing his signal to the barman. And I was frightened. I was afraid for Stan Forbes.

LOOK, Jim," Paul Locker was saying, "the crowd'll be showing up in about ten minutes now. Stick around and take in the floor show. Order what you want, there won't be no check.

He was slipping off my hook and I let him go. I needed time. I watched him plod down the wide steps to the dining room, stop a moment and then turn along the bottom step to the continuation of the wall that backed the bar, and pull aside a fold of drape. There was a door behind it. Locker reached for its knob, hesitated, then came around to a tall, cadaverous individual who'd appeared from nowhere. I could see the club owner's gesture, apologetic, pleading.

"Don't you recognize me, Jim Corey?" the girl asked. "I'm Leila Humboldt."

"Oh sure. Sure." I'd never seen her before. "What gave you the idea I didn't know you?"

"You didn't even nod," she said. Everything about her looked good, the way her hair framed her elfin face, the lurking lights in her frank eyes, the slim body her black evening dress enclosed. Even with what I had on my mind, I was aware I was looking at someone too young and sweet to be hanging around a place like this unescorted. "I'll bet you've forgotten meeting me at the Fosdick dance with Stan Forbes. Have you seen him lately?"

The skin tightened over my cheekbones. She was telling me she was a friend of Stan's and that she knew I was. She was telling me she knew I was looking for him. "Why bring him up?" I grinned, warning her to skip

the subject within hearing of the bartender. "Now that we meet again, how about a drink?"

"Hold that," I checked the barman who already had fresh glasses out and was reaching for the pinch-bottle from which he'd poured my last one. "I see you've Irish there." I pointed to an unopened fifth on the back-bar. "We'll have that. And a new bottle of soda, that last was flat."

His big shoulders shrugged but he was wooden-faced. I watched him closely, as he scooped ice cubes from the bin, and was certain nothing went into the glasses except what should. I picked mine up as soon as it was filled and Leila did the same, and said, "Isn't this the most fascinating place in Parling City? Don't you just love it?"

I grunted.

"And isn't that girl in the wall weird? She haunts me. I want to go look at her again, Jim." Her left hand seized mine, tugging me off my stool. It was as cold as the tumbler in my other hand. "Come on."

"Neat," I thought. "She's shifted us away from the barkeep's ear."

The customers had started to flock through the lounge and our progress was slow and halting. We kept our voices low. "You were wrong," Leila murmured. "Stan's not chasing a flosie in the chorus. Not my Stan."

I hoped no one noticed the startled glance I couldn't help shooting at her. "I read your lips," she answered the question it asked. "I learned how during the war, as a nurse's aid in the deaf ward."

It was pat. It was too pat. Was I being taken? "Your Stan, Leila? We were buddies for a damn long time but I don't recall his ever mentioning you."

"He wouldn't. I was fourteen when he went into service." That would make her about nineteen now. "I was the neighbor's brat with knobby legs and braces on my teeth. He didn't know I existed. I'd changed by the time he came home." A smile touched her lips and there was pain in it. "He hadn't changed, he was just the same. I'd loved him always, Jim. Now he found out he loved me too and I was very happy until—until the Saturday night the Fosdicks brought us here."

A knot of backs, black-clothed, or bare and draped with furs, barred us off from the thing she'd pretended to want to show me. "Since that night," Leila went on as we paused in the comparatively clear space behind them, "I haven't seen him, have had only a couple of hurried phone calls. He was tied up, he said, by something important. I believed him, too, until I had tea with Jennie Fosdick this afternoon and she told me she'd heard Stan was coming here night after night, that he was fascinated by that woman and—"

"What woman?" I broke in. "I thought you said he wasn't chasing a showgirl."

"He's not. If it was that, I wouldn't have come here to find him. I would have been hurt, not—frightened." In the blue-shadowed hollow beneath her throat her heart pumped. "Is there such a thing as magic, Jim? Black magic?"

It was ridiculous. But I didn't have the heart to laugh.

"She gives me the jitters," one of the barebacked women exclaimed and pulling back from the crowd almost knocked the glass from my hand. "You can stay here gaping at her, but I refuse to." Her escort mumbled a protest as he turned and Leila surprised me by slipping into the space they'd left.

I shoved in beside her, and felt her fingers close on my arm. "Isn't she adorable, Jim?" She was back in her teen-age role. "Isn't she the cutest thing you ever saw?"

"Just ducky," I chuckled, as I wondered why she'd gotten us into this jam. A push-covered rail kept us from crowding too close to the wall in which at eye level a glass-fronted box was sunk. A foot wide and some ten inches high, it contained, perfectly proportioned in the scale of an inch to the foot, a tiny rose garden. Just within the left-hand edge a high, vine-clad parapet ran straight back, then right-angled and merged with the corner of the structure that closed in the rear. Only a portion of this was visible—a curiously narrow window which tapered upward, and half of a door whose stone frame had the same odd slant.

Over the garden wall one looked into an empty and somehow foreboding sky. "You're mean," Leila pouted. "I think you're awfully mean to poke fun at me," but crushed against her I could feel that she was trembling.

The garden could be explained as a sterling example of miniature model maker's art, not so the woman who strolled among the flowers. In precise proportion to the rest, she was hardly more than five inches tall and she was alive. She was no mechanical doll. She was flesh and blood, an incredible tiny living creature. "See what I mean," Leila prattled. "Wouldn't she bring out the wolf in anyone?"

She was double-talking again. She was saying that this was who'd taken Stan away from her. "Yeah," I grunted. "I see what you mean."

And I did. Human size, the woman in the garden would get into any normal man's blood. As she stooped to clip with her pruning shears a dead rosebush spray, her silvery, loose robe slitted to reveal a perfectly formed leg that tapered into a microscopic silver sandal. Her arms were uncovered and moved with exquisite grace. A silver girdle caught up the robe under its deeply cut neckline.

Etched cameo-like against the deep hue of the bush, her face was as young as this morning's sunrise and as old as sin. There was mystery in the droop of the long, dark lashes that hid vaguely slanted eyes and in the flare of the nostrils, the insidious curve of the lips, there was a promise of forbidden delight.

She was beautiful—and evil. The garden was an appropriate setting for her, with the profusion of its flowers and the grim loom of the building whose oddly tapered window was caged over with heavy bronze bars. The door, too, was bronze—It was moving inward!

The woman twisted to it. For an instant she stood tensed, lips snarling back from pointed, feral teeth, then she had darted to the widening aperture and had vanished within. "Damn!" growled the man beside me, then slid a sheepish grin to his girl and said, "Let's get a dance in before the floor jams up."

They were gone. The cluster against the rail had disintegrated. "Queer time for her to cut her act," I remarked, "just when the customers are getting here." An odd sound came from Leila, a barely audible word, "Look! Look, Jim. The window."

I looked. At the sill tiny hands clutched the base of a vertical bar and deep within the embrasure was a thumbnail-size face. The hands jerked loose, the face jerked down out of sight, and chill prickles puckered my neck. That impossibly small face, mouth open with what seemed a yell for help, had been Stan Forbes'. Braceletting the wrists of his hands that clenched the bar had been manacles from which a gossamer chain had trailed back through the black slot.

The pain in my arm was Leila's fingers, digging in. "Easy, honey," I muttered. "Take it easy. It's bad enough, but it isn't what you think. Stan hasn't been shrunk to the size of a five and dime-store doll. It's not black magic, Leila, it's only a stunt."

"A stunt," she repeated, hysteria jittering in her breathless voice. "How do you mean?"

"Take a slug of that whiskey and I'll explain." I had to get that glassy stare out of her eyes, before Locker or one of his gang saw how she looked and guessed why. There was a menace here and I didn't want it aimed at her as well as me.

She did it. She emptied her glass and as soon as she let go my arm, I did the same!

"Tell me, Jim. Tell me quick."

"Just a minute while I make sure no one spotted you wilt." I looked around the lounge. There was a jam around the check window out in the lobby. Three attendants were behind the bar now and all too rushed to have been watching us. The plush rope was up across the gap in the railing at the head of the

steps down to the dining floor but it wasn't Paul Locker who presided there. It was the lank, lugubrious character I'd seen intercept him.

Tall as the latter was, his long-nosed visage and bald headpiece were topped by the white mane of an important looking personage whose booming tones came clearly to me through the gabble of the lounge. "I haven't a reservation, Henri, and I don't want one. I want to talk to—" A crash of cymbals drowned the rest. I twisted back to Leila, Harlow Forbes is here. Stan's father. He must have decided to do some poking around on his own. If he sees me here, my name's mud."

"Mine too, Jim. I'm supposed to be at a Brierley College hop. He'd be sure to tell Dad and— But what's behind that glass?"

"There's nothing behind it. Not right behind it. That's just a clever optical illusion worked by means of a series of lenses." I'd seen the stunt for the first time at the New York World Fair in '41. Assigned there as one of the detectives, I'd been allowed behind the scenes to see how it worked. "It's like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. The house and garden and the woman are all actually full size. They're in a big room somewhere back of this wall and so's Stan. Now we know he's there, we can— What's wrong?" I broke off, seeing the girl's pupils go large again. "Isn't it clear?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, it's quite clear. Only it doesn't explain what we've seen, because—" A muscle twitched in her cheek. "Because, Jim, there can't be any big room back of this wall. It's the outside wall of the building and the parking lot is beyond it."

CHAPTER TWO

Out of Space—Out of Time

I WENT cold all through, ice cold, for not remembering that. "Hold this." I thrust my empty glass into Leila's hand. "Hold it and stay right here," and then I was stumping through the milling lounge towards the steps.

By the time I'd reached there, however, I'd got back enough control not to shoulder aside the sucker who was giving his name to Henri. Waiting while the *maitre* found that name on his list, unbuckled the rope and signalled a captain, I searched the floor for Locker but could see him nowhere. Rope-end in hand, Henri laid colorless, fishy eyes on my face. "I want to talk to your boss," I told him. "But fast."

"My boss, sir?"

"Locker."

"Sorry, sir," he said. "Mr. Locker is occu-

ped at the moment. If there is any complaint, I—"

"I said I want Paul Locker. Where is he?"

"I have no idea. If you will—" But his look had flickered to the far sidewall and before he'd finished his lie I'd shoved him down the steps and was striding toward the drape-hidden door where I'd last seen the man I wanted. A little surprised at reaching it without interference, I plucked aside the silken fold, jerked open the door and pulled it shut behind me.

It blanked out sound and light. Peering into darkness I heard only the rasp of my own breathing, and smelled the rancid stench of the old juke-joint that had Cinderellaed into the swank Silver Sandal. Then my eyes accommodated themselves and I was in a narrow space between two vague walls, with stairs that climbed steeply between them.

As far as I knew the building had only the single, main floor but wherever these stairs went, they would lead me to Locker. The ladder-steep wooden treads creaked under my feet. My right hand trailed brick, my left hand rough boards gritty with dust. As I reached the upper landing I heard, somewhere ahead, a retreating, tiny scutter.

My cigarette lighter was in my hand, its flame lit. The glow could not reach to the end of the space but its frayed edge caught—

I shook my head. My eyes must have played a trick on me. What the light's edge had caught and lost had *not* been a thumb-size human figure. It was a mouse, I assured myself. Only a mouse.

Nevertheless, for a moment my scalp was prickling.

In the board wall beside me was a closed door. I pulled it open, stepped through into a small room that had only a skylight in its low, slanted ceiling. Grimy light seeped down through the dirt-encrusted glass, and spread over the battered files, a rust-spotted safe, and a scarred rolltop desk out of whose pigeon-holes a clutter of papers spilled. Paul Locker wasn't sitting at the desk. He lay huddled on the floorboards between it and its swivel chair. I went down to my knees beside him, felt no pulse in his flaccid wrist, saw no flutter of the hairs in his wide nostrils.

He was dead. He'd not been dead very long. The little splatter of blood on the white edge of his collar was still scarlet. There was a splotch on the close-shaved neck just above the collar's edge. It had squeezed out of a quarter-inch slit at the base of his skull.

It seemed grotesque that so small a puncture should have let out the life of this lumbering hulk. It would have been incredible to someone who did not know, as it was my business to know, that right there was a space between vertebrae and skull-case into which

a nail file or a narrow penknife blade could be slipped, almost without effort, and sever the spinal cord.

A file or a knife blade or one blade of the miniature shears with which I'd seen a tiny woman prune a tiny rosebush.

I pulled the back of my hand across my brow, and wiped away the cold sweat that had sprung there. This was murder. I not only could, but must call in the Homicide Squad. Columnists, big shots, Harlow Forbes, no one could kick now if we tore the Silver Sandal to pieces looking for clues to the killer—and found Stan.

There was a telephone on the desk. I pushed erect, heard a clink at my feet and realized that I'd been kneeling on something, that it had stuck to the still damp cloth and had dropped off. It wasn't the death instrument. It was a flat door key, one of those silly solid gold gadgets no one ever buys for himself. The first time I'd ever heard of them was when I'd gone with Stan to a jewellers in Phoenix, while we were on desert maneuvers, and he'd ordered one to send to his father as a birthday gift. I recalled that he had ordered the wide fingerhold initialled. I bent to see if this one had been monogrammed.

It was. The letters were *H.F.*, for Harlow Forbes.

I stared down at it, my brain racing. I'd overheard Stan's father saying that he didn't want a table, that he'd come here to talk to someone. Locker of course. Henri wouldn't have tried to give him the same brushoff he'd given me, and would have directed him up here. That wasn't more than fifteen minutes before I myself had started for the door below and I hadn't met Forbes coming out. That left ten minutes for him to have climbed to his room, had his talk, descended again, and for someone else to have killed Paul Locker and gotten out before I entered. Not enough. Not nearly enough.

But it seemed inconceivable that Harlow Forbes should have— Something stung the base of my skull. I slapped—tried to slap at it, but darkness invaded my brain too swiftly. I plunged dizzily down into oblivion.

MY SKULL throbbed with pain. I was back to some kind of consciousness but I couldn't lift my hand to my head, couldn't move my feet. Strong light lay against my eyelids, pried them open to a green dazzle splotted with red, pink, and white.

The dazzle cleared. The green was the leaves of a lush bush through which I peered. The colored spots were roses. Huddled on my side, my wrists and ankles manacled, I looked slantwise across a sun-flooded rose garden to a towering, ivy-streamered wall.

The garden and its wall were at once

familiar and strange, like some scene out of a recurrent dream. With dreamlike illogic they ended abruptly in a glittering murk. I stared into this. Something seemed to move within it— Suddenly the dream became a nightmare. Squinting against the too-bright sunlight I made out a monstrous and appalling face; purplish, writhing lips as long as my arm, vast nostrils out of whose cavernous nares protruded black hairs thick as hawthers, eyes the size of footballs staring in through what I now knew was glass.

I knew terribly that the tremendous sheet was the twelve by ten inch glass framed in the wall of the Silver Sandal's lounge—knew that the gargantuan face was no larger than my own had been when I'd gazed in here at the silvery-robed woman who now wandered into my field of view and was no longer tiny but as large as I.

Wrong! *I was as small as she.*

She paused, clipped a rose, lifted a graceful arm to tuck it into her dark wealth of hair. From behind my concealing bush I could not make out if the pruning shears with which she'd clipped that blood-red rose were stained with Paul Locker's blood, but in that moment I wished she had used them on me rather than that I should be reduced to the size of "a five and dime-store doll."

"Is there such a thing as magic?" Leila had asked me, "black magic?" and I'd laughed at her. I wasn't laughing now. I was fighting for sanity, and was clinging to the thought of the gray-eyed girl as my last link with the reasonable world. Was she still out there where I'd told her to stay? Was hers the gigantic, distorted face that peered in here? If I wriggled out from behind this screening bush, would she see me, smash the glass and—?

And what? I would live on a circus freak, a homunculus—"Jim."

The whisper had seemed very near. "Jim Corey." Now it was a low murmur right behind me and it had the very timbre of Leila Humboldt's voice. "Wake up, Jim." Now I was hearing things as well as seeing them. "Please wake up, Jim."

I wasn't asleep. I was insane. Leila was in the Silver Sandal's lounge. She wasn't in here. It wasn't her sob I heard, close behind me. I'd prove to myself that it wasn't. I rolled over, saw looming above me the building facade that backgrounded the garden, saw towering above me the door, only half of which had been visible through the glass. It was a quarter open and there was movement within the dark slit. Leila's voice: "Oh, thank God! I thought—I was afraid you were—" A sob choked it, and then it gasped, "Quick, Jim. She isn't looking this way. Now's your chance to get back."

Why didn't Leila reach out, pluck me up between thumb and forefinger and— "Oh, hurry." I arched my back, did a belly-crawl across the threshold and into darkness.

Relieved breath whispered above me. I shoved cuffed hands hard against the floor, shoved up to my knees. I stared at Leila on her knees in front of me, her wrists handcuffed, her eyes black pits in a color-drained face that was on a level with mine.

She was my size. She also had shrunk to inches. "How—?" I gasped.

"A bus-boy told me you wanted me in Mr. Locker's office. He took me as far as the stairs, let me go on up alone. Just as I got to the top something stung me on the back of the neck and—and the next thing I knew, I was lying here beside you."

"Beside you? But I was out there."

"You came sort of half awake, wriggled out and seemed to go blank again." She swallowed. "What's happened to us, Jim? Where are we?"

I tried desperately to think of something to say which would keep her from toppling over the brink of madness. Beyond her I could see only darkness but I had a sense of space immensely away, of space, even allowing for my distorted perception, too vast to be contained within the wall of any building.

Yet all this must be within the Silver Sandal's outer wall. Or was it? "I—I remember reading a book once, Leila, about the fourth dimension and stuff like that. This writer said, that two different worlds might overlap one another without the people of either knowing anything about the existence of the other. He said time might be different in the two worlds. It might for instance be night in one and day in the other. He said distances might be in different proportions, so I suppose that would mean size too. And he said there might be intersections of the two worlds—'mutual planes'—through which the people of one could pass into the other. The time I read that, I thought he was completely goofy but maybe I was wrong." I grinned at her, pretending to believe what I was saying. "Maybe that's what this is all about. What do you think? Does it make any sense to you?"

"It does, Jim, sort of. Prof. Manley at Brierley told us something about that theory in one of his lectures on Einsteinian Relativity, only I don't remember—did your book say anything about the people of a one dimensional world being able to look into the other through a mutual plane? I mean, when we looked in here and saw Stan."

"Stan!" How could I have forgotten about him? "He's here too, of course. Wonder where."

"He's right behind you."

I swung around in the direction of her

nod. A beam of light slanted down through the high, tapered window, and laid a brilliant trapezoid on the gray floor. Just within the wallward edge of this was the freckled, boyish face of Stanley Forbes. Not so boyish now. There were bluish pouches under the closed lids and the one cheek I could see was sunken and haggard. The other was pillowed on up-flung hands and from their handcuffed wrists a heavy chain trailed upward to a ring bolted to the wall.

"Chained like a dog," I said, "to keep him from getting out where he could be seen. She didn't have time to do the same for us," and then another thought sent me squirming to Stan's motionless form.

He wasn't dead. His nostrils stirred with slow breathing and a pulse beat in the collarless V of his dress shirt. He was asleep, or—"I couldn't wake him, Jim." Leila had crawled to me. "I tried but I couldn't. I think he's been drugged."

"Drugged's right," I agreed, settling back on my haunches. "That she-devil in the garden must have done it when she dragged him down from the window." I was still in the dark shadow of the wall but the sunbeam lay across the girl's face so that I could see how ghost-pale it was. "Well," I grinned, trying to ease her. "We—We've found him."

"And now we've got to find some way to get him out of here and back to our own world. But how, Jim? We've got to think how."

You had to hand it to that girl. Even if she didn't know about that slit in the back of Paul Locker's neck, what she did know was enough to give anyone the heebies. But she was trying to figure out how to save the guy she loved.

"We're cuffed hand and foot and that dame's out there." With those damned shears of hers, I thought, but did not say. "She'd slap us down."

"She wouldn't dare, Jim. Not out there where people would see."

"Why not? Anything that happens in this little box, the yokels would figure was part of the act. Wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Leila admitted. "That's the terrible part of this, that we're so near help, so near our own kind and yet we might as well be a million miles away." That was getting me too. "They wouldn't even hear us if we yelled to them. We didn't hear Stan, remember—" She checked, as we heard a scrape of wood on wood, somewhere distant.

Far back, the blackness was slit by a gray streak, that widened slowly. As it widened, light spread across the floor and a shadow grew out into the patch of luminance, the gigantic shadow of a man.

The shadow protruded the huge outline of an

arm and from the shadow-arm's fist jutted the shape of a gun the size of a 105 mm. howitzer. Abruptly the shape dwindled to human size, to our less-than-human size. A door-slam cut off the light but there were groping foot-falls in the blackness and a shape moved slowly toward us.

"It's Mr. Forbes," Leila whispered excitedly. "He got little as he came through but I saw him just as the door closed. It's Stan's father. He's found us and he knows the way back."

"Yes," I agreed dully. "He knows the way in and he knows the way back." But he would not be taking us back from this other-world. Was there any better place for a murderer to hide the evidence of his crime than in this space that was out of space and time? To hide the corpse of his victim and the body of the detective who knew him for a killer?

And that of the girl who was about to be witness to his second slaying.

CHAPTER THREE

To Hell and Back!

THE vague form neared, slowly but inexorably. A light-ray glinted from his gun. I dropped down, silencing my fall on spread palms, and instantly was in motion.

I'd not lost the skill acquired through months of training, and used through more months when it had meant the difference between life and death. Hobbled as I was, I slithered swiftly on my belly, without sound, heard Leila's gasp behind me. Too bad, I thought, that I can't take her along but she's in the light and if I'd tried to, neither of us would have a chance.

Forbes couldn't see me, I hoped, but my eyes were more accustomed to this darkness than his and I could make him out, cautiously advancing. I remembered to be careful not to silhouette myself against the light. That sent me straight out to meet him and he almost stepped on me as we passed.

I rolled hard against his legs, swept them out from under him.

His gun skittered away as he thudded down. I swarmed atop him, sledge-hammered my chained fists down on his head. He heaved and I struck again. The threshing subsided, and he was very still.

The split-second furious action had taken more out of me than I'd expected. I lay panting, wondering if this was because of my tiny size. Harlow Forbes was out of the picture for a while and I knew there was an exit from this damnable space, knew that passing through it I should regain normal size, and be able to get help for the others. It was nearer than where Leila stood over

Stan's huddled form, but I didn't dare leave them alone as long as that woman was in the garden.

Nor could I call. The woman would hear. I must go back.

She was rigid, watching me return. Her manacled hands were at her breast and her eyes were wide. Just as I came to her she went down to her knees between me and Stan. "Keep away!" Her voice was husky in her throat, her fingers clawed. "I won't let you touch him."

"You won't—oh, I get it." I almost laughed out loud. "You think that because I sloughed his old man I—Look, the reason I did that is because Harlow Forbes has murdered one man already and was here to do the same to me. And to you, unless I miss my guess by a mile." I told her the story, just the high spots. I didn't like to but I had to, and I knew she could take it. "I still don't know what's behind this business but I do know your boy-friend's father is part of it. That's proven by the fact that he knew the way in here, and I'll lay ten to one he's the number one devil. It's a cinch Paul Locker wasn't. Not only didn't he have the brains to take advantage of this but he was scared to death of it.

"To death is right," I added grimly. "He was so scared he was ready to spill his guts to me, and so Forbes killed him."

"Oh no-o-o," Leila moaned. "I can't believe it."

"Believe it or not," I shrugged, "what you do now is walk, not run, to the nearest exit where we saw Harlow Forbes come through. You'll be back to your right size then and you can go get help. Get going."

"No, Jim." Her little chin thrust out a little, stubbornly. "You go. I'm staying here with Stan."

"Like hell you—" I caught myself. No use arguing with her. She still wasn't sure she trusted me and she wasn't going to leave me alone with the boy friend. What she thought she could do against me if I went for him was a puzzle, but she'd do what she could. "All right," I yielded. "We stick together then." What the dame in the garden could do to her would be plenty. "So we're back to what I was talking about. We get to that glass out there and smash out through it."

This she liked better. "But how? That woman—"

"We'll take care of her. Listen." I explained the scheme. "It's taking a chance, but it might work."

"It will, Jim. It must. Come on."

We struggled erect, and shuffled to the wall beneath the window. Leila faced it. Behind her, I stooped till my hands touched the floor and she could hop backwards.

Her pumps' spiked heels dug agonizingly into my wrists. It didn't do any good for me to tell myself that she weighs only a pound. That might be true but I was only ounces heavier and my strength was in proportion. My back muscles tried to tear loose from their anchorage as I slowly straightened up. Inch by tortured inch I slid her up along the wall till at last I could push her toes into the ring that held Stan's chain.

She thrust her arms across the window's sill, clenched her fingers on a bar. Her neck was corded with strain as she looked down but her eyes shone in the sunlight. "Luck," I read on her ashen lips and then I was hopping along the walls to the door's opening.

I got myself set, nodded. Leila let go a shrill yell. "Help! You people out there! Help!"

"Cut that," a husky voice outside commanded. "Cut that and get down out of there."

"I won't," Leila flung back, defiantly. "You can't make me." And let go another yell, "Help!"

Bushes threshed outside, sandals pattered on the threshold. A swish of silvery fabric, a furious face, came past the door edge. My blow caught the gal behind the ear and she went down.

I snatched up the shears, hopped out the door and into the garden. I went across it like a scared kangaroo, in great, two-legged bounds that crashed through rosebushes, and flower beds. My eyes were on the glass ahead, but the enormous eyes staring in through it reminded me how tiny I was. To their owners I was merely a new puppet acting a miniature drama for their edification.

They'd know differently in a moment. Two more leaps and I'd be near enough to hurl the shears through the glass. I made the first and my arms flung up to fling them. As I started the final bound—Leila screamed, behind me.

The shrill terror jerked my head to it. The window was blank but I was in midleap, could not turn. I landed—

Did not land! *Kept on going down!* Because of that backward glance I'd not noticed that the garden ended feet from the glass. I dropped now into the dark abyss that yawned between ground-edge and wall.

Even in that ghastly moment, training, repeated till it was instinct, prevailed. I fell relaxed, limbs and head tucked in, so that when I thudded to the bottom of the chasm I was shaken, but had broken no bones.

Leila's scream had cut short as I fell. Why? Why had she screamed just as I started that last, disastrous leap?

On my side against one wall of a deep and narrow gulch, I stared up at the gar—Not

up! I looked *down*, slantingly down into the eerie scene out of which I had leaped. I hung in midair above it somehow, and somehow too in my fall I'd grown larger. The bushes, the ivy-clothed wall, seemed smaller, not as tiny as I knew them to be, but almost half normal size.

I shook my head, looked again, and was even more confused. Below the garden—or above it—was another, no, the same garden, larger and upside down. The opposite to the other, at any rate. It was as though I looked at reiterated images in edge-to-edge mirrors—That was it! That was precisely what I was doing.

Just like that, the whole weird mystery clicked into relation with reality and was a mystery no longer.

Neither Stan nor Leila nor I had ever shrunk to living dolls. We'd never entered any other-worldly space. The whole thing was, as I'd said at first, a trick done with mirrors. With the mirrors up into which I stared from where I lay on the Silver Sandal's floor behind the silk-draped false wall of its lounge.

It was very simple. The garden was a permanent stage-setting erected not behind but *directly above* the lounge, in the building's slant-roofed attic. A huge mirror was hung to face this, tilted downward at a forty-five degree angle so that it sent the garden's reflection down into a second mirror at the level of the lower floor. This in turn had an *upward* slope of forty-five degrees and so faced the back of the lounge's wall and the twelve-by-ten glazed aperture framed in it.

To this extent the construction was that of a gigantic periscope with the exception that in the conventional periscope the lower mirror would have faced in the opposite direction. Because of this reversal, the image pictured in it was upside down.

The principal trick, however, was this; Both mirrors were convex, their silvered surfaces curved outward, and so the reflection in the upper was a reduced image of the actual scene. That in the lower, a not only inverted but again reduced repetition of what the one above it showed. And the eyepiece, the framed glass in the lounge wall, was a powerful lens that not only once more reduced the pictured scene but turned it right side up again.

When we had looked through it from the lounge, the railing had kept us far enough from this lens so that it had appeared to be a flat piece of glass and the thrice reduced reflection of a scene actually above our heads had seemed to be close behind it. From the stage set, we had been looking into the "right end of the telescope" and seen the spectators' faces enormously magnified. This, together

with the dazing effect of whatever drug had been injected at the napes of our necks made us imagine ourselves shrunk to miniature size. Once implanted, that weird notion had clung to me till now.

Long as it takes to describe this, it took only seconds to realize with the construction right there in front of me. As my eyes found above me the brass collar that held the lens, Leila's scream seemed still to pierce my ears. To shaken to extricate myself, I stared up into the topmost mirror to see what had happened to the girl.

The garden was empty but there was a shadow of movement within the doorway. I peered into darkness, my heart pounding. Someone had switched off the spotlights. It could not be Leila. She knew no more than I the location of the switch.

Who then?

A dim light came in through the lens from the lounge outside, so that now I could make out that it was a man who'd emerged from the door at the rear.

He was moving cautiously out as I discerned him. He hesitated now, and peered about. I could tell that he was tall and heavily built, that his hair was a white mane. I hadn't hit Harlow Forbes hard enough. He had recovered, done in Leila and now hunted me to finish me off.

"Corey." The low call came from behind me. "Where are you, Corey?" It came from Forbes, I'd forgotten that what I looked at was his reflection. "Speak up, man. We must hurry."

"You must hurry, I thought, hurry to silence me. I rolled over, got hands and knees under me and watched his up-side-down image in the lower mirror. I was going to smash out the lens with my handcuffs. I'd have to do it quickly because when I rose I'd be directly in front of this mirror and he'd seen me in the upper one.

I'd be a sitting duck for a bullet from his gun. He'd found it or had another. There'd been no shot so he must have used the butt on Leila, but he'd have to shoot me from up there. Could he bring me down before I smashed the thick glass? No matter. If I crashed through the glass his shot would be heard and that was all I could hope for.

"Stop hiding, Corey. You're somewhere in here."

My muscles became taut. Maybe he'd turn his head and I'd have that more time to pull this thing off. Hello! Someone else had slipped out of the door behind the banker, and moved silently towards his unknowing back. Not quite as tall, and slat-thin. It was the *maitre d'hotel*.

Henri was dealing himself a hand. That made things different. "Okay," I yelled, dis-

tracting his attention. "You win, Forbes."

He looked startled. "Where are you, Corey?"

"Here." Henri had almost reached him. "Down under you." The thin man's arm lifted and a splinter-thin stiletto gleamed in his hand. It started down but a white hand snatched at it! Not quite quickly enough. Forbes dropped and Henri twisted, fighting to wrench his knife-wrist free from the fingers that had clamped on it. His free hand battered at a white face. At Leila's face!

I had to get up there. I clawed the floor to shove up and my hands caught on something round and wooden. A ladder rung. A ladder lay here. Of course. Those mirrors must be kept immaculate, must be polished daily and the upper one could be reached only by a ladder.

I couldn't see as I struggled with the contraption, and fought to raise it, but I could hear Leila's whimpers and muttered curses. The thing was coming up, slowly. Its other end rested against the floor edge above me and I was hopping up the ladder, dragging myself frantically up from rung to rung.

I was up, staring across the garden to where Leila sank under Henri's merciless blows, but her hands were still clutching the wrist whose fingers clenched the murderous stiletto. And as I half-jumped, I saw Henri wrench his wrist free.

I was hopping frantically toward them but the dagger sliced up, hesitated for surer aim, and I knew I could not reach there in time. The knife started its descent—A black arm flung out from the huddle behind the *maitre*, struck the blow aside. And then I was there, was pounding furious manacles down on a bald head, and saw Henri slump to the grass that wasn't grass but green-dyed rags.

I sank down and gaped at Harlow Forbes. "You—You're supposed to be dead," I mumbled. "I saw his steel sink into you."

"No." He put fingers to the back of his head, brought them away reddened. "The hilt hit me that's all, thanks to a very brave girl." His look went past me. "But you, my dear. Are you badly hurt?"

Her nose was bleeding and bruises darkened her cheeks. Her dress was all but torn from her but she still could smile twist-edly and say. "I'm a bit battered but that doesn't matter as long as Stan's all right. I—I was working on his handcuffs with the key you gave me when the lights blacked out and then I saw this—this man steal past and out of the door after you. And you—You were wrong, Jim." I must have made some sound. "You were all wrong about Mr. Forbes. Stan's awake now and he's told me some of the story. I'm sure now that his father didn't kill Mr. Locker."

"No, Corey," Forbes sighed.

"Okay," I said, dully. "After what just happened I'm willing to believe anything. Why did you try to cover up when you found Paul dead in his office?"

"Why did I—?" He looked puzzled.

"I saw the key on the floor there. The gold key that dropped out of your pocket."

"The gold—" Forbes checked. "Oh yes, I recall noticing it also, beside the corpse. But it is not my key, Mr. Corey."

"It has your initials on it. H. F."

"Not mine." His brooding look went to the man I'd knocked out. "That fellow's full name is Henri Ferroniere."

Henri Ferroniere. H. F. I recalled that I'd only helped Stan order a gold key for his father, had never actually seen it. "Okay," I sighed. "Henri's the killer."

"And a blackmailer," Leila added softly, "and a kidnapper."

"Quite a guy, I'd say. I seem to be the only one who doesn't know what this is all about. Would it bother you too much to tell me?"

Forbes did. A little then, and more downstairs in the Silver Sandal's lounge when the Squad had taken over. By that time Ferroniere had confessed to killing Locker and, incidentally, to having me slipped the Mickey Finn. He was the real owner of the Sandal. He'd built it up from a tawdry roadhouse, using Paul Locker as a front, and a cover for blackmail.

A cover and a source. Men—and women—are often indiscreet in night clubs. Even a man like Harlow Forbes. What Ferroniere had on Forbes I never learned and never wanted to learn, but he had been bleeding the banker since a year after the war started. Stan somehow had got wind of it, not the whole tale but enough to send him to the Silver Sandal night after night trying to ferret out more. He'd gotten the notion that he could dig some information out of the woman in the garden, had worked out the

secret of the illusion and just before closing time Thursday morning had managed to slip upstairs to get hold of her.

That had been a mistake. The partners had trapped him there, chained him up and drugged him, then sent his father a ransom demand naming Locker as the go-between. Harlow Forbes had come here tonight ready to pay. In the meantime, however, my intervention had brought Ferroniere to a decision he'd long been contemplating. It was time to make a last haul and pull out. And so he'd slain Paul, hurried down again to take over the rope, persuaded Forbes to take a table and wait for his interview with a man already dead.

My insistence on talking with the corpse had played right into his hands. He'd let me go on up, slipped up behind me and knocked me out with a hypo injection, dumped me behind the stage set. And that had made it necessary for him to get Leila out of the way too before she started asking questions about what had happened to me.

When things quieted down in the Sandal, Ferroniere had gone to Forbes, told him Locker had deputed him to collect the ransom money, had taken it and given the banker the key to Stan's chains, sent him upstairs to release his son. He'd had no intention of permitting Forbes ever to come down again, alive, but an accident—a brawl between a customer and two of his captains—had delayed him for awhile.

The rest is pretty obvious, except perhaps that the woman in the garden was Henri Ferroniere's wife. His widow, when the State exacts the penalty for Paul Locker's death. "She's quite a gal," Stan Forbes remarked when we'd gotten the tangled skein all unravelled. "She'd go to hell and back for him."

"I know somebody else like that," I told him. "I know somebody else who's quite a gal and would go to hell and back for the man she loves." I gestured with my glass. "Here's to Leila Humboldt."

THE END

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Dime Mystery Magazine combined with 10 Story Mystery, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1946, State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Dime Mystery Magazine combined with 10 Story Mystery, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October 1946. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 40, Register's No. 363-W-8. (My commission expires March 30, 1948.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.



The door opened with a soft creak, and closed.

BLOOD IN YOUR EYE!

By TALMAGE POWELL

Through the blue smoke haze and over the sparkling laughter came the haunting madness of those minor chords of the man who was playing to drug his own past—and deaden the future of the kill-crazy hophead who'd given it to him!

THE young man at the piano in Zelmer's Bar and Grill lighted a cigarette. He did it in a funny way, holding to its tip and bringing up the match with awkward care. He guided the match that way because he was blind.

Zelmer's place was crowded and all around

the blind man at the piano were people. The buzz of conversation interlaced with spurts of laughter, the clinking of glasses and layers of blue tobacco smoke. But it was all alien to the young man's world of darkness, the warmth and laughter, and he wished he were someplace else.

He put out his cigarette and began to play *Night And Day*. The piano was old and weary with a million songs torn from its guts. The piano was like a wasted, aging woman but with the young man there, it wept liquid sound as if he were recalling to her the days of her sweet, virgin youth. The music was all night as it poured out of him and the piano seemed to share his stark, lonely bitterness, as if it had things in common. He was knotted inside and he played with a savageness somewhere in the haunting minors as though he were trying to wring his soul dry.

He stopped playing and the laughter and clinking of glasses went on uninterrupted, not caring whether he were here or not or whether he played or not—a fixture, like one of the bottles in the neat rows behind the bar, to be thrown on the trash heap when empty. His time was overdue, he thought. He'd been empty almost a year, since the night he'd lost his sight.

He was aware of a person standing beside him. Her hand touched his. She had small, warm, strong hands. Beautiful hands, a beautiful voice. He knew Sal must be all beautiful though he had never seen her. He let go of her hand abruptly and fumbled for another cigarette.

"Eddie," she said softly. "Eddie, I listened to the tune. You should never play like that Eddie!"

"No?"

"Not with the hopelessness, Eddie. Not with blind despair."

He put the cigarette behind his ear like a pencil. He didn't light it because he didn't want her to see how his hands might tremble. "I should laugh with the music, I guess," he said. His voice had a raggedness in it like a discord hanging in the air that wouldn't resolve.

Her hand found his again. "Eddie, there could be so many things for you! You have a natural ear, perfect pitch. . . ."

"A blind freak!"

"Eddie, no! Eyes aren't everything. And they make new discoveries in medicine and surgery every day. If only you'd hope and want. . . ."

"The only thing I want is to get the man who did this to me," he said, touching his brows with his fingertips. He pushed her touch from his other hand, and dropped his damp palms to his thighs. *The only thing I want. . . .* He was lying in his teeth and he knew it. He drank in Sal's nearness and the warmth of her perfume. But he couldn't think of it. It had to be something fine for Sal, somebody swell—not a blind, bitter piano mauler.

The moment of silence dragged; then she said, "Okay, Eddie. Will you give me four for *Lilacs and Moonlight*?"

He broke into a four bar intro for *Lilacs and Moonlight*. The arpeggios were strident, his rhythm jerky. Sal began singing the lyrics and her voice brought gusty pain. As he played little beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

He thought about the night he'd lost his sight. Against the dark walls of his world the images were never out of his mind for long. He'd been playing at the Purple Parrot back then, a nice young guy with lean, strong hands. He liked people and people liked him. He'd been an easy touch for any of the guys in the five piece combo who needed a loan.

There'd been a girl vocal with the band, Renee DuVal, she called herself, but she'd laughingly told him her real name was Sadie McDougal. He'd called her McDougal. There'd been nothing real between them. They had a beer together now and then and supper once or twice a week. She was an all right guy but something always seemed to worry her, as if she lived in a quagmire of worry and fear. Eddie liked to kid the shadows out of her deep eyes.

HE'D BEEN going back to her dressing room the night she got killed. When he'd entered the dim corridor, he heard her cry out and a man's voice say, "You don't do it to me, babe. My pistons are frantic!"

Then the crash of gunfire. The door of McDougal's dressing room burst open and Eddie got one look at the man—a tall shadow with the dim light glowing on his pale blonde hair. The man had seen him, jerked up the gun and fired. Eddie's head had seemed to explode.

When he regained consciousness two days later he was in a hospital with bandages over his eyes and scalp. He was very lucky to be alive, they assured him. It had taken a tricky bit of brain surgery to keep him from dying. And the center that controlled the optic nerves—it might be it wouldn't function so well in the future . . .

When he was well enough, a homicide lieutenant named Christopher Reardon had questioned him. Christopher Reardon of the soft voice, the Harvard accent. Eddie pictured Reardon as a funny sort of guy to be a cop.

"The boys on narcotics have told us," Reardon said, "that Sadie McDougal was mixed in a quaint scheme of using her job at the Purple Parrot to peddle the stuff. Narcotics was onto her. She was killed obviously to keep her from talking in case she was picked up."

It was hard to think of McDougal peddling dope. At first, Eddie had hated her bitterly because of what she'd caused. But as time wore on he saw a different McDougal—a kid from a poor home seeking things she thought she wanted, getting herself involved in a mess

that cost her life and a man's desire for living.

Christopher Reardon had questioned Eddie patiently and Eddie had told him the same thing over and over. "The lighting was dim in the corridor and I didn't get a good look at the guy. He was tall and blond with hair like yellow mud and his voice had icicles in it. But that phrase he used, Reardon—'My pistons are frantic.' Nine people out of ten have got a pet phrase of some kind, though maybe not that obvious. Shouldn't such a phrase mark a guy like a third arm?"

"Maybe."

"And wouldn't that type of man be a regular patron of bars in the Purple Parrot class?"

He'd felt Reardon's weight lean on the edge of the bed. "You're suggesting that we detail men to every bar of that type in town, Eddie, and have them wait for weeks, maybe months, until a blond customer, male, lets drop the phrase, 'My pistons are frantic'?"

"It would mark the guy," Eddie said doggedly.

"And run us out of business," Reardon said. "In the first place, I haven't got a detail big enough even to attempt such a thing. In the second place, my files are bulging with unsolved cases that are putting gray in my hair, not to mention the murders that are going to happen tomorrow, and next week, and the month after that." Reardon's voice moved and Eddie knew he'd stood up. "As soon as you're strong enough, we'll round up what suspects we can and have you listen to their voices. An identification of that sort would be shaky, and this time it's complicated by the fact that Narcotics has no record of a tall, blond man who might have been connected with Sadie McDougal. But we'll do our best, Eddie, to get the butcher."

"And if their best isn't good enough," Eddie told himself grimly, "I'll do it myself!"

The boys in the band at the Purple Parrot were swell. The day Eddie had gone back there for the last time, tapping a cane, Hank Walters, the lead, had punched him on the shoulder. "A natural ear, perfect pitch, what more do you need, Eddie? The combo will star you, a guy without . . . I mean . . ." Hank must have swallowed painfully. There was a shifting of feet.

"Thanks," Eddie had said, "you're a swell bunch with a swell guy leading you. But I'm going to be looking for a man with a phrase and I got a hunch he won't be coming back here to the Purple Parrot for a long time."

For a while hate and a thirst for revenge had carried Eddie. Homicide hit a dead end on the killing of Sadie McDougal and the case began to be buried and forgotten in a welter of fresh violence that pushed into police files. But Eddie was still around, a blind wanderer, playing bars in the Purple Parrot class and

listening to voices until he could maul the ivories subconsciously and listen to a conversation carried on halfway across the room. The man feels safe, he told himself. He'll return to his old neighborhood to places and faces he knows, if he ever left at all. He'll drop in a bar for a drink. He'll use that phrase the way some people make little gestures with their hands, and I'll be there to hear him.

Sometimes doubts came. Maybe the guy had learned that Eddie had overheard his pet phrase. Maybe the guy would be on guard against saying it. But unconscious mannerisms, Eddie told himself, are hard to break. As time goes on the yellow-haired man will let down his guard. Someday our paths will cross again . . .

The someday had extended into a year now. He'd been at Zelmer's place almost two months. It was less than eight blocks away from the Purple Parrot where Sadie McDougal had been killed.

He listened to Sal bringing the lyrics of *Lilacs and Moonlight* to a close. Two months working near a girl like Sal, had helped from the beginning. Zelmer hadn't wanted to hire Eddie. But Sal had been back at the piano in the deserted bar that noon and had heard them talking. Eddie had listened to her approaching steps and her voice saying, "Let him run over a number with me, Zelmer. I can't carry Lake and his drinking any longer."

SHED sounded like something pretty special to Eddie from that first moment. They'd tried a number together and found they clicked. Zelmer had hired him. But after two months of being near Sal, Eddie knew he had to get away from Zelmer's place. He had to get away quick. He couldn't stand to hurt Sal. There had to be something fine for her, something better than being chained to a guy whose soul had gone sour.

Eddie dropped his hands in his lap. "That was neat."

"*Lilacs and Moonlight* is a good number," Sal said. "Eddie . . . will you have a drink with me?"

"No."

"But, Eddie . . ."

His throat was dry and tight. He screwed himself up to the effort of speaking. "I don't want to drink with you," he said.

He waited, turning his head away, as if he could see and was avoiding her eyes. His hands felt sweaty and awkward. He remembered the cigarette behind his ear and reached for it.

He heard her move quietly away. He crumpled the cigarette in his hands. Maybe he was being a louse and a fool, but there never could be anything for him and Sal. He'd sour it. His blindness and load of hate would sour

it. He'd rather have it this way, something that might have been, than let it get soured.

He strained his ears marking Sal's progress away from him. At first he didn't catch the voice over at his left. Even when his senses concentrated it took him a moment to realize why that particular voice was biting through the bubbles of sound in the bar. He'd listened for it so long—recalled it to mind so many times, a whisper of it might have brought him from a sound sleep. A pale blonde voice with icicles in it . . .

Heat waves played along Eddie's back. He turned slowly on the piano bench. The voice was coming from a booth, mingling with a woman's soft laughter. Eddie felt sweat gathering in the creases of his forehead.

" . . . You were a scream, Arch," the woman's voice said.

And the voice of icicles was laughing, but unable to find mirth in its owner's being. "Yeah. My pistons were sure frantic."

They kept talking. Eddie lurched up from the piano bench. For a moment he was afraid his sudden dizziness was going to cause him to stumble. He started forward, bumped a seated man's back at a table and mumbled an apology. He paused a moment to get his bearings. He knew the location and distance of every table and booth in Zelmer's. Since he'd got the set up in his mind, he'd never bumped into a table before. By moving slowly and cautiously he'd always been able to make his way without calling attention to his blindness. Tonight was a different matter. The man and woman in the booth were still talking.

Reaching the bar was like crossing an endless ocean of black water but Eddie felt its age under his hands at last. He wondered how long the man and woman had been in that booth and how much longer they would stay there. If the man should leave, after a year of waiting and listening . . .

"Davitt!"

"Okay, okay," said the barkeep who worked the lower end of the bar, "keep your shirt on Eddie."

Eddie waited, straining to keep that icicle-filled voice from the other side of the room in range. He couldn't hear it so clearly now. He . . .

"What'll it be?" Davitt said almost in Eddie's face.

"Nothing. I mean, I think I just heard an old friend of mine talking. Over in the booth just left of the piano dais—a man and woman in the booth together. The man is tall and blond, isn't he, Davitt?"

"Yeh. You know Arch long?"

"Who?"

"Lomax. Arch Lomax. The tall blond guy over there. I don't know the babe he's with. He hangs around the joints a lot. Been in here

every night for a week now. Want I should call him over, Eddie?"

"No," Eddie said quickly. "Being blind . . . I wouldn't want him to notice me."

"Sure," Davitt had lumps of sympathy in his voice. "I unnerstand. A friend from better days, eh, Eddie?"

"Yeah, from better days. Where is Arch living now, Davitt, would you know?"

"I don't know him so well," Davitt broke away long enough to draw a beer. His wheezing breath waddled back to Eddie. "Last I heard, Eddie, he had an apartment a block or so from here. Used to phone down in early afternoon sometimes and have me ask Pee-wee, the swamper, to shag him up a few beers and a bottle of rye. Buildin' a hangover on a hangover, y'know."

"Thanks, Davitt. Thanks very much. Find Zelmer for me, will you? Tell him I had to leave. Tell him I was sick."

"He'll raise hell, Eddie. You only got another half hour to . . ."

"Tell him it felt like ptomaine! Like blind, poison ptomaine about a year old . . ."

Eddie paced the floor of his room. He'd never seen the place, but he knew what it was like—old furniture and antique plumbing in the bath. In summers it was close and sweltering; in winters the radiators popped and worked when they felt like it.

HE LISTENED to a shade flapping in the night. He felt the chill darkness of the room on his face. Then abruptly his pacing stopped; he held a cigarette half raised to his mouth. The door had opened and closed.

"Eddie . . ." It was Sal. He heard a click. She'd turned the light on. She was standing, looking at the room and at him.

She came towards him. He took a couple of steps back. He reached for the old center table, found the ash tray and crushed out his cigarette.

"Eddie," she said again. "I saw you talking to Davitt back there in Zelmer's. I got away as quickly as I could, because . . ."

"You shouldn't have come here, Sal."

" . . . Because," she went on, "I saw your face. I saw the way you were speaking. I asked Davitt what you'd wanted and he said you'd heard the voice of an old friend. He wouldn't tell me who the friend was. Davitt likes you and thought he was keeping silent as a favor. He knows how I feel about you, Eddie. He was afraid I was trying to find out who the friend was to bring him here and jar you out of some of your sensitiveness about being blind. He was convinced such a thing would hurt you instead of helping you. I tried to tell him I wanted the 'friend' for no such purpose, but he'd jumped to that conclusion, and you know Davitt."

Eddie walked across the room and sat down. The bed creaked. The old bed always creaked like that. The window shade flapped dismally in the night breeze. It was very late and traffic was still on the street below. The silence ate at Eddie.

"I knew you hadn't heard the voice of a friend, Eddie. I knew whose voice you really heard, the voice of the man who killed the McDougal girl and blinded you."

"So you came here."

"Yes, Eddie."

"You'll have to leave. It won't do you any good."

She was standing over him now. He felt her presence, heard her breathing. Her voice came quietly, "You'll have to tell me who he is, Eddie."

He didn't speak. She caught hold of his arm. "You tell me, Eddie. Let me handle it. Let me get the police."

"No," he said. "After a year, get the police? Me, the lone witness, trying to identify a murderer by the memory of a phrase and the way his voice sounds? You want the D. A. laughed out of court, Sal?"

A drop of moisture hit his hand. She was weeping without sound. Her hand crept up his arm, clutching him. "Then forget it, Eddie! Forget it all. It's past and done!"

"I can't forget it," he said.

"But how can you be sure, even yourself, that it's the right man?"

"I'll make sure, Sal."

The gnawing silence came back. The shade snapped in the rising breeze. He felt her trembling hands reach out to hold him, shaking him a little. "No, Eddie," she said hoarsely. "You . . . You're planning to kill him! But you can't, Eddie. You can't try to be judge and jury."

He was afraid to touch her. He stood like a wooden man. He felt her body arch up as if she'd thrown her head back. She laughed and the sound shattered and broke against the walls of the room. She kept it up. Finally, he gripped her arms and did a little shaking himself. His face felt oily and cold; a pulse pounded in his temple. "Sal, stop it!"

"Eddie, all these plans you've made . . . You think I haven't made a few of my own? You'd come to your senses. You'd start living for the future instead of the past." The laughter kept bubbling out of her. "We've had a few good times together, haven't we, when you let the real Eddie come out of hiding? Now you want to push that real Eddie back into hiding forever. For a year you've been running from yourself, afraid to face yourself and making up for it by filling yourself with a load of hate. Now you want to push that real Eddie so far back in his barren cave he'll never get out by killing the man who took your

sight. It won't work, Eddie. It just won't work!"

She broke away from him. He reached for her, guided by the stifling sounds of her sobs. His groping hand failed to touch her; the door closed behind her. Eddie knew he was alone. He licked his lips. The flapping shade snarled at him. Sal's words ran together in a tiny corner of his mind, then came parading out, one by one.

He stood there in his dark world a long time.

He felt weak when finally he started for the door. He went downstairs and searched with his fingertips along the wall until he found the pay phone in the musty hall. Zelmer's place was on Jernigan Avenue and Davitt had said that Arch Lomax lived on the same street. Eddie dropped a nickel in the phone, trailed around the dial with his fingertip and dialed information. In a moment he had Arch Lomax's number.

He hung up. He waited a few minutes to make his next call until some of the shaking had left his hands. Then he dialed Lomax's number.

THE PHONE rang three times. It was taken from the hook. A voice said, "Hello." It was so many icicles barbing over the line at Eddie.

Eddie licked his lips. Lomax said again, "Hello?"

"This is an old friend of Sadie McDougal's Lomax."

A pause. Then Lomax said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I never heard of the dame."

"No? Maybe this will refresh your memory. She was passing dope for you. The Narcotic squad was getting onto her. She was a decent kid anyhow, who you'd roped in on the deal. She didn't like it. You were afraid she'd talk. You blew her brains out."

"What the hell kind of gag is this!"

"Gag, Lomax? Then why don't you hang up? You were in her dressing room. You said, 'You can't do this to me, babe. My pistons are frantic'. You wouldn't forget those words, Lomax, the last words you said to her."

A longer pause. "You're still crazy."

"But not the way you think. Crazy for a needle. I used to buy the stuff from Sadie. She told me things, Lomax, that the cops would like to know, that would tie her killing right around your neck. I've already proved by what I overheard you say that I was around when she was killed, only you didn't see me."

"Who is this?" A faint crack sounded in the ice.

"Never mind that. I never have told the cops before because I don't like cops, and I always figured I might need you on tap, for a time like tonight."

"What do you want?"

"I told you. I'm crazy for a needle. I'm holed up in a cheap room, flat broke. If you want me to keep quiet, a few grains of morphine . . ."

"Cut it," Lomax said, "you've already said too damn much to be talking on a telephone. Give me the address."

Eddie pushed a slaving note in his voice, "But I tell you I'm crazy for . . ."

"All right, all right! We can make a deal. Give me the address."

Eddie gave it to him; then he hung up. He wondered if he'd just been the world's prize sucker. His stomach felt like it was turning over slowly. He reached for another nickel, put it in the phone, dialed the operator, and said, "Get me Homicide Lieutenant Christopher Reardon at Police Headquarters. This is an emergency . . ."

Eddie sat alone in the darkness of his room. He'd been sitting there a long time. He finished the last cigarette in the pack. His breath was whistling in and out like steam through a too-tight safety valve.

Then his breath caught in his throat as the light knock sounded on the door. He said, "It's unlocked."

The door opened with a slow, soft creak and closed. Eddie said, "Lomax?"

"Yeah, why the darkness? Are you alone?"

"More alone right now than I'll ever be,"

Eddie said. "You bring the stuff?"

"I might have. I might not. I want to know a few things first."

"You killed the McDougal girl, Lomax. You . . ."

"You're still talking crazy until I get some answers," Lomax said harshly. "I'm turning a light on."

Eddie rose, walked to a corner and faced the wall. "Go ahead. The switch is beside the door."

He heard the switch click and Lomax walking across to look in the bathroom. "Okay," Lomax said, "so you're alone."

Eddie turned and faced the sound of the icy voice. "I'm not the hophead you thought you'd find up here, Lomax. I told you that tale to get you up here. If a hophead was on to you and suffering from lack of the stuff he might be crazy enough to go to the cops and crack wide open. I knew it would bring you up in a hurry."

"What's this you're trying to pull?"

Lomax's voice was very quiet.

"Look at me, Lomax—and remember! You

won't recognize my face. The light was at my back that night and too dim even for me to see yours clearly. But look at me closely. It will come back to you. As you burst into the corridor from Sadie McDougal's dressing room . . ."

"You're him!" Lomax said. His voice rose and cracked. "The guy who came tearing down the corridor right after I'd shot her . . ."

It was coming, this instant. Eddie had known that Lomax had had a gun in his hand from the moment he'd entered this room. Now Eddie sensed the gun swinging up and heard the faint rustle of cloth as Lomax charged in to batter down the living, sightless nightmare confronting him.

Eddie flung himself to one side. "Okay, Reardon," he shouted hoarsely, "you heard him admit it . . ."

The window shade gave a loud flap. But it wasn't the wind cracking it this time. It was Chris Reardon charging in from the fire escape. Guns began to bucket as Eddie skidded into a corner.

For a moment the room seemed to rock, bursting with sound. Then it was over and silence was crashing down like a tidal wave. Eddie pushed himself to his feet. "Reardon?" he whispered.

"All correct, Eddie," Reardon's Harvard accent sounded strong and easy.

"Lomax?"

"Dead."

"Oh," Eddie said.

"That was a thing that took nerve, Eddie. If ever the police department can lend you a hand, make yourself known."

People were crowding around in the hallway outside Eddie's door and half hysterical voices were talking about gunfire. "You might lend that hand right now, Lieutenant, by clearing me a path down the hallway to the stairs."

"But, Eddie, you can't leave. We'll need . . ."

"I'll be back," Eddie assured him. "We'll both be back, any time you need us."

"Both?" Reardon said. "I see. I'll clear that path."

Eddie got his cane and followed Reardon's footsteps. What was it Sal had said? The future . . . New medical techniques discovered every day . . . And even without eyes, a natural ear, perfect pitch . . .

The cane was like a live thing in his hand, guiding him to tell Sal that he had got Lomax, but had got him the way *she* wanted, with honor and courage.

FOR A PRESENT TO YOUR FUTURE —
BUY VICTORY BONDS!

DEADLY IS MY SLEEP

Thrilling Novelette of Midnight Murder-Menace

By CYRIL PLUNKETT



Each night I'd kill him. . . . Each day he'd return to taunt me!

CHAPTER ONE

If a Body . . .

IT WAS always the same house. It was a kind of fateful milepost, a sign that read *disaster* that I'd meet every night. There was nothing I could do about it. I'd see it every night the minute that I closed my tired eyes. I'd seen it in a dream and that, too, never varied. It was a dream that rose from nothing, from the ragged darkness. I would hear the moaning wind, and then the thumping. I never understood the thumping. Its rhythm was sometimes too fast, sometimes too slow, but it always made queer music.

There was nothing *in* the house to make such music. There was nothing *in* the house at all—except fear and the body.

I'll come to the body. To begin with, in the dream, I would walk the fateful road, and you must know that road. You must *see* the way it roamed along a rocky pasture until—until it turned abruptly, sharply, at right angles. There was a faded sign there, just around the turn: *Always Eat At Art's Place*. I don't know who Art was; that part never was important. The sign, the tree, the willow did become important. The tree was just across the creek, where stood the bridge with boards so loose they clattered.

I was half way up the slope when a dog began barking.

The house, of course, sat on the farther hill above the bridge. It was a square frame building. It had a squat hip roof, and squarely in its center was a platform like an ugly wart. Maybe there were Indians in the woods in those days and someone stood there watching. Time and wind had long ago destroyed the platform's railing. There were no more windows, just the yawning holes. The porch had sagged, was overgrown with weeds, and lay rotting. Two gaunt pines stood halfway up the hill like scrawny ghouls.

The wind would sigh and moan and even cry out in the darkness. I would always hear the wind, the thumping and the music.

Understand, it was something that I dreamed. As far as I knew I had never seen the house, awake. I didn't know where it was, indeed *if* it was a house, and not a picture spun entirely from imagination. All I knew was that night after night I would crawl up that hill. On hands and knees I would crawl across the sagging porch. I would crouch inside with my own breath the only sound. The darkness was intense, but I'd never fail to know just where to go to find the body.

Yes, every night I'd find the body. I would feel the hard beat of my heart and smell my own cold sweat. Every nerve would ache



and for one awful moment I would lose command, paralyzed in every muscle. Then I'd reach out, finally. I would have to reach out to turn the body over.

It was always Dawson.

"Carlie boy," I'd whisper, "now you've done it. You've killed Dawson."

THE curious part about it, Dawson wasn't dead. I mean, nights in my dreams he was dead. I would find his body and know then that I'd killed him. But awake, I would find him very much among the living.

He was dark, still young and bronzed. His face was chiseled and he wore long black sideburns with a small mustache—and usually a sports coat whose shoulders were padded. The first time that I saw him was a month back, a July afternoon. It was in the Mill about five-thirty and he was drinking double shots of rye and talking about women.

"Who's the blowhard?" I asked Hank Cathay.

Hank Cathay and his wife Sue live above me. I own the place, two fine apartments on the far South Shore. I bought it late in the war shortly after going into business with Tod Raven but never mind him now.

Hank Cathay was in real estate and insurance. His wife had run the business while he'd been in the army. He was about thirty, slight, blond and shy. We would play bridge every Tuesday evening, the Cathays, Vallie and I. Often we would meet at the Mill, a cocktail lounge not far from home, to chat there over drinks. Hank Cathay. I liked the guy. I liked his wife, although—but nevermind that. I'll come to that, too, in a moment.

"Who's the blowhard?" I'd turned that afternoon and asked Hank Cathay.

It seemed I'd touched a sore spot. He knew Dawson. I don't know what it was—Hank glared across the room at him and didn't speak. A moment passed and I felt embarrassed. Maybe it was Hank's wife who knew—had known—Dawson? Anyway, that's the first time I saw Dawson. I didn't like him.

Apparently he lived nearby, because after that I would see him almost every day. I'd see him in his big yellow convertible I'd see him at the Mill in a rear booth with a girl—never the same girl. Women were like leaves upon the trees to him, I guess. I'd see him lounging at the bar and always he'd be bragging.

One evening I walked to the Mill with Hank and we took a booth. Behind us were three men. One of them was Dawson. He was talking about my wife. That's right, about Valerie. Of course I didn't know it was my wife until—

"So we had another drink," said Dawson. "She was getting tight. She had on a black dress, sheer, and it was tight. Some babe! Hell, you've seen her in here. You know, Mac, the blonde? Well, she'd had a date it seemed, and the guy didn't show. She was annoyed and ripe for picking. All I had to do was say, 'How about a drive, kid, up the beach—?'"

The juke was playing. It was something sweet—Lombardo. I looked up at Hank and he seemed strangely tense. Hank began to talk, fast—but despite the juke and Hank I could still hear Dawson.

"We drove out to the Dunes," he was saying. "I got a cottage out there, Mac—you know? We got into swim suits. We took a bottle with us to the beach. Up the beach, Mac, where it's nice and lonely—"

"Did you say she's got a husband?" Mac said.

"That babe?" Dawson laughed out loud. "She gives a damn about her husband! Sure, she's married to some jerk named Vorpe—"

I spilled my drink. I saw Hank reach out for my arm, but I was up too fast. I spun around the booth and reached in for him, Dawson.

He didn't know me. I could see that in the look he gave me—no guilt, just surprise. I jerked him up and said, "You're a liar, Dawson."

He tried to squirm away. I hit him. Mac and his other friend tried to get between us. Hank was trying to pull us apart. I weigh two-ten. I'm six feet three. I shook them off and pulled him from the booth. Now everyone around was yelling. I hit him again, hard, and he sprawled over the table. He screamed.

It happened that swiftly. Suddenly the juke was playing again. The yelling had stopped, and everyone was on his feet looking. Dawson shivered and cowered in a corner.

"If ever you mention her name again, Dawson," I said, "I'll kill you."

The words reechoed, *Kill you, kill you*. Hank was tugging at my arm, and everyone around us began talking.

I walked straight out of the place. Hank kept hold of my arm. Then Hank said, "We know he's a liar and a louse." Hank gave me a cigarette and lit it. "We know there's nothing to it, Carlie."

My wife? My Vallie?

"We know," Hank said, "that Vallie's crazy about you, Carlie."

She would look queerly at me sometimes, through the veil of her long lashes. She was beautiful and tall, and her skin was gold from hours in the sun, her hair was gold that fell around her shoulders. But she would look queerly at me, sometimes—

"Carlie," Hank said. "let's face the thing sensibly. She stopped in the Mill for a drink. *He* was there—maybe they sat there and talked. You know how *he'd* build it. That's all there can be to it, Carlie."

"I'll kill him," I said.

Hank said oddly, "Kill him?"

I didn't sleep that night. I just looked at Vallie, asleep in the next bed. The pin-wheels in my mind were spinning. Then I got up. I crossed almost to the window and stood there just above her, sweating. Both my hands were clenched. Suddenly she drew in a deep breath.

"What's the matter, darling?" she said.

I said thickly, "Dawson."

"Go to sleep, dear! It's the middle of the night!"

I said, "Dawson!"

The moon was bright. I could see her eyes pop open. Then she sat up. "Who on earth," she said, "is Dawson?"

"The louse at the Mill."

She shook her head. A moment passed and she answered with soft laughter. "Cock-roaches, darling, but not lice."

I could hear soft music. It came from overhead. It was Hank's wife, Sue, who didn't lead the kind of life she wanted. He was always serious. She was small and bright as a new nickel. She was gay. She would sit up half the night, upstairs, playing records or the radio.

A breeze stole in. I was sweating, and I shivered.

"You went out to the Dunes with Dawson, Vallie."

"I?" Her eyes were wide open.

"Last week," I said. "The week before. I don't know when it was, but—"

"Carl Vorpe, are you *insane*? I don't *know* anyone named Dawson. I've never been to the Dunes with anyone, except you and Tod—"

Remember Tod? Tod Raven was my partner.

"—Darling, what are you talking about?" Vallie finished.

I shivered again. I drew in a deep breath, and went back to my bed.

"Carl, what's the matter with you?" she said.

"I was dreaming, I guess."

"Having nightmares, you mean!"

"Well, I—I'm all right now," I said.

"I certainly hope so! Good heavens, to wake up and see you standing there like that—you frightened me out of my wits! It's awful."

"I'm sorry, Vallie." I mumbled.

She sat looking at me. Then she rose and crossed the small space between us. I reached out for her and she kissed me.

"Why would I want someone else?" she whispered. "Ugly dreams, darling—"

A long moment passed before she said, "When you love someone, Carl, as we do, dreams can be so cruel."

THAT'S the right word—cruel. As happy as we'd been. Naturally I believed her, I believed in my Vallie. But jealousy and doubt, however brief, leave wounds, and wounds leave scars, and the dreams began a few nights later. You know the one I mean. The *dream*—

The road, the bridge, the willow. The strange music and the house, just as I've told you. *He* was always in the house, Ron Dawson. I would turn him over. I would find him dead. "*Carlie boy*," I'd whisper, "now you've done it, you've killed him."

Yes, dreams can be cruel. I would see him every night at the Mill. He was wary of me, but *alive*, thank God. That's what I would always think. I would take a double shot of whiskey—and come back the next night. I would wonder if he'd be there the next night. There was always new doubt and a next night.

One night Dawson wasn't at the Mill and I sat for hours in the last booth, shaking. At nine or so Sue Cathay walked in. I've told you about Sue, but you haven't seen her.

She said, "My husband's reading a book. Imagine, Carlie. Isn't that the limit, *reading*?"

She wore slacks and was slim in them. She was blonde and cute and little. She ordered rye and water and put her cigarettes on the table. She had a scratch on her left cheek, cheekbone to the lip, and now she took her compact, looked into its mirror, frowned and said, "This is what I get for playing with a kitten."

"Imagine," she said. "All I've got to do these lovely summer nights, play with a kitten."

She was like a kitten. You always felt that if you touched her she would purr. She lit a cigarette, blew smoke across the table in my face and said then, "What's your trouble tonight, Carlie?"

"I'm waiting for someone."

"Girl?"

When I blinked, she looked at me and laughed. "Won't I do?" she said.

She began sticking nickels in the juke box. She had another rye and water. She was always playing music. It annoyed me; she annoyed me. She sat there, talking, humming with the music. All the while I sat there wondering what had happened to *him*, to Dawson. I felt woolly in my mind and sick. I realized that since the dream had first begun I'd felt that way.

The thing, of course, was silly. I argued

with myself. I'd say yes and no to Sue—and tell myself that Dawson might have been away today on business. I didn't know how he made his living. I didn't even know where he lived. Anyway I had seen him last night. And I knew where I'd been—last night.

We'd played bridge last night, Tuesday, with Hank and Sue, and they'd stayed until eleven. They'd gone upstairs early, at eleven. Then I'd had a last drink. A habit, every night a last drink with Vallie.

I shook my head. I'd had the dream. But damn it, *I had been in bed*. I couldn't have harmed Dawson, dreaming from my bed. I wondered why tonight I felt so—so woolly. I wondered if I would see Dawson here tomorrow night, Thursday.

I walked home after midnight with Sue Cathay. At the door she called, "Goodnight—and pleasant dreams!" My God, pleasant dreams. I fought sleep until almost morning. On Thursday morning the whole world caved in.

CHAPTER TWO

Always Eat at Art's

I WAS in the office, in conference with Tod. You remember—Tod Raven, my partner. I must tell you about Tod. We'd met in the South Pacific. We were wounded back in '43, but after our discharge we kept in contact. Then one day we'd pooled our cash and gone into business.

Tod was smooth and tall. He had a fertile mind. He could plan and sell anything. I knew construction. That's all I'd ever done, construction. By the end of '44 we were building cities for war workers, factories, and small homes. Vorpe and Raven. Vorpe out on the job and Raven in the office. By the spring of '46 we were set to gross millions.

All right. You know Tod now. You know we were friends. This morning, Thursday morning, I would catch him looking at me queerly.

"Carlie," Tod said abruptly, "you should take a rest."

We were planning a new sub-division. Hank Cathay had already been commissioned to buy up the land. Today, Tod and I were pouring over blueprints in Tod's office.

Now he leaned back in his chair. Behind him was the window, blue sky and tall buildings.

"Carlie, what's this business of you lying awake nights?"

I looked at him directly. "Who said I wasn't sleeping?"

"Look at yourself lately in the mirror?"

"I shave, don't I?"

"All right! And your eyes look bleary."

I said, "Nuts. It's too much whiskey."

"Like hell it's whiskey. It's nerves. Look, Carlie, Vallie stopped in yesterday. You were on a job, so we had lunch together. Now get this straight, Carlie. I think an awful lot of Vallie. She's one in a million. I think a lot of *you*. So we talked about you. I might as well admit that, Carlie."

I pulled cigarettes from my pocket, lit one. Two matches in my hand? There was only one. I squinted at "them", pulled "them" together. Then I broke the match and stuffed it in my pocket.

"You've been hitting the ball, kid," Tod continued. "She knows it. I know it. You've been working like a horse. Keep that up and you'll blow your top, Carlie."

Was that the answer? Nerves? Doubt of Vallie first—then dreaming every night of Dawson. Nerves?

"You can't tramp around the house half the night, every night, Carlie, and keep on ticking."

Wait a minute. *One* night, wasn't it, that I'd got up—the night I'd tangled with Dawson? "Did Vallie tell you that, Tod?" I demanded.

He nodded.

"Every night?"

He nodded.

The pulses in my temples began pounding. "She said—*around* the house, Tod?"

"In and out," he admitted.

"Out?"

"Hell," he said, "don't you know what you're doing?"

The outer office buzzer began snarling. I closed my eyes, grateful for this interruption, as Tod reached for the desk. A voice from the desk speaker said, "A Mr. Greer, to see Mr. Vorpe. It's urgent."

Greer? I escaped from Tod's office. But who the devil was Greer?

He was blond and young. He talked with a soft voice. He looked lazy, but his eyes were level direct, and very clear.

"I'm interested," he said, "in a man named Dawson."

From frying pan to fire. I stiffened. My hands were in my pockets so he couldn't see I'd balled them into fists.

"I understand, Mr. Vorpe, that you had some slight difference with Ron Dawson recently?"

Well, everyone had seen it. "We quarreled," I admitted. "If that's what you want."

"Yes, that's what I want. Care to discuss the reason?"

"No," I said. "I do not."

"I'm sorry." Greer shrugged. "I hoped to get everything clear. You struck him?"

"What is this, a civil action?"

"Not at all, Mr. Vorpe."

"Lawyer?"

"No." He smiled. "I'm a detective."

"A what?"

"Headquarters. Surprised, Mr. Vorpe?"

He indicated my chair. "Sit down. This call is simply routine. All I want is to get the thing clear."

I didn't sit down. I backed against the window. The sill was strong support. I put my hands behind me and gripped it. My hands were wet.

Then Greer said, "Dawson's missing."

Oh no, I thought. Missing just one night, just last night, just Wednesday. That's not missing. A date, perhaps? Or out of town on business?

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Vorpe, he disappeared Tuesday evening."

"Tuesday? I saw him Tuesday evening."

"Did you? At what time, please?"

"Early in the evening."

"Then would you mind telling me where you spent Tuesday evening?"

For a moment I stared. Now my temples were ticking like excited clocks. "What the hell is this?" I said.

"Routine questioning," he repeated.

"Because I tangled once with Dawson? Am I the only guy in town who's ever pushed the louse around?"

"Certainly not. We're making a general inquiry."

"Oh, of every one in town?"

Greer passed the sneer, "Certainly not. But you threatened to kill him."

There were people in the outer office, employees at typewriters, accountants over books and draftsmen over boards. Everything was safe and sane—out there.

"You did utter that threat," Greer continued, "and before witnesses. In the heat of an argument, possibly. I could understand that, but I *still* want to know where you spent Tuesday evening."

"I had one or two drinks," I wet my lips. "That was at the Mill, at seven. Then I went home. We—my wife and I—had company, the people from upstairs. We played bridge. You can verify all that. When they left, I went to bed."

"Did you by any chance go out again later? Let's say after midnight?"

I drew in a deep breath. "I did not go out," I answered stiffly.

Greer smiled again. "Purely a routine checkup, as I've said, Mr. Vorpe. After all, we know the man's habits and it's quite possible Dawson may be on a tear. His wife doesn't think so. And we found his car; the key was in the lock. We've found his hat near the car. It was a lonely place, an alley he

drove into every night to put away his car. Our theory just now—" Greer just smiled and shrugged. "You know how it is."

"And that's all for me?"

"Yes, that's all for the present."

"I don't like that word, Greer."

"If I were you I wouldn't like it either," Greer said, "if the thing should become murder."

NOTHING to it. Just feel the lust to kill, the will to kill—and then plan it in your sleep. Do it in your sleep. Bleary eyes? Of course! Legs like lead that you had to drag around? Of course! In and out the house these nights, every night, busy with dark plans and with—murder.

I sat down at the desk after Greer had gone. I knew Dawson wasn't just missing. He was dead. I knew it was murder. I knew they would find him in a house that set upon a hill, a house beyond a creek, behind two scrawny pines. I'd been there. I must have been there. But I didn't know where the house was or how to go about finding it.

Someone knocked on the office door. Seconds passed before it registered. "Come in," I said.

Tod came in. For a moment I wanted nothing quite so much as just to tell him. Now I wanted sympathy and help. I gripped the desk.

"Don't you feel up to it, Carlie?"

"Up to what?" Everything was whirling.

"Look, I can't check that layout alone,"

Tod said. "And your friend Hank Cathay was on the phone a few minutes ago. He wants to close today, if we okay it."

Close what? Okay what? I shook my head, I couldn't concentrate.

"Look," Tod said, and his voice had sharpened with concern, "we're buying property today, Carlie. We're buying it through Hank. It's the new sub-division, remember? We're supposed to go out there this noon and look the layout over. Carlie, are you up to it?"

Oh, we looked the layout over! We drove to the city limits, then beyond, and Tod seemed to have the wrong directions. We got out too far, so we had to turn back and cut over. We passed wooded areas and farms. Tod stopped at one house for directions. The sky was very blue here and the sun was moulten. I was wet with sweat—and cold. The muscles in my legs were jerking, and my teeth chattered. I was freezing.

"Straight ahead," Tod said, returning from the farmhouse. "There's a sharp turn a mile down. We can't miss it. Watch for a sign, Carlie. *Always Eat At Art's.*"

Wait a minute. *Art's?* I stopped breathing. Everything stopped, even a buzzard overhead. Then life went on again. A sign?

There must be no sign! No, not *that* one! There must be no bridge, no willow—

There was a sign—*Always Eat At Art's Place*—and a bridge that clattered when we crossed—and a weeping willow. There were weeds on the higher ground and gaunt sentinels, the pines. There was a square house, gray with disrepair, and on its roof a rotting, warty platform. Just the way I'd dreamed it. Everything the way I'd dreamed it. Everything?

Dawson was lying inside?

"Hey!" Tod said. "There's a place we could whip into quick shape for a renter."

Oh no. Rebuild any place but this place. My voice squeaked then as I pleaded, "It would need a lot of fixing."

"Hell," Tod said, "what's the matter with you, Carlie? New siding, a new roof—" He'd slowed the car; he stopped. "Damn fine location. Let's take a look at the house."

"Now?" I'd almost fainted.

"Why not? We're here."

I don't know what I said. The sun was hot. I was dizzy; I must have made it good because he closed the car door again, frowning. I don't know what I did that afternoon until evening. *He's in there*. Constantly in my mind was that one thought. I couldn't work. I couldn't think. *He's in there*.

It was inevitable that another thought would come after a time. How did I know Dawson was in there? A dream in itself was no proof. I *could* have seen the house before—years before, perhaps—and recalled it only from my deep subconscious. Yes, how could I know Dawson was dead *until I saw the body*?

I would have to make sure. I would have to find peace of mind. And now I could scarcely wait for darkness. I had to go back. I had to play it safe. No trail. No fingerprints. No footprints. I must use no flashlight. There were other houses near, and farmers have keen eyes. I would run the back road without headlights. I would even wear dark clothes and gloves, for their must be no black fear after this night. I must prove dreams were only dreams and find peace of mind.

Just before dusk I told Vallie I would run down to the Mill a while now. Poor Vallie. Had Greer been to see her too? Did Hank know, and his wife Sue? I didn't dare ask questions, now.

"How long, darling?" she said.

Long? An hour? Did it matter how long—*if there was no body*? Poor Vallie.

"Don't you think, Carlie," she said, "you should see a doctor?"

You couldn't escape a dream by resting, could you? Or by talking to a doctor? You had to run a dream *down*.

Poor Vallie. She watched me as I got into the car and drove off. It was dark then.

It was after eight-thirty. I drove past the Mill, fast. Twenty minutes more and I was on the side road. I backed the car into a lane, and left it hidden behind a screen of foliage. I walked across the bridge and was halfway up the slope when a dog began barking.

Not here though, not near. A minute passed and the dog quit barking. I thought I saw a figure and dropped instantly to the ground. No figure. Nothing but a stump. Crouching I ran on to the building.

There was no door—just the yawning hole. And no music. For a moment I was almost surprised. There always had been music. I had a queer feeling that something was wrong. The darkness was as it should be, the pines, the willow—but no music. To hell with the music! I didn't *want* the music, did I? I didn't want to prove the dream real, did I? I took a step inside, and suddenly there was sound. I froze with the sound. It was only a rat or a squirrel. Death would never scamper. I edged along the wall feeling my way and a board squeaked. Then the dog began barking again. It seemed nearer.

"Easy, Carlie," I whispered aloud. My toe had met something. Something lying on the floor, movable but hard. Should a body be hard? Seconds passed as I argued. I was dripping sweat now, and my quaking legs were buckling under me—

On hands and knees, I found it. The body I turned it over. I lit a match; it burned into my gloves. Rats had nibbled at the face, the sideburns. He'd been stabbed. The awful eyes were open, glassy. The eyes accused me. It was Dawson.

CHAPTER THREE

Face the Music

THERE was no such thing as time now. There was nothing but sheer horror. Then, growing from it like rank clawing vines, a new tightness crept into my throat, a new threat. Paralyzed though I was, I was conscious of the sudden danger. I heard it from afar, first its herald, the barking dog. Then the motor of a car. Still I crouched there, unable to move, every muscle like rock.

Vallie, believe in me—I didn't do it.

I pleaded with my legs to raise me—with my mind to let me get away. I could only shake and moan. I was nailed there.

I thought of the detective, Greer. I knew I didn't dare face his questions again. I didn't dare tell him I'd known the place where Dawson would lie dead—long before he'd died. But the approaching car! A farmer? I drew in a deep breath and held it till it hurt, because the car wasn't passing. The car was turning

in. Now I saw its white lights sweep the house and probe the holes, the empty doors and windows.

The car stood in the weeds, halfway up the hill. My muscles broke their shell of rock; I scrambled to my feet and lunged across the room. The white lances momentarily found me. From the darkness came a cry as I darted for the rear.

How many rooms in a house? Where were the doors and windows? I ran headlong into a black wall, staggered and swayed against a sill. The night was cool outside the window. Now I knew the bawling voice behind me. It was Greer.

He was in the house, plowing through it. And there were others racing around it to trap me. I could see the dancing lances of their flash lights. I could see that I had not one chance in a hundred. It was then I stepped into a hole. There were boards lying loosely over brickwork, a cistern. This was my only hope. I slid through the hole and dropped just as Greer's men tore around the corner.

There was no water. I lit with almost no sound. Mud oozed beneath my feet and I leaned against the mossy brickwork.

Greer met with his men almost overhead. Their voices funneled down now, and Greer said, "He plunged straight through the house. I caught a glimpse of his figure."

Their feet began thudding towards the woods behind the house. They had overlooked the cistern. For a moment, at least, I was safe. Safe until they found my hidden car. I began to wonder how I'd ever get back to the car—or get away even if I reached it.

Presently the voices were returning and Greer said, "It was a good tip. In the front room."

"Dawson?" someone asked.

"I'm afraid so. I caught a glimpse of something in the corner."

All right Greer, you win. It's Dawson. Their footfalls moved into the house, the night began to chirp and sing, and above was nothing but a lonely star. I felt along the mossy wall for loose brick or crevices.

It wasn't much of a climb, the danger was at the top. The third time I made it. Outside, I lay flat out on the ground panting.

They were in the front room. I could see their lights and hear the mutter of their voices. Their car was certain to be equipped with two-way radio. They were here to stay until the Sheriff and the Coroner came. I couldn't leave my car and if I tried to get away in it they'd hear me.

I stole around the house. They had a sedan halfway up the hill where they'd stopped. There was no one in it. I released the handbrake and the car began to coast

back slowly. By the time it gathered momentum I was running for the bridge.

They heard me. The cry came from the house and then a shot. Simultaneously the sedan bounced across the narrow road and backed into the ditch. I hadn't quite reached the bridge. I leaped off the road as two more shots rang out and leaped into water. Not much water, only knee deep and not ten feet wide. They'd barely reached the road as I climbed the other side.

The starter whirred and nothing happened. I nearly died then. Their lights were on the bridge. The motor caught and I gunned it. The car lunged from the lane and I went up the road swaying side to side. In the mirror I could see orange stabs in the gloom. Even if they missed the tires, the car was almost certain to be marked by bullets. They'd have me. The fenders and the body would be scratched by the thicket and marked by their bullets.

I made the turn by the sign, *Art's Place* and switched the lights on. Minutes would elapse before they could get their car out of the ditch. Their radio was no good; they didn't have my license. I could use the back roads, hit town from a new direction, and keep my bullet pocked car away from all brightness. The chances were I could get home. But then what?

My nerves held until I hit the city limits and snapped. The whole evening marched across my mind. I had to pull up on a side street, shaking. I sat there fifteen minutes, just shaking. I wouldn't even have tonight—I would have to face Vallie. I would have to explain why my shoes were caked with mud, why the legs of my trousers were wet and dirty. Why my hands and face were scratched, why my clothes were torn. I couldn't roam the streets until she'd be in bed.

I got out to look at the car. The light above the license plate was shot away. Gas was leaking from the tank. I would have to go home now, and face Vallie.

SHE hadn't been to bed. It was later than I'd thought: Eleven. She wore a sleek black housecoat splashed with crimson flowers. There was no color in her face except for two blotches of rouge.

"Carlie!" she whispered.

I just mumbled. I'd put the car in the garage and locked it. Now I fell into a chair.

"Carlie, you've been hurt!"

Not hurt she could see. The hurt was deeper, deadly.

"Carlie, the car?"

"Carlie," she said, "your eyes—are you ill? Shall I call the doctor?"

There it was again. She always wanted a

doctor. The Cathays came home at that moment. She ran for the kitchen door but I beat her to it.

"Wait," I said, "don't call them."

She shrank back to the table.

"Don't look at me like that!" I said.

One hand rose and touched her throat. "Be still!" I said.

She didn't utter a sound.

The Cathays came up from the garage, crossed the rear walk and climbed on up the back stairs. Their door closed and Sue's high heels clicked across their kitchen. Then I heard their radio. I couldn't breath.

Every night, music. Every night the dream, always to a jerky, interrupted rhythm—to music.

"Vallie, don't call them! Don't spoil it!"

I ran across the hall into our bedroom. I threw myself on the bed, closed my eyes and listened to the music. Faint, eerie—half the notes were lost. Half the rhythm was lost. *But every night the same dream, set to music . . .*

Vallie came to the bedroom doorway, eyes very frightened and watched me.

"Vallie," I pleaded, "trust me! Don't spoil it!"

I got up and looked around. The wall screen, the cool air vent, was so obvious I was sick the moment that I saw it.

"Carlie," Vallie whispered from the doorway. "Carlie, what are you doing?"

Doing? I gripped the bed to keep from swaying. Doing? I was writing the end of all terror.

"Carlie, you scare me," she whispered. "Something has happened—you don't tell me—"

I began to laugh; my own laughter jarred me. You bet something had happened.

"Carlie, please sit down and—"

"I'll be all right, hon. Don't worry."

Her voice began to rise. "Carlie, please sit down! I—I'll get you something to drink—"

"Sure," I said, "I'll be ready soon now."

"Carlie, what are you going to do with the alarm clock?"

I'd grabbed up the alarm clock. I ran past her to the kitchen, to the basement. I heard her follow to the top step. "Carlie—!" she was moaning. It was a cheap alarm clock, a holdover from the war. It ticked very loudly. I pulled the collar off the cooling system and set the alarm clock in the vent. Then I ran back up stairs.

"Carlie, wait! Please wait, Carlie. Drink this."

Whiskey. I needed it, the whiskey. I gulped it, put the glass down and ran to my bed. I could hear the clock ticking through the vent from the basement.

So a voice from *upstairs*, softly persuasive, could be heard here. Sound would travel up or down. Nice, huh? Hank Cathay whispering every night while I slept, from upstairs. "Carlie, let me buy the land for you," he'd said when we'd first talked about the new subdivision. He'd scouted the area. He'd seen the bridge and the gray house halfway up the hill. He'd seen that it would be a fine place to hide a body—and that's what he had done. Killed Ron Dawson, and then hidden Dawson's body. And every night *before* he killed Ron Dawson . . . whispering to me while I slept, telling me about the gray house and the body, planting it in my subconscious mind.

Nice, huh? Give Tod, today, precise but *wrong* directions for finding the new subdivision. See that Tod drove by the gray house. Arrange that I would see the gray house. Nice, huh, get me back there—oh, he'd known that I would try to prove the dream unreal! Get me back there—and send Greer—to trap me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Slay Me Down to Sleep

MY PALMS were moist with sweat. There was hope, everything was clear now. And yet—yet there still was a curious, puzzling factor. How calm I felt inside! The tension should be mounting, and not leaving. felt—sleepy.

I lay sprawled out on the bed and I knew I had to confront Hank Cathay. I knew I had to go upstairs and accuse Hank. I knew I had to get up off the bed, but—

Sleepy. I blinked my tired eyes and tried to keep a straight line on my thinking. I was floating and not thinking. I was in a cloud, suspended. Everything was hazy, and strange patterns appeared on the wall. Squares became little circles, funny little circles.

Vallie—?

I thought I'd called to her. Apparently I hadn't. I hadn't made a single sound. *She* had made the sound. She was at the phone, talking.

"Yes," she said, "I put it in his drink. Yes," she said, "he's quiet, he's sleeping."

My Vallie. Talking on the phone. My Vallie. Telling someone on the phone that I was sleeping.

I heard her put the phone down. And then minutes passed. It was very still. It seemed she hadn't risen. It seemed she'd turned to stone. Or maybe I had turned to stone, and that's what she had meant by sleeping.

I flexed my fingers to see. They tingled. I could clamp them, I could make a fist. I

straightened out my legs. I heard Vallie tip-toe up the hall. I felt her staring at me from the doorway.

Almost at that second a car raced up the street. Then brakes squealed and it stopped outside. Someone ran across the walk. Vallie was tiptoeing up the hall and a door opened—inside.

"Oh, Tod, Tod!" she cried.

He said, "I didn't waste a minute." He said, "I called Greer again. He'd just got in."

"Tod, his clothes were sodden—!"

"Yes, he waded the creek, Vallie."

"He was in a terrible state—!"

"Hold on, Vallie. Keep a tight grip."

"Tod, you've got a gun!"

"Easy, Vallie. We can't take any more chances."

Still my fingers tingled. I could squeeze. I could make a fist.

"She was waiting for a date," Ron Dawson had boasted. "We went up the beach, and no one was around—"

"Carlie," Hank Cathay had said, "we know it's a lie, we know there's absolutely nothing to it—"

I remembered. She had looked at me queerly. Now I had to bite my lips to keep from screaming. The killer had not been Hank Cathay. Hank Cathay had not whispered down the air vent. The whispering had come from the *other* bed, right here. From my Vallie. My friend Tod. My Vallie.

"Tod, what will we do?" she said from the hall.

"Wait," I heard him whisper.

They were at the bedroom door now. Just standing there—I could feel them. I could see it all now. I'd threatened to kill Dawson. I'd given them their cue. Do away with me through Dawson. The trail I'd left tonight had made things even better for them.

I began to *feel* the gun in his hand. He would shoot me. That was how it would end. Better even than they'd plotted, quicker than they'd planned. They wanted me out of the way. They wanted each other. He wanted all of the business.

"Vallie," Tod said, "he's not asleep. He's shamming."

He waited a few seconds.

"Carlie," Tod said, louder, "we know you're awake."

He waited a few seconds.

"Don't try anything, Carlie. I'm prepared. I've got a gun here."

I looked at them and the gun. I pulled the bed spread into knots and gripped it in my fists.

"Just lie there, Carlie, quietly," Tod said in a tight voice.

I raised my head a little. It was almost

level with the dressing table mirror. I could see it in the mirror. I could see my own face looking at me, grinning.

"Cute," I whispered. "Pleasant dreams the rest of your life, Vallie."

She sobbed, turned, and ran back through the hall. Everything turned frantic at that moment. Everything began pounding, all over the house. I leaped off the bed. I saw the fear on Tod's face as I lunged for him. He side-stepped into the hall. He tried to hit me with the gun to stop me. He couldn't. I had the strength of ten men and he broke like a match stick. Everything was pounding. I went straight on up the hall after Vallie who was running.

I caught her at the front door by the neck. My Vallie.

The pounding was Greer, whom Tod had called, breaking down the door. The pounding was Hank Cathay running down the stairs—Sue was behind Hank. And above all, Sue's radio. A broken, crazy rhythm, the same I'd heard for weeks, for years, for ages.

They pulled me from my Vallie. She fell to the floor, holding her throat. Everyone was looking at me queerly. Everyone began talking. "Suspected it for weeks—" Hank Cathay. "Knew it this noon, the minute that we passed that house. He went to pieces right there, at that house—" Tod Raven. "I wondered what was wrong with him, last night—" Sue Cathay.

Everyone was talking, but Vallie, me . . . and Greer.

FUNNY about Greer. How calm and sure he was! Finally I babbled, and he listened. He shook his head when I'd finished; he walked into the bedroom. He came back in a minute, saying, "You're right, Vorpe. That part. I could hear the clock ticking through the air vent."

Funny about Greer. He looked at Sue and said, "I'd like to have a chat with you, Mrs. Cathay. You are Mrs. Cathay, aren't you? Let's go back a month or two. You were seeing Dawson."

Vallie came across the room and sank beside me by my chair.

"You met him, Mrs. Cathay, at the Mill," continued Greer. You were bored and he was gay, and you saw little harm in flirting. You did take some precautions, however. You concealed your identity. You told him you were Mrs. Vorpe."

Tod sucked in his breath. Vallie gripped my hand. There was not a single move or sound from Sue Cathay. Then she said, "But that's fantastic."

"Oh no," answered Greer. "The police are

not infallible, Mrs. Cathay, but they're thorough. We've found Dawson's treasure chest. He didn't play around with women for nothing. He used the women he met, blackmail. And we found your picture, snapshots that he'd kept, inscribed 'Vallie Vorpe'. That stopped me.

"I admit I was confused. I admit, today, I singled out Vorpe. I admit I took it for granted that you, the picture, was Mrs. Vorpe. I admit, after talking to Raven and hearing of Vorpe's strange actions, I drew the net about Vorpe. I had a good lead. It blew up this afternoon when I talked to the real Mrs. Vorpe."

His eyes thanked Vallie. "Singular picture, intriguing," he went on then. "It was taken at a quiet spot, along a creek. There was a house in the background with a warty platform on its roof. This was a place no doubt you'd discovered, Mrs. Cathay, in the course of handling your husband's business. A place no doubt that you've used for meeting Dawson. A place, with Dawson missing, that I seriously wanted to find—"

"The picture proves nothing!" Sue Cathay interrupted.

Greer just smiled. "I've covered a lot of ground today, Mrs. Cathay. Now I'd like to go upstairs with you. I'd like, among other things, to have a sample of your rouge and lipstick."

Hank said not a word. He looked up, haggard eyed, as Greer continued to pile up the evidence.

"You met Dawson last Tuesday night, Mrs. Cathay. After midnight, after playing bridge all evening, after your husband had retired. You left your radio on, a ruse you regularly employed. Your husband, if waking, was to think and very likely did think you were in the house, listening to the radio. But you met Dawson—and sometime in the last few weeks he'd put the squeeze on. He wanted money which you didn't have and which you knew you couldn't get.

"You knew that Vorpe had quarreled with Dawson and what he'd said. You knew that Vorpe would be suspected if Dawson were found murdered. It was then you made your plans, and you were very clever, Mrs. Cathay. You planted the *thought* of murder firmly in Carl Vorpe's mind. How? Often, doubtless, you'd heard his voice rising from his bedroom through the air vent. So it was a simple matter to reverse that.

"You told him all about the house, night after night, and how he'd find the body. You knew your message was getting over the way Vorpe began acting. Perhaps Mrs. Vorpe even helped you by mentioning her concern that her husband was rising in his sleep.

You knew then you could go ahead with the murder.

"You intended that Vorpe would find the house. He did. You knew he'd return and find the body. Obviously, he'd betray guilt then when questioned. Circumstances played into your hands tonight when Raven, worried about his friend, called me and begged me to keep an eye on him."

"Greer—" Hank Cathay stopped, swallowed. "All of this—you're guessing. You surely don't have proof—"

Greer said flatly, "We found rouge and lipstick under Dawson's finger nails—minute traces. He'd raked her face as she'd stabbed him. We found a clear print on the face of his wrist watch—she'd tried to ward off his arm."

Greer looked suddenly aside at me. "And I'm very glad, Vorpe, that you hid tonight in the cistern. Getting out, you shoved the cover boards away. Later that brought it sharply to my attention. Doubtless Mrs. Cathay hadn't expected it to be dry. So I found the knife, the murder weapon, where she'd thrown it—in the cistern. And on the knife were a nice set of prints. The same print that appeared on the wrist watch, incidentally. The same prints we discovered on Mrs. Cathay's pictures."

Hank walked straight across the room to Sue. You could see he was going to tell Sue that even now he believed in her and would stand by her. The kindest thing she could have done was to have remained silent but she didn't.

She looked at him. She laughed.

THEY'D gone. Still Vallie sat by my chair and Tod Raven remained in the room too, standing.

"Carlie—" Tod cleared his throat and tried again. "I guess I stuck my chin out. I guess I don't blame you."

He picked up his hat, put it on, turned toward the door.

"Tod—" I called.

He looked around at me. Remember what I've said, that we'd fought together in the jungles?

"Tod, see you in the morning?"

He began to grin, "Fine, kid."

I looked down at Vallie. Tears were in her eyes. "Hon," I said, "there's bound to be cruel dreams. Remember when you said that?"

She knew what I meant, Tod Raven. There was a small catch in her throat as she said, "Pipe dreams, Carlie?"

I put my arms around her, and then I kissed her.

THE END

COPPERHEAD

By
WILBUR S. PEACOCK

The writhing, fanged death that Dane Vernon planned to profit by, buried its venom-filled teeth into a priceless, golden fortune—for somebody else!

THEY crawled. Scale against scale, sinuous body overlapping sinuous body. They watched the onlookers with beady unblinking eyes, and the chill of death was in each slit pupil.

"They're horrible!" Dane Vernon said harshly.

And saw the answer to his murder plan!

"Well," the Professor said, "they aren't exactly lovely, but they do good work. We extract about a quart of venom a week; and with the new pits we're preparing, the amount will increase appreciably before long."

"I couldn't do it," Dane Vernon said. "Work like this would drive me crazy."

But that wasn't really what he meant. What he should have said was that any work would have driven him crazy. That was why he planned to murder old Tom Riverton before their car reached Los Angeles. That way he would make certain he never had to work again; that way, he could live off the money Grace would inherit on her father's death. That was the reason he looked at the crawling snakes with such avid eyes.

Grace shuddered at his side, and he touched her arm protectingly, as he always did, making the gesture subtle and masculine; and she smiled at him from clear blue eyes.

"Let's go back to the house," she said. "I've seen all I want to see of those snakes."

"Of course," Dane Vernon agreed, and turned away.

"We'll be up in a short while," Tom Riverton said. "I want to take a look at the rest of the place."

"There's plenty to see," the Professor said proudly. "I've got about the nicest snake farm in the Southwest."

Dane Vernon shivered. "Snake farm! Lord, what a filthy crop to raise!" There were three cement pits, shaded in spots, with water troughs and straw, and shiny-skinned monsters crawling everywhere.

"Rattlers, copperheads, corals in there," the



It struck with blinding quickness and the fangs slid out and sank into his wrist.

Professor had said. "In the other pits are African and Oriental types."

He had held up the slim jars fitted tight with rubber covers. A milky fluid moved as he lifted the jar, and the oily liquid had the same sinuosity of movement as the snakes from which it had been milked.

"This will save lives," he had said, "instead of taking them. Snake venom, both liquid and crystallized, is valuable in surgery today."

"Take lives!" Dane Vernon whispered softly himself then, and had the answer to his problem.

He had thought of murder, reaching into his memory for ways and means, knowing that any slip would mean his downfall. He discarded the thoughts of guns and knives and brutal weapons, for those were the things cops knew killers used.

An accident was the answer, an accident so clear-cut there could be no argument or speculation. He had thought of an accident with the car, but Grace had stopped that. She was always along, and so she was the obstacle to such a plan.

There were other ideas and half-thought plans, but all had gone into the discard. And with each passing day, with Los Angeles coming closer, Dane Vernon had realized he had little time to spare.

He had planned carefully, first in gaining the introduction to Grace Riverton; and then in the passing days he had made her love him, made her care for him with the skill that came so naturally to him.

He was good-looking, he knew, and his hair was dark and his body, powerful and tanned. He could smile with white teeth, and he spoke with a tenderness that gave no clue to the thoughts in his mind.

And so he had wormed his way into the Riverton family, admitting he had nothing but ambition, lying about his past and all its sordid details. Tom Riverton had accepted him for his daughter's sake; but deep in his eyes Dane Vernon could read suspicion and dislike, and he knew the old man was his implacable enemy.

They had come West, driving leisurely, for Tom Riverton had wanted to visit his west coast offices, and Vernon had come along at Grace's insistence. Even Tom Riverton had been cordial; and only a reading of the letter Vernon had found in the old man's luggage had revealed the reason.

"—criminal record," the letter had said in part. "No good, suspected of murder in death of first wife. Suggest bringing him out here and letting Grace hear stories from people who have known him."

That had been old Tom Riverton's death warrant.

And now they stayed overnight at the Snake Farm, visiting a friend of Tom Riverton's and

planned to drive on in the cool of the morning.

Dane Vernon thought of that as he walked with the slim girl to the main house. He thought of the slender hypodermic-fangs that lay in the snakes' jaws, and he remembered the glass hypodermic needle which rested in his luggage.

He had his answer then, so simple, so sure, so natural that no suspicion would be left behind when Riverton died.

And so he made his plans, even while he laughed with the girl and spoke of the coming days in Los Angeles.

AT DINNERTIME, he excused himself and went up the stairs, ostensibly to wash his hands before entering the dining room. He found the gleaming hypodermic needle in its slim black case and thrust it into his pocket.

He went along the upper hall and down the back stairs, going along the covered path between the house and the laboratory and easing through the unlocked door.

He could feel the thudding of his heart, and he moved slowly, frightened unreasonably that he might be discovered. Then he shrugged. Even if caught in the room, he could have the alibi of having wanted to look the place over again.

He went directly to the wall cabinet where the rubber-capped jars sat on glass shelves. There were four, with the poison like curdled milk within each. Below, on the bottom shelf, were smaller bottles, marked, *Anti-Venom—Copperhead Anti-Venom—Coral* and others, one for each particular species.

He grinned thinly when he saw those. Life lay on the bottom shelf and death on the top.

He unsheathed the hypodermic and slanted its needle through the rubber cover of an upper jar marked *Copperhead*. He filled the tube with the milky fluid and thrust the needle into a soft ball of cotton before returning it to its case. Then, conscious of fleeing time, he closed the cabinet and hurried back to his room.

He laughed a great deal at dinner, knowing that he was making a good impression on the Professor. He could see that even Tom Riverton was thawing a bit; and he knew then that his plan would succeed.

The night came on as they talked; and when at last it was time to dress for the dance in the little resort town, he walked upstairs with Tom Riverton, smoking one of the old man's cigars.

"Come in for a minute, Vernon," the old man said. "I'd like to talk to you."

"Sure," Dane Vernon agreed, and followed Grace's father into the room assigned to him by the Professor.

"Vernon," Riverton said then, suddenly blunt and forceful, "I brought you along on this trip to study you."

"Study me!" Dane Vernon said, and the

pulse of coiled rage began to beat at his temple.

"That's right." The old man was like quarried stone then. "And even this close association hasn't sold me on you. I don't think you love Grace; I don't think you give a continental damn about her. I think you figure on marrying the money I'll leave her. So I'll make you an offer; I'll give you ten thousand dollars to walk out of here tonight and never come back."

Dane Vernon almost grinned. The old boy was plenty shrewd, smart as a whip, in fact. Except in one thing; he was trying to pay ten thousand dollars to queer a deal that would probably net Vernon a cool million.

"No, thanks," Vernon said. "I don't like your words, and I don't give a damn about your money. I want Grace."

He hit the old man then. This wasn't quite the way he had meant to do it, but it would have to do. He threw every bit of his weight into the blow, and his fist smashed against the old man's jaw, dropping him inertly to the floor. He didn't move.

Making certain, Dane Vernon caught up the heavy chair, holding it by the back and swung it like a gold club. The leg made a nasty sound when it struck Riverton's temple. Now the old man would stay unconscious until the poison worked. And if the bruise showed later, the assumption would be that the old devil had fallen from the poison's effect and struck his head.

Dane Vernon worked fast now, utterly cool and callous. He drew the hypodermic case and lifted out the needle. Carefully, he made two injections, three eighths of an inch part, in Tom Riverton's ankle just above the silk sock.

Then he left the room, locking the door behind him and racing down the back stairs. He eeled into the darkness, sneaking from shadow to shadow toward the snake pits. There was no moon yet, and he had no fear of being seen unless by accident.

He found the snake-catcher, a length of wood like a broom handle, to which was fastened a device of wire. The wire ran along the handle and ended in a loop at the end, a loop which would snare a snake's weaving head and hold it tight, when the wire was drawn taut by a finger loop.

He bent over the edge of the pit, wincing at the instant brrrr of rattling which greeted his appearance. Vaguely, he could make out the darker strips of shadow which were the snakes stirring restlessly.

He played the loop like a rigid lasso, and when at last he was certain, he pulled the wire and felt the thrashing weight of a snake on the stick. Shivering, holding the monster at arm's length, he hurried toward the house.

Inside, he breathed more easily, recognizing

the snake for a copperhead. The Professor had been most explicit in his information, and now Vernon was profiting by the glib talk.

He went up the stairs, the snake bucking and coiling, eerily and strangely silent. He stood in the el in the hall, making certain that he was unnoticed, then raced to Riverton's room and twisted the key in the lock.

Tom Riverton still lay on the floor. Dane Vernon shuddered, seeing him and then his jaw set. This was no time to lose his nerve.

He loosed the copperhead, holding it down with the stick while he loosed the garroting wire, then jumped back toward the door. The snake coiled viciously, watching with cold brilliant eyes.

Dane Vernon grinned then. He hadn't liked doing things this way, but he had had no choice. A snake will not strike something un-moving, and so the hypodermic had had to be used. Nothing could be left to chance; if he had knocked the old man out and let the snake strike, Riverton might have waked in time to save himself and identify his attacker.

Dane Vernon turned and went through the door.

HE HEARD the scream five minutes later. He heard it and knew that Grace had walked unsuspectingly into her father's room. Now was the time to play the hero, now was the time to solidify his position with her for all time.

He went into the hall and saw that Grace stood in the doorway of her father's room. He heard the mad hissing of the copperhead's warning; and then he was by the girl, catching up the machete which was an ornament on the wall beside the other trophies the Professor had brought back from his world travels.

He slashed twice, the keen blade chopping through the copperhead's body and cutting into the polished floor. The snake hissed and flailed, its body now in three pieces, and at last lay still, eyes still alive in death.

Grace whimpered at the doorway, and then went toward her father, cradling his head in her slender hands. Dane Vernon watched for a silent second and then swung to the hall.

"Professor—help!" he bellowed and heard the sound of running feet.

He bent to lift Tom Riverton a bit, aiding the girl, and when the Professor and a servant appeared in the doorway, he explained.

"One of your snakes must have gotten loose. Grace found him and I killed the snake. Get something to help; her father's just been bit-ten!"

"But—" The Professor's voice was stunned with surprise.

"Snake—copperhead!" Dane Vernon
(Continued on page 97)

Fast-paced "Socrates Bean" Mystery-Thriller

By
DALE CLARK



Jeff Danish was scrambling past the house on his way to the hedge.

"I'm totally indifferent," said Socrates Bean, "to so-called good causes. So don't tackle me for contributions to milk funds or societies for homeless animals. I devote my whole time and fortune to helping innocent people accused of homicide. And I mean murder, son!"



CORPSES, INCORPORATED



CHAPTER ONE

Who's the Best Man?

I WAS up in a tree looking for a bird nest when the cab stopped.

"Driver," a feminine voice said, "this isn't 800 Mimosa Drive. It simply can't be."

The hackie said, "Look, girlie, I've been kicking a heap around this town ever since gas buggies was invented. I couldn't wind up at a wrong address if I tried with my eyes closed."

Girlie had misgivings. "But Mr. Socrates Bean is supposed to be a millionaire. He couldn't be living in squalor like this. He could afford, at least, to have the lawn trimmed."

"That's just where you're off the beam," the hackie argued back. "Taxes alone on an old ruin like this must run to ten grand a year, so any ordinary guy would have to protect his investment by painting and repairing. Nobody but a millionaire could afford to raise an acre of weeds on a swell street where property values are absolutely tops. Anyway, it's 800 Mimosa Drive, all right, and you owe me a buck-twenty."

Sure, I could have hollered down out of the tree that he was right, and this was where Socrates Bean lived. I wanted to see what

she looked like first, though. Why should I take a chance?

I damned near fell out of the tree when I saw. She got out of the cab, and she was wearing a bridal costume. You know, white, shiny satin with a veil wrapped a couple of times around her copper-red hair and then tossed off over one shoulder. It was a long, flowing skirted dress with a fancy train which she clung to with one hand as she started up the walk.

Socrates Bean's walk is brick—here and there—but mostly weeds. It twists through a lawn of grass grown high enough to hide a calf. It leads up to what used to be a white painted house, maybe slightly smaller than the average county courthouse, fretted all over the front with rusty ironwork. The windows are so large that a good pilot could probably fly a private sized plane through one of them.

A pilot would be afraid, though, his propeller breeze might push the old building flat on its face. You have to get up close to see that the oak is still like iron under the dingy, peeling, World War I paint job.

The girl in the bridal dress had reached the veranda by the time I Tarzanned out of the tree. She started cautiously across the veranda boards as if she expected them to crumble under her feet. Or maybe she wasn't so sure she wanted to throw herself on Socrates Bean's charity, after all.

I had time to cross the yard while she crossed the veranda. "Looking for someone?" I asked.

She whirled.

She was *pretty*. She'd not just get by in a crowd, or even merely stand out from the crowd. She made you think: "Hey, this kid ought to be in the movies!"

She'd have been a knockout in Technicolor with her gleaming copper-red hair and wide-apart eyes, so gray they seemed smoky.

"You're not Mr. Bean?" she gasped.

"Nope, I'm Al McKane. I'll tell Bean you're here. What name shall I give?"

"My name is Kitty Blake. Only I'm not sure, maybe it's Mrs. Ralph Hestling." She gnawed her underlip nervously. "You see, the shot was fired during the wedding ceremony. Technically, I may or may not be a married woman."

"Did the shot kill somebody?" I asked.

"Yes, my hus—I mean, Ralph's best man, Donald Wheeler."

"That's okay then. We'll go right in."

"Okay?" she gulped.

"It's okay for you to talk to Socrates Bean. He specializes in murder," I explained. "You'd be surprised how many applicants he turns away because they're mixed up in merely minor misdeeds such as arson and bank robbery."

I PUNCHED open the weather beaten front door, ushered Kitty What's-her-name along fifty feet of moth-riddled hallway carpet, into a booklined study smelling of old paper, leather and coal smoke.

Socrates Bean was bending over a shoe box on the study desk, too busy with a medicine dropper to notice us.

The girl froze to a sculpturesque halt when she saw him. Appearances are all against Socrates Bean. He's so homely a mirror must hurt when he looks into it. He couldn't win a beauty contest from a collection of gargoyles.

Without glancing up, he asked, "Any luck, Al?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bean. I've climbed to the top of every tree in the yard without solving the mystery."

He sighed, reached down into the box and picked up a half naked, fledgling bird. You'd have thought from the unholy cast of his face that something highly unpleasant was going to happen. That's what the girl in the bride's costume thought.

"Relax," I said as she paled. "Mr. Bean found the poor thing chirping for help in the yard this morning. I've been climbing trees trying to locate the mother's nest while Bean's been feeding the orphan with a medicine dropper."

Kitty What's-Her-Name sprang past me to Socrates Bean's side. "Then it's true! You *are* a good, kind man!"

On his homely pan, a smile always came out a twisted leer. He shrugged, "I'm simply what twenty years in the penitentiary made me."

"The penitentiary?" Kitty's backward step almost caused her to trip over the bridal train.

Socrates Bean nodded. "I was sent up for a murder I didn't commit. It does happen, you know. It'll go on happening as long as policemen are less wise than the Almighty—as long as judges and juries aren't drawn from the ranks of the angels. I don't intend to let it happen any oftener than I can help. When I was released from prison I resolved to devote my time and money to assisting innocent persons wrongfully accused of homicide. I said *homicide*."

He drew his roly-poly figure up sternly and waggled the medicine dropper for emphasis.

"That's as far as my goodness and kindness go, though," he would up. "I'm totally indifferent to so-called good causes. I never give a dime to charity. I'm indifferent to the problems of poverty, juvenile delinquency, and homes for the mentally ill. You're wasting your breath if you've come to seek a contribution for a school, hospital, milk fund, or society for suffering animals. Neither am I interested in your personal sorrows, your broken heart, your wasted talents—"

I cut in to this, "I told her, Mr. Bean, that you specialize in homicides. She says her case involves a shooting."

"A fatal shooting?" Socrates Bean raised his tufted eyebrows.

"Yeah. A guy named Donald Wheeler got shot dead at her wedding."

Faintly, interest showed itself in Socrates Bean's eyes. "He deserved to be killed, I don't doubt?"

The bride shook her head. "You're wrong. Mr. Wheeler was very popular. He was everybody's friend. The police feel sure Jeff must have been aiming at Ralph, hitting Wheeler by accident."

Socrates Bean frowned. "Jeff? Ralph? Who are they?"

The bride blushed. "Jeff Danish is the boy I used to be engaged to. Ralph Hestling is the man I was marrying."

"Tell me more," said Socrates Bean.

"It was this morning, shortly before noon," the girl said. "It was a garden wedding at my parents' home at Northwall. During the ceremony a shot rang out. Donald Wheeler, the best man, fell dead. My parents had employed a private detective to guard the wedding gifts. He heard the shot and stepped to the window in time to see Jeff Danish race across the lower lawn and leap the hedge to reach the street. Later, the police picked up a recently discharged revolver in the shrubbery. It was Jeff's gun."

Her eyes swam with tears as she told this story. But Socrates Bean had begun to dry-wash his hands in a queerly satisfied way.

Softly he asked, "I assume Jeff Danish's previous life has been above reproach? He is well thought of in Northwall? It will be difficult for people to believe him guilty of such a crime?"

The red haired girl said. "That's just the trouble! Jeff is—well, he's headstrong and reckless. Northwall is one of those staid, conservative suburbs. I'm afraid public opinion will be heavily against him."

Socrates Bean bent forward eagerly. "But perhaps he's so rich public opinion won't matter? He can afford to hire the best of lawyers?"

"Jeff isn't a bit rich," the bride sighed. "It's true he inherited a small amount of money. But he managed to lose it all in backing a worthless invention."

"And yet," Bean asked. "you don't think this Jeff Danish, this reckless wastrel, is a murderer?"

"I know he isn't!"

"How do you know?"

Kitty moistened her lips. "I haven't any legal proof, if that's what you mean. I simply feel sure he isn't the type to hide in the bushes and shoot anyone."

"Excellent," said Socrates Bean. "I may even say, it is ideal! It's not everything I like in a case—damning circumstantial evidence, a victim everybody liked and a suspect everybody dislikes, no possibility of a skillful defense, and no grounds to base a defense on. A perfect set-up for a miscarriage of justice, if I may say so."

"And you like it?" the girl puzzled.

"Certainly. I'm not interested in the ordinary, doubtful cases in which the jury will probably release the defendant for lack of evidence. It's the innocent chap who hasn't a chance on earth who needs and deserves my help."

The bride brightened. "That means you'll help Jeff?"

Socrates Bean spread his pudgy hands. "I will, if McKane agrees."

The girl flung around to me. "Mr. McKane, oh, please—"

"It's no use begging *him*," Bean's voice boomed. "McKane isn't biased as I am by penitentiary life. He doesn't fall for sob stories as I do. He realizes that many accused persons aren't innocent at all, that many of them deserve punishment. That's why I hired him. He's my insurance that my money won't be used to help hardened criminals beat their raps."

The bride's smoky eyes stared at me. "But how can you tell?"

"He's an investigator," Socrates Bean explained. "McKane will go up to Northwall. It'll be up to him to decide whether Jeff Danish deserves help—or hanging. I'll be guided entirely by McKane's report."

I could have used a little of his confidence right then. I was an investigator, sure. But I hadn't been able to find that mother robin's nest outside! I make mistakes, too, and a man's life depended on how I handled this case.

So far I'd been just a listener. But now I had to go to work. The murder of Donald Wheeler was my baby from here on in.

CHAPTER TWO

The Marriage-Murder Set-Up

A CAR goes with my job. I bundled Kitty Blake, or maybe she was actually Mrs. Ralph Hestling, into the front seat and headed for Northwall. It's a good two hour run and it gave me time to ask some questions in an assumed leisurely fashion.

"Whatever put it into your head to rush to Socrates Bean?" I queried.

"Henry Gigham suggested it."

"Who's he?"

"The inventor. He was rushing about trying to help Jeff, too. Aside from being a crackpot about his inventions, he's an awfully good

hearted soul. He told me that Mr. Bean was probably the one man in the country who would take an interest in Jeff's case. He loaned me the bus fare. Of course, I could have gone home and changed clothes and taken a car, only my parents would have tried to stop me from coming to Mr. Bean at all."

"Your parents, eh? Wouldn't Ralph Hestling have something to say about it, too?"

"Oh, I can handle Ralph. Anyway, he's too upset about Wheeler's death to think much about anything else. They'd been bosom pals for nearly forty years, from childhood in fact."

"Forty years," I flashed back. "How old is Jeff?"

"Twenty-two."

"Aren't you afraid a lot of folks may think your actions today indicate you are secretly still in love with young Jeff Danish, rather than the forty year old Ralph Hestling you were marrying?"

The bride's voice went toneless. "There are different kinds of love, Mr. McKane. Ralph Hestling is kind, considerate, dignified, and gracious. He offered me happiness. I was fond of Jeff, but I was continually quarreling with him. Jeff is rude, hot-tempered, obstinate, and bitter.

"After all," she sighed, "the fact I decided not to marry Jeff doesn't mean I want to see him hanged!"

"Okay. Who do you think fired the shot, if Jeff didn't?"

"I've been searching my mind," she declared, "but I haven't been able to think of a logical suspect yet."

She still hadn't thought of one when we rolled into Northwall. It's back in the hills and dotted with big homes. About all a tourist gets to see in the residential area is the brick walls and tall hedges, plus an occasional roof glimpsed through the trees.

Kitty told me to swing into a roadway plainly labeled *Private*. We came to an estate named *Goldenacres*. She told me to turn in there onto a crescent drive leading to a Norman style house. Instead of going into the house, she led me by flagged steps around to a rear garden.

This was it—the marriage murder set-up. A couple of hundred folding chairs were still arrayed on the lawn facing the fountain which was the showpiece of the garden. Imagine a spray of water leaping in a broad pool, thirty feet in diameter, with lily pads and goldfish in the water. Low, wide steps led up to the fountain, and that's where the marriage ceremony had been in progress. A blood stain showed where Donald Wheeler had fallen.

The cops had marked it up with chalk, tracing the outline of the victim's body, marking the positions where Kitty, Ralph Hestling, the bride's father, the bridesmaids, and so on

had faced the clergyman. It seemed thorough.

"The shot came from the left?" I surmised.

"I'll show you where they found the gun."

Over on the left stood a caterer's table, sheeted now with white tablecloths. I raised one cloth, found myself confronting an aromatic, tawny-brown smoked turkey. I peered under another cloth at the gleaming frosting of an uncut wedding cake.

Shrubbery made a solid green bank behind the table. "In here," the girl pointed.

Sure enough, the cops had staked a peg into the earth to mark the find. I assumed they'd run a chalkstring from that point to the body, thus checking the angle of fire.

"Let's have a look at this room where the private dick says he put the eye on Jeff," I suggested.

"It's upstairs."

It was like entering one of those auction rooms where they knock off antiques to the highest bidder. A table down the middle of the floor was piled with offerings, mostly sterling silver. The stuff was tagged with gift cards so you could see who had contributed what.

But I've left out the most important thing—the private dick. He was still on guard duty with a half-smoked cigar to keep him company. He had some more company bulging in his armpit, but of course he didn't pull the gun. He recognized Kitty and said, "Hey, where you been? The family's been about crazy looking for you."

That didn't buy him any answer from Kitty though. "Jackson, this is Mr. McKane. I want you to tell him exactly what you saw today."

SURE. Step right over here to the window, Mr. McKane." The way he voiced my name, I knew he didn't intend to forget it for fifty years or so. He kept shooting hot, hard glances from under his bushy brows. His humped nose was practically sniffing at me in his curiosity.

"You couldn't see the wedding or the bushes from here," I remarked.

"That's true, Mr. McKane. All I could see was Jeff Danish scrambling past the house on his way to the hedge."

"Are you personally acquainted with Jeff?"

"I'd been warned about him."

"Who warned you?"

"Miss Blake herself showed me his picture and told me to be on the lookout for the guy," Detective Jackson said very quietly.

I turned to the girl. Hot color waved into her face.

"I thought Jeff might stoop to some practical joke," she said. "I didn't mean he would murder anyone!"

I swung back to Jackson.

"What did you do next?"

"Nothing. For all I knew, the shot was a trick to lure me off my job. Then Mr. Blake came running in here, asking me to take charge of the murder. I telephoned the local law and they picked up the Danish kid on their way out here." He shrugged. "By that time I already found the old 44-40. Mr. Hestling said the shot sounded like it came from the bushes so that's where I looked. It was a simple, routine investigation like most cases."

"Yes. Wasn't it too simple for Danish to leave his gun on the scene?"

"It wasn't any dumber than trying to pull off a daylight killing," the private dick argued around his cigar. "I figure the kid blew what little brains he had when he saw he'd shot Wheeler instead of Hestling."

"Jeff in innocent," Kitty said. "He didn't fire the shot at all."

"Come on," I said. "It's time you changed into some other clothes."

But I knew she'd tabbed me for Jackson. He knew I was on Jeff Danish's side. Strictly speaking, I wasn't. But his thinking so and passing it along to the local police wasn't going to make my work any easier.

"Mr. McKane, I can explain why I told Jackson to watch for Jeff."

"Later. I can always talk to you. What I want now are the explanations you can't give. I want to meet a few people before this dick spreads the word around."

Henry Gigham was the one I'd fixed on as the likeliest starter. Even a rich man's town like Northwall can't be all hilltop castles. There has to be a downtown shopping street, and a comparative slum where the lower classes live. I rounded a couple of corners, following a gas station attendant's directions, and fetched up on front of a sidestreet shop where a gray-thatched citizen was boarding up a broken window. By the time I'd asked and gotten out of the car, he'd tossed aside the hammer and was wielding a paintbrush. *Gigham & Danish*, the paint flowed on in foot high letters.

He stepped back, stared at his handiwork and said, "There! Let 'em try throwing stones through *that!*"

"You mean the popular feeling is running so high that the townsfolk have taken to tossing rocks?" I asked.

The gray haired man focused a squinting stare at me. His face was sharply angled, crowtracked, leathery.

"Who are you? Another reporter?"

"Take it easy, Mr. Gigham. I'm your idea. You sent Kitty Blake to see Socrates Bean, remember?"

The crowtracks changed directions and drew a smile across his face. "That's different. Come in, come in."

Drapes of war surplus canvas hung from ceiling to floor inside shutting off all but the front eight feet of the shop. Smells of banana oil and cloying chemicals seeped through the canvas. An electric motor was humming and a metronome noisily ticked behind the curtains. Henry Gigham snapped on a light bulb on account of the boarded up window.

"I can't believe Jeff is guilty," he began. "The boy is an excellent shot. It's difficult to see how he could aim at Ralph Hestling at a mere hundred foot range and miss his target so completely as to hit another man."

"Maybe he was aiming at Wheeler," I tested.

Gigham's brown eyes widened. "Oh, no, no. Wheeler was the most popular man in town. Everybody admired and trusted him. He always had charge of all the community chest drives. It's impossible to think a soul in Northwall could have harmed a hair of his head."

"Perhaps Hestling had enemies other than Jeff Danish."

"Perhaps. But I doubt it."

"Then," I said, "what in hell is your theory, if you think Jeff is innocent?"

Gigham dropped into a chair. "I'll tell you. I don't think the murderer cared *who* he hit. He fired at random. It was all the same whether the bullet struck Wheeler, Hestling, the girl, or the clergyman himself. Just so somebody was hurt and Jeff's gun was found there."

"What would that buy?" I asked.

"It would put Jeff Danish in jail, leaving me alone here. As I mentioned before, Jeff is an excellent shot. He's also brave to the point of foolhardiness. Therefore, the first step was to eliminate him."

"And the second step?"

"God knows, but I can tell you what the last one will be. These people are after my invention. It happens to be worth easily a million dollars."

I grinned. Those inventions—they're always worth a million bucks!

The gray haired inventor shrugged. "Very well, take a close look at my boarded up window."

I looked. Nobody had pitched a rock through the glass. A network of fracture lines cobwebbed from a cleanly drilled bullet hole.

THE SECOND hand on my wrist watch had time to make a complete sweep before I pulled my eyes back to Henry Gigham.

"Tell me about this invention."

"I can't. It isn't yet protected by patent."

"How do you know it's worth a million then? Nobody," I argued, "would offer that much dough, sight unseen."

He fed his thumbs into his vest armholes. "I'll put it this way. There happens to be a certain article in universal, daily use. I won't

name the article. But it is both difficult and expensive to produce. My invention will make it possible to put this product on the market for approximately one-hundredth of its present cost. It's as bound to make money as if you were feeding pennies into one end of a machine and taking out dollar bills at the other."

My lips formed a whistle.

"The trouble is," Henry Gigham said slowly, "I've tried to interest practically every wealthy man in Northwall in the project. Wheeler, Ralph Hestling, Kitty Blake's father, and fifty others at the wedding—I tried to persuade them all. It's possible I talked too freely, enabling one of those men to guess the right answer. Provided you knew something about the subject, a very short time behind that curtain," he nodded at the canvas drape, "would supply the necessary information."

I held up my hand. "Sh-h-h!"

A boarded up window doesn't keep out sound the way solid glass will. The footfalls came closer only they weren't so steady as they reached the window. There was a hesitating scuffle of leather and then the rattle of the door's hardware.

The man who pushed open the door was a fat, blond forty. A cane hooked over one forearm and his tailoring was snappy.

Henry Gigham leaped to his feet. "Why, hello, Mr. Hestling."

"Good afternoon, Henry. I wonder if I might have a word with you—er, alone?"

Gigham tipped me an ace-in-the-sleeve look. "Oh, I guess it could be arranged, if the salesman here won't mind dropping back later to pick up my order."

"Later it is. I want to contact a few other possible customers anyway."

I went away briskly, but not very far. All I did was swing the car around the next corner, then I ghosted back as softly as a man could without actually removing his shoes.

Pulling up at the freshly boarded window, I went through the motions of pausing to light a cigarette.

Henry Gigham's astonished tones sifted through the cracks between the boards. "You want to help Jeff? But you always hated his guts!"

"I'm a married man now," Ralph Hestling said. "I have to consider my wife's feelings. For Kitty's sake, I want to see the boy has a fair chance."

"You'll bail him out?"

"Murder isn't a bailable offense, Henry. However, I'm willing to advance money for Jeff's legal expenses. I can't do so openly, of course. It would have to be disguised as a business proposition."

"Name it."

"Let's put it this way," Ralph Hestling suggested. "I stand willing to buy up Jeff's

interest in your invention, worthless as it may be. You needn't mention my name. You can tell him merely you have a cash offer."

I resumed walking. Along the main drag knots of citizens were discussing the murder. From what I could pick up, they weren't in favor of it, but they weren't toting lynching ropes either. No threatening crowds surrounded the combination fire and police building at the foot of Main Street. A clean shaven desk sergeant sat brooding over a financial weekly.

"I'm sorry, but Danish isn't allowed any visitors." He was courteous about it, the way cops in an exclusive community often are.

I didn't give him any song and dance about the prisoner's Constitutional rights. I put it this way, "You wouldn't like to be held liable for any loss he sustains while you're holding him incommunicado?"

The sergeant blinked.

"For your information," I spied, "Danish possesses a substantial interest in a certain investment. Conditions have arisen which materially affect the market value of his equity. If you deprive him of access to the fact, he may incur a heavy financial reverse. In that case, Officer, he can sue you."

Frankly, I didn't know whether or not this was the law. I simply figured that the upper half of Northwall's population was worth its weight in blue-chip bonds. I assumed the local cops had a healthy respect for property rights.

Then, too, this sergeant wasn't just a cop—he was a cop who tried to play the stock market, as the Wall Street dope sheet on his desk indicated.

He grumbled, "Next thing, you brokers will be wanting us to install stock tickers in the cells." He came to his feet, though, keys in hand. "But, okay, I'll let you have five minutes with him."

JEFF DANISH had his coat pillowed on the cell cot, his necktie loosened from his muscular throat. He rested a black, crew-cut hair trim on the coat and stared bleakly at the ceiling.

"Kitty Blake sent me to see you," I gambit-ed as an opening move, after the sergeant had keyed the grated door behind me.

Jeff Danish's face looked hard enough to scratch a match on. "Her name's Kitty Hestling now, and she's nothing to me," he rapped.

"You thought enough of her to go to the wedding, didn't you?"

He didn't answer.

"What were you doing there, if you weren't gunning for Hestling?"

That didn't win me any brass ring, either.

"Why did you run when the shot was fired?"

I was wasting my time.

"Did you know Ralph Hestling is willing to buy your interest in Gigham's invention?" I threw out suddenly.

That fetched him. He heaved his head from the folded coat and swung his legs off the jail cot.

"Is that Kitty's idea, too?" he demanded.

"Suppose it is? What then?"

"Suppose, hell! I asked you a question!" he snapped.

"And I asked you a number of questions, Danish. If I answer yours, will you answer mine?"

"Okay."

I said, "Buying your share of the invention isn't Kitty's idea. Turning to Hestling for help isn't her method. Now, why did you go to her wedding?"

He said, "I was delivering a wedding present, in person."

"A lead bullet for the bridegroom, maybe?"

"No. The gun was in my room, so far as I knew."

"Tell me why you ran when you heard the shot."

"I ran before I heard the shot. I wanted to get away while everybody was still watching the ceremony."

"What became of the wedding present?"

He reached for the coat, shook it out across his knees, and fished a paper from the breast pocket. He pushed it into my fingers. "Here, read this."

The paper was a delicate cream-tinted stock, the inked scrawl apparently feminine. His fist crashed against my jaw as I started reading.

Sure, why not? I couldn't read the missive with one eye and watch him with the other.

My head floated away for a black 'bye-by ride for awhile.

Two cop faces bent over me as my eyes fluttered open. Siamese twin faces they were, growing out of one pair of shoulders. The two mouths worked in perfect unison. It wasn't Siamese language that came out. It was cop talk, pitched in the same key as a tiger's snarl.

"What happened?" I mumbled.

The two faces slowly fitted into one—the desk sergeant's. He howled, "You know what happened, you so and son of a so! You're in it just as much as he was!"

My stare groped around the cell. It failed to find any trace of Jeff Danish.

"He got away?"

"Sure, he got away! He hollered out you had a heart attack. I came in, like the good hearted fool I am, and he hung a slug under my ear." The cop rushed to the cell door and began rattling it and roaring at the top of his lung power.

My hand groped to my armpit. I had an empty holster there. The cop had an empty holster on his hip, too.

A fireman came running.

"There's extra keys on the top drawer," the sergeant yelled. "Get me out of here."

That's just what he meant. He planted a big hand against my chest as the door swung open. "You're staying!"

"Hell, Danish slugged me, too."

"Sure. He had to—had to make it look good."

The grated door clashed shut. I went over and sat down on Jeff Danish's cell cot—my cot now.

An oblong of cream-tinted paper on the floor caught my eye. In the hurry of leaving Jeff hadn't time to remember everything.

There was no date, no salutation, in fact no beginning. It had been a two or three page message, originally. This was the last page:

It's too late, anyway—I can't change my mind. Ralph must never know. Let it remain your secret and mine. Thank God, I can rely on your loyal silence. I'm more grateful to you that I can ever say. But now we must pretend none of it ever happened. Please believe that I shall always think of you as a dear friend and a noble gentleman. I only hope that some day I can repay some small part of your kindness.

Kitty Blake.

At first the thing didn't spell shucks to me. It read like the kind of brush-off a girl would give one man on the eve of marrying another.

But I had four mortal hours to brood over it before anything else happened. I began to find meanings in it. Murderous meanings.

CHAPTER THREE

Fifty Shares for the Shroud

AT HIS best, you'd never call Socrates Bean a handsome man. He was downright dismal-seeming as he sat there huddled in a Northwall police station chair, chin sunk into the upturned lapels of his coat.

He had company in his gloom. Ralph Hestling stood on one side of Kitty and on the other side was a paunchy, senior citizen with enough family resemblance to be Kitty's father.

The sergeant steered me into the room and said, "Well, McKane, Mr. Blake has talked me out of pressing charges. But I hope this will be a lesson to you." The sergeant was a grim, dour cop now. "Hereafter, don't try coming between the law and a murderer!"

Socrates Bean dropped a deadweight sigh into the proceedings. "It's really all my fault. As McKane's employer, I accept the entire responsibility."

"Oh, but it's *my* fault!" the red haired girl insisted. "I'm the one who got these men into it in the first place."

"What I'm saying goes for all of you," the sergeant rumbled. "In the future, just kindly keep your noses out of other people's crimes. I suggest you beat it, McKane, before I change my mind and throw the key away."

"Why should we want to stay?" Socrates Bean's features looked like a mask of poorly modeled putty. "Mr. McKane and I have no further interest in the affair. There is no longer a potentially innocent suspect for us to defend."

I asked, "You've settled on Jeff Danish's guilt, have you?"

Hestling coughed behind his hand. "Jeff settled that when he slugged you, didn't he? A jailbreaker on the lam with an arsenal of stolen weapons hardly adds up to a picture of martyred innocence."

The explosion let him get that far, and no farther. The next instant he'd landed slap against the wall, eyes bugging from his face. I swear the floor shook under our feet. True, that might have been because the sergeant shot straight up into the air and came down again hard.

Kitty gased, "What was *that*?"

Urrumphh-bah, it came again—a slower, reverberating explosion which set the windows rattling. An alarm bell began jangling in the fire station next door.

Nobody headed me off as I sprinted for the street. The others were still stupified. I've run for the nearest foxhole and a few times in recent years, otherwise I'd have been caught flat-footed, too.

Outside, the twilight was tracered with fiery sparks that came arcing from the back streets. That part of the sky had a brassy, molten color.

It looked like a direct hit on an ammo dump—on a small scale.

Kerrumphh-boom! This one busheled another flux of sparks into the sky that had hardly started sifting down before a fire truck's red snout bulled past me.

I made a leaping grab for the rear hand-rail and step and wedged myself into a foothold between two Northwall firemen. With their eyes straining towards the fireworks, they didn't notice a hitchhiker in the party.

We hit street corners the way a rollercoaster takes its dips.

The fire was in Gigham & Danish's shop—or rather, the fire was where the shop had formerly been. Already, the building was a flaming crater with ribbons of flame leaping from holes in the walls. Those chemicals burned in every color the dictionary names, and a few nameless ones to boot.

"Help! Help! Help!"

I jumped from the fire truck and ran across the street towards the outcries. The pavement was a Milky Way of glowing embers. When I stepped on one, I felt its heat through the sole of my shoe.

"Help! Help!"

A fright contorted face opened its mouth at me from a shattered upstairs window.

The building opposite Gigham & Danish's was one of those shops that have rooms to let upstairs, reached by a private side door. I punched open the door and followed the fire-light up a flight of steps too narrow for two men to climb abreast.

"Help!"

I threw open another door, off the upper hallway. The flames across the street illuminated the pitifully shabby interior almost as brightly as daylight. A man inside dropped his hands from the windowsill and began dragging himself toward me.

"I'm hurt *bad!*" he forced through his clenched teeth. "It got me across the back. I can't move my legs."

The explanation for the smashed window lay on the floor. A length of board stared up at me. The freshly painted letters hadn't found time enough to dry.

"Take it easy, old timer. I'll fetch a doctor for you."

HE WASN'T so old that he'd lost his grip, though. His clawing hand caught my leg and sank its talon-like fingers into the calf muscles. "This building's going to burn up, too! You've got to get me out of here!"

He couldn't move his legs. He had a spinal fracture, for all I knew. He might die in my arms from the kind of treatment he'd get going down those narrow stairs.

I bent down; I had to twist his thumb to wrench his fingers from my trouser leg.

"Relax, man! I'll bring help, that's a promise."

I spun out of the room, along the hallway to the stairs. The stairs were pitch dark. That shouldn't be, for I'd left the lower door wide open. Maybe one of the firemen had come along and closed it?

I struck a match, pushed it out in front of me. I damned near shoved it into Jeff Danish's face. For a shaved splinter of a second, our eyes smashed stares through the match-flame.

He was standing, probably, on the third step from the top. Pillars and cords of muscle seemed to draw seams in his face. I'll bet my own expression wouldn't have won any beauty prizes, either.

All that was one split second before I jumped him. He had the guns, I had no trouble remembering. I simply figured that on the stairs like this he wouldn't pull one.

Two men couldn't have walked up these steps abreast. How the two of us ever went down them is a mystery. But go down them we did, in a ball of kicking feet and pounding fists. Sometimes it was my knees that bumped on the treads, sometimes it was my head. And part of the time *he* was underdog as we rolled over and over.

We were still swapping blows and kicks when we landed in the lower hallway. I'm not sure whether it was a fist or a foot or a knee that ended the scrap. Maybe it wasn't any of them. He cracked his head on the wall during the struggle, as likely as not.

He lay still, anyway.

I tottered to the door and wrenched it open. The street outside was billowing smoke and steam, from the conflagration. Under the water hose, the shop's front wall had gone down and the heat and stench was worse than if somebody had dumped a ton truckload of garbage into a blast furnace. The breath I caught of it made my knees buckle.

I didn't quite pass out but it was that bad. I had sense enough to swing and suck a gulpful of cooler air in the hallway.

Eerily, the fire glow played in on Jeff Danish who was on his hands and knees, shaking his head vigorously. Both his hip pockets bulged. The desk sergeant's stag-stocked gun loomed the biggest, so I grabbed it.

"On your feet!" I ordered—if a choked-up sob can be called an order.

Jeff wasn't any worse off than I. He could stand on his feet. But he wasn't in any better shape, either. We faced each other groggily like two barroom brawlers much, much too drunk to fight.

I bawled at him, "Who set that fire? You?"

"No, but I know who did."

"Who?"

My knees buckled again before I caught an answer. The words barely grazed my ear when they came.

"Nitrogen dioxide," Jeff Danish said.

"Who?"

"The fumes!" he stormed. "We're dead ducks if we don't get out of here fast!"

I needed a helping boost to steer through the doorway. I don't know whether I got it or whether he simply shoved me along in his hurry. But by the time we rounded the corner of the building, I was definitely behind him.

That could have been just as well. Ahead of me, he couldn't realize that the cop's big gun was a useless lump of iron dangling beside my knee.

Sheer instinct, the mere groping away from the holocaust, just turning our backs on the stifling smoke and fog, pushed us back into a vacant lot.

Fallen sparks had started fires licking at the dry grass there. Jeff Danish picked his way through it. I was just dogging along at his heels, trying not to lose his striding figure.

We didn't reach a fresh air zone until we'd crossed the lot and found a paved alley underfoot. Right then the memory hit me—that poor, crippled devil I'd left upstairs. It wouldn't take the flames in the vacant lot long to engulf the building.

"Danish," I blurted, "we've got to go back."

A lifetime won't erase the remembrance of his face as he spun to confront me. He couldn't have known before how nearly I was out on my feet. I'd possessed the strength to beat him up, so naturally he'd thought of me as the better man.

I saw astonishment fill his features. Following that came an ugly glare of comprehension. His hand must already have jumped to his hip pocket. The gun—my own gun—didn't leap there of its own accord.

How far apart were we? I'm not sure, but there couldn't have been more than a yard or so between us. I seem to have had the incredible notion I could club him down with the cop's big, stag-stocked gat.

The other gun was coming up into my face.

And that's all, absolutely all. To this day I don't remember any gun-flash business, any report of a shot. It was one of those silent movie fadeouts on my part.

THEY HAD a nice hospital in Northwall.

They even had a pretty nurse to go with it.

"You won't let yourself get excited, will you?" she pleaded. "Delehanty has to talk to you a minute."

I knew no one named Delehanty, not in this life I didn't. But it turned out I did too know him. Delehanty was the desk sergeant, brass buttons, badge, and all.

"How's the kid this morning?" he greeted.

"I didn't even know it *was* morning."

He shrugged. "You could be worse off. The knock on the coco wasn't much. It's really the smoke poisoning that kayoed you, and a nice few days rest will cure that."

He sat down next to the hospital bed, metal pencil in hand, notebook open and braced on his knee. "Just tell me about it in a few brief words, see?"

It seemed to me he ought to be doing the telling. He was the one who was up and around and finding out things.

"Have you caught Danish yet?" I asked.

Delehanty's face muscles indulged in a little fidgetting. "I might as well come right out with it, McKane. Danish is dead."

You know the nurse needn't have told me not to get excited. During the night they'd

hypo'ed me too full of shut-eye. I burned with excitement like a wet log.

"How'd it happen?" I wondered dully.

"You killed him, McKane. Don't you remember?"

I wasn't just a wet log, I was waterlogged. I lay there and blinked peacefully at Sergeant Delehanty.

"Evidently you ran into the guy at the fire and tried to put him under citizen's arrest," he tried to refresh my memory. "Doesn't it come back to you now? You had a fist fight. He skinned his knuckles on your face. Right?"

"It sort of does come back to me. . ."

"Yeah. You got him down, and you got my gun away from him. But then he pulled the other gun, yours. It was self-defense. You had to let him have it. You were lucky and managed to squeeze off the first shot. I figured that as soon as I saw the two of you guys sprawled there in the alley, each with a gun in his mitt."

"My gun had been fired?"

"One empty under the hammer," Delehanty nodded.

"It's funny, but my mind's a complete blank."

"Yeah? I guess you probably need some more sleep." He tiptoed away.

Believe it or not, I fell asleep almost immediately. I had no dreams, either.

The material for bad dreams flashed into my mind when I opened my eyes, and saw the sunlight beaming in the partly open window.

Window!

I reared up and grabbed the buzzer device dangling on a cord at the head of my bed.

Quite a while must have slipped by while I slept because the pretty nurse had gone off duty and it was a middle aged, motherly one who popped into the room this time.

"Gracious, you shouldn't be sitting up!" she gasped.

"The old timer! Did they save him?"

Her hands made soothing motions at me. "Now, don't you worry a bit. You lie back and don't say a word while I take your pulse."

"There was an old man across the street from the fire. Did they get him out?"

"You mean Mr. Sheldon. He's in the room right across the hall." Her matronly face clouded. "In't it queer the way accidents happen? Blowing that board completely across the street and through his window—you'd almost think Fate had a hand in it. You don't know how lucky you are, compared to him."

"He's bad?"

"Permanently crippled from the waist down, the symptoms indicate. And he's just a workman, a gardener. How will he ever make a living if he can't walk? He's a newcomer in town, too. He hasn't any family or friends to help."

I lay back against the pillow and had thoughts. What a hell of a case it was! Donald Wheeler dead, Jeff Danish dead, and this poor outsider washed up for the rest of his life. And who'd gained anything from it all?

I remembered something—Jeff Danish blurting out he knew who set that fire! It was arson then. And arson is usually for cash.

"Gigham!" my voice popped out.

"What's that?" the nurse asked.

"Henry Gigham must be legally liable for storing explosive chemicals in the middle of town. Sheldon can sue him."

THINGS were tailoring up in my mind. Not all of the things, but important parts. That bullet hole through his window—Gigham could easily have put it there himself. Say he planned to burn the place down, he'd want to create the impression somebody had it in for him. Say he planned to collect the insurance, he'd first want Jeff Danish out of the way so he could keep it all.

"I'll bet," I said, "Gigham carried plenty of fire insurance."

"He didn't. Not one thin dime," the nurse denied.

"How do you know?"

"The whole town's talking about it. Gracious, you don't suppose we have two killings and an explosion every day do you?"

That licked me. That left me right where I'd started. There was no insurance, no money motive, no motive of any kind that I could see or imagine.

Presently a different idea stirred in my head. This time I didn't ring for the nurse. I slipped out of bed. After a reeling second or so, my head cleared. I realized that it wasn't decent to go parading around in a short length of hospital bed-shirt. I groped across the floor to a closet door.

They'd hung my clothes there, neatly. I pulled on the trousers, bracing myself against the wall in order to stand on one foot at a time.

The hallway stretched deserted and I opened the door opposite mine.

"Sheldon, I've got good news for you."

He turned a beard stubbled face on his pillow. Poor, old chap—I genuinely pitied him.

"Listen, Sheldon. I'm employed by a millionaire named Socrates Bean. He isn't merely a rich man, but he's a philanthropist into the bargain. I know he'll be willing to guarantee your medical expenses."

Sure, I could talk Socrates into it. A guy who'd feed baby robins with a medicine dropper couldn't pass up a fellow human in Sheldon's plight.

The old timer's lips writhed apart. He ground his words through his stumpy, stained teeth. "I don't want nobody's damned charity!

I know my rights, and I'm going to git 'em!"

The malice in his manner set me back on my heels. But then why should he be in a grateful mood after what he'd been through and what he still had to face? Who wouldn't have a chip on his shoulder under the circumstances?

I tried the patient, soothing approach. "It wouldn't have to be charity, Sheldon. Bean owns a large home in the city. The grounds have been neglected two years. I'll do my darndest to make him realize he needs a good gardener on the place. Even if you weren't able to get around much, you could supervise the workmen on a landscape gardeny job."

All I got from the old fellow was a glare. "You ain't fooling me a bit, sonny. You're working for Hestling 'n Blake 'n all that crowd, ain't you?"

"Ralph Hestling? And Kitty Blake's father?"

Sheldon nodded.

"What possible interest have they in your trouble?" I stared.

"That's easy. Donald Wheeler was a cousin to the Blakes. These rich families around town are all more or less intermarried like a pack of royalty. Hestling getting married to the Blake girl gives him a stake in the deal, too."

Wheeler! The murder victim whose death started this thing. My voice pounded the roof of my mouth. "What deal are you talking about, Sheldon?"

I shouldn't have used that tone. He clammed up, sour faced. "I'm just saying I know my rights, and I'm going to git 'em, that's all."

Across the hall, in my own bed, I pulled the sheets to my chin and rang for the nurse again.

"I've got to see Kitty Blake. Phone for her to come here right away."

The motherly nurse explained, "You can't have callers except during visiting hours. Besides, I'd have to ask your doctor."

"Okay, ask him."

"He's out on a case just now."

I said, "Okay, okay, I'll wait."

Of course, I didn't. The minute she left the room, I was back in the clothes closet pulling on a coat over the cotton flannel bed-shirt and tucking my bare feet into oxfords.

I got out the back way along the ambulance driveway.

You always find a cab stand near a hospital. I pitched into a hack and told the driver, "Goldenacres."

Fumbling for a cigarette, my fingers closed onto the oblong of cream-tinted paper. Five minutes later I was waving it under Kitty's eyes.

"Where on earth did you get that?" she gulped.

"From Jeff Danish."

"Jeff!"

"That's right," I said, "but you didn't send it to him, did you?"

She hesitated. I went on, "I know you didn't. It's a trifle too formal, and a hell of a lot too grateful. It's the kind of a note a woman would send to a man she owed a lot, not to a guy she was refusing to marry."

The bride blushed. "I wrote it to Donald Wheeler, if you must know."

I had that feeling you get when you pull the handle of a slot machine and the bars begin to fall in line.

"What was the big favor he'd done?"

The girl moistened her lips. "Donald Wheeler was everybody's friend, the man everyone turned to for help. I hated to see Jeff throw away his money on Gigham's crazy invention. Donald agreed to buy fifty shares of stock in the scheme. As a shareholder, you see, he would be legally entitled to examine the books. If the thing proved a fraud, he was going to compell Gigham to return Jeff's money."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

She shook her head. "Because Jeff, the stubborn fool, refused to be helped. Worse than that, he leaped to the conclusion Donald Wheeler was trying to squeeze him out and reap all the profits himself."

"It was a motive why Jeff might have taken a shot at Wheeler, eh?" I brooded. "Well, let's take one more look at the gardedn."

The chairs and the caterer's table had been whisked away. I sighted from the fountain past the spot where Detective Jackson claimed to have found Jeff's revolver.

"Who owns the big place across these? The one with the tile roofed garage?"

"Nolanders, but the place is vacant—for sale."

"I'll buy it," I grinned. If the cops had run their chalkline another two hundred yards, they'd have fetched up at the tile roofed Nolander garage.

CHAPTER FOUR

Homicide at Par

I HAD no trouble finding Henry Gigham. Stick in hand, he was morosely poking onto the still smoking ruins of last night's fire.

He told an entirely different story.

"The girl's lying, or else Donald Wheeler lied to her. It wasn't fifty shares he bought, it was five thousand. I can show you the application in my box at the First National Bank."

"At how much a share?" I asked.

"The par value is ten dollars."

I blew out breath in a whistle. "Fifty thousand bucks!"

"Sure, but I haven't got the money. Wheeler gave me a check for five hundred to seal the bargain. He was to pay forty-five hundred more when the stock was delivered, then thirty per cent more when I got my patent, and the balance as soon as we started producing the article commercially. This fire simply set me back four or five years."

"You forgot to mention yesterday that Wheeler owned a piece of your idea," I mentioned.

"You're not the police, McKane. Anyway, yesterday I was still trying to protect Jeff Danish. He was sore because he thought I was letting Wheeler's crowd buy a controlling interest. He thought they'd squeeze him out."

"How could they?"

"McKane, there are dozens of ways. One thing they might do if they had control would be to levy a stock assessment. Since the kid couldn't have raised another dime, he'd have been forced to sell his interest. For that matter, Ralph Hestling was trying to buy him out yesterday."

He stirred up ashes with his stick, irritably. "There's also this angle to consider. My invention wouldn't leave any room for competitors. A lot of companies that are making money now will go bankrupt when I perfect my process. Maybe fellows like Hestling and old man Blake have a lot of money invested in those other companies. Perhaps they don't want me to succeed."

"Perhaps, maybe, but how the hell can I consider any such angle? You haven't even yet hinted what the big idea is all about."

Gigham lowered his voice. "I'll let you in on the secret, McKane. I'm working on an everlasting match. You can scratch it, blow it out, scratch it again—it's good for a lifetime of use. Now, don't you agree it's worth a million?"

"It ought to be—especially when you get around to inventing an everlasting cigarette to go with your lifetime match."

Color surged into his furrowed features. "I don't think that's a damn bit funny!"

"Well," I said, "I'll have to hand your idea this much. It sure as hell set off a honey of a bonfire last night."

The heat had cracked windows across the street. The shop downstairs was vacant, so nobody had yet bothered to start repairs. I climbed the narrow stairs to Sheldon's room.

He had a three room, cold water flat, I saw by daylight. I checked through the rooms and I found a couple of items of interest.

A Winchester carbine, model 92, leaned among the brooms and mops in the kitchen pantry.

The second item was a pair of work shoes with pockmarked soles.

I leaned my head from the front window

and shouted to Henry Gigham across the street, "Call the police!"

He came trotting over. "Why, what's the matter?"

"I said call the cops."

He hurried upstairs. "What is it? What's wrong?"

So I showed him the shoes. "Savvy what this means?"

Gigham shook his head.

"That's what you get walking on red hot chemicals," I said. I kicked off my own oxford and showed him.

"That's the theory I've got for the police," I said. "The old gent, Sheldon, was last night's arsonist. He set that fire, and Jeff Danish either saw him entering the building or leaving it just before the explosion."

"Sheldon!" Gigham shook his head stupidly. "But I hardly know the man. Why would he do a thing like that to me?"

"Maybe he's a pyromaniac, a fire-bug."

"I can't believe it. He always struck me as perfectly normal."

"Yeah, but as you say, you hardly knew him."

Gigham fell silent, nibbling his underlip.

I said, "Anyway, Danish suspected him. He was on the stairs when I met him. Those stairs don't lead to anywhere else than Sheldon's flat."

"He might have been following *you*," Henry Gigham argued.

"No. After the fight, Jeff told me he knew who started the fire. The simple answer is that Sheldon overheard the fight, and heard that remark, too. He followed us."

"Dragging himself on his hands?"

"Nope. Walking on his two feet and these shoes, and stepping on some of those sparks outside."

GIGHAM washed his lips with his tongue. "I'd like to believe it, but I can't. The hospital took X-rays. There's no doubt Sheldon's spine is so injured that he can't walk."

"He probably has an old spine injury, but I'm sure it's an old one and it doesn't keep him from hobbling around nicely. When Jeff Danish turned around in the alley last night," I said, "I'm convinced he saw Sheldon in the alley behind me. Sheldon was toting a gun, and that's why Jeff whipped out his gun. He saw Sheldon taking aim, and that's why he struck at me—to knock me out of the way."

"But *why*?"

"Maybe you can guess when you see his gun."

Henry Gigham stared at the carbine.

"This is going to take us back a while," I said. "It all began in the black powder days, when ammunition wasn't too plentiful on the frontier. A lot of the old timers wanted a car-

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tridge they could load into either their personal, hip artillery or their rifles. A number of cartridges were developed for identically that purpose, such as the .32-20, .38-40, and .44-40. They are rifle loads, modified sufficiently so they can be used in handguns, and are so used today.

"Used yesterday," I wound up, "because I don't think the .44-40 which killed Wheeler was fired by Jeff Danish, or fired from his revolver. I think Sheldon took a rifle shot from the roof of the Nolander garage."

Fresh crowtracks printed into Gigham's face. "It's incredible. Why, people heard the shot right there in the bushes."

"I don't give a damn about people, Mr. Gigham. I happen to know gun experts won't go the stand and swear to testimony like that. Too much depends on the wind, the moisture in the air, echoes, right on down to how old the cartridge happens to be. And those guests were watching a wedding. The shot was fired and over before they really heard it."

"But it still comes back to the same old question. Why would Sheldon kill Donald Wheeler?"

"Five thousand reasons," I said, "Par value, fifty thousand bucks."

He stared. "Sheldon won't inherit Wheeler's estate."

"I'm speaking of fifty thousand bucks liability, Gigham."

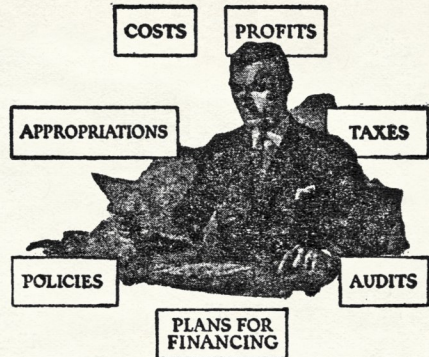
His eyes faltered. For the first time.

"As a promoter of these things," I said, "you ought to know the law. Unlike a partnership, corporate liability is limited. But it still exists. Let's say you go around the country organizing companies to back your inventions. Let's say people buy shares in your schemes, even on a percentage basis and part payment plan. They're still liable up to the par value of their holdings. If an accident happens to one of your employees, or even to a passer-by, your company can be sued. And if the company hasn't the money, the individual shareholders like Jeff Danish and Donald Wheeler have to take the rap."

"I never heard of such a thing." His eyeballs rolled with the words.

"Oh, hell, Gigham. You and Sheldon are in cahoots. You've probably pulled this stunt half a dozen times. Just organize a company and then stage a fire or an explosion so Sheldon can sue the stockholders. If you settled out of court for a measly twenty grand a throw, you'd soon stack up more money than you could possibly make with your everlasting matches.

"The thing is," I said, "Wheeler was digging into your record, and your record couldn't



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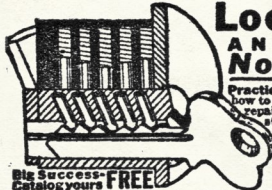
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DALE CLARK

stand it. That's why Sheldon killed him. Now, let's take a walk."

He blustered. "You think the police will believe this?"

"The walk I mean is to the bank."

"The bank!"

I said, "Yeah. I think Wheeler subscribed for fifty shares and paid you five hundred bucks in full. Once he was dead I think you raised his application to five thousand, exactly like raising a check, to slap a fifty thousand dollar liability onto his estate. That's why Sheldon is lying snug in the hospital sneering at Socrates Bean's charity."

"You can't prove it."

I'm willing to let science decide whether that stock purchase paper was monkeyed with."

He wasn't. He plunged at my throat. He hadn't swallowed a slug of smoke fumes last night, and been shot full of pain-killer since.

I went down. He got a bony knee in my belly, and both hands onto the carbine.

The hell he didn't know about guns. He jacked the lever action like lightning to make sure he had a nice fresh .44-40 under the hammer.

Just to make sure, he took a step back so my hands, waving in front of me, couldn't reach the carbine's barrel.

I was looking right up the hole in the gun.

But then, he screamed—horribly.

Do you remember that board he'd spiked over his window, and Sheldon had torn off and brought up here, as if an explosion had blown it into the room?

The board was what he'd forgotten.

He'd stepped back and planted his foot down on a spike sticking through the board.

THEY HAD to take him to the hospital.

Sergeant Delehanty was kept busy there. He'd go into Sheldon's room and say what Gigham had confessed, and then run back and tell Gigham what Sheldon added to that, and finally it came out they were half brothers.

"I wonder," Socrates Bean kept saying while this was going on.

I told him, "Yeah, you're wondering what the wedding present was Jeff Danish intended to give Kitty. I imagine it was the letter he had in his pocket, the one she wrote to Wheeler. I don't know how he got it, but I guess he was a good enough guy to give it back to her."

"I wasn't thinking anything of the kind," Socrates Bean denied. "I'm wondering how old does a robin have to be before you can throw away the medicine dropper and start feeding it bird seed?"

THE END

The Waxwork Wake

By

JHAN ROBBINS

SPRINGHEEL JACK, the famous highwayman, sat easily on a red plush chair and stared genially at the passing throng. His eyes were an innocent blue, his cheeks faintly pink and, for all the fact that he had died on the gallows a few years before, he looked to be in remarkably good health.

Herman Hubble gazed at the robber and then he looked down at his small nephew, Archie. The boy was fishmouthed with terror and admiration before the images of Springheel Jack and the other famous criminals in the Chamber of Horrors.

"They're made of wax," the uncle explained.

"Naw, can't be," the boy said in disbelief and leaned across the velvet rope to poke experimentally at the figure's crossed knee.

"Ere, none o' that!" a voice reprimanded sharply. "These waxworks are fine art, they are, and them as damages 'em will have to pay!" and a stately guard in the employ of Madame Tussaud siezed young Archie by his jacket tail and jerked him backwards. Dressed in a gilt and green uniform, looking almost like an exhibit himself, the guard was impressive as he shook a stern finger under Archie's nose. "Now, get along with you!" he said. Turning to the uncle, he added, "You, too!"

Herman Hubble, who was not a man to spend lightly the sixpence admittance for himself and his nephew felt somewhat indignant at being thrown out. Madame Tussaud's new exhibit of criminals was the talk of all London and he had hardly been able to give a look around.

"Just you wait," he mumbled to himself, "I'll have one o' them galleries myself, and I'll be the one standin' at the door collectin' the sixpences and I won't let in nary a person from this place, beg as they may!" With this threat, he took his grubby little relative by the hand and dragged him home through the dirty winter streets.

The iron cold sea wind raced ahead of them. February of 1894 was a month that old London still remembers, when the city was bristling with icicles and the cobbled walks were coated thick with frost. Archie, blue with the chill, began to wail and his uncle cuffed him sharply, growling, "Quiet, now! I'm thinkin' business!"

His sister scolded shrilly when next evening Herman brought home a large lump of wax. He had got it cheap from the candlemaker and while it was not in the cleanest condition he

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JHAN ROBBINS

felt it would do for a start. When he announced his plan to open a rival wax museum that would put Madame Tussaud out of business, his outraged sister stalked from the room, slamming the parlor door heavily behind her. Herman took the lump of wax with him up to a storeroom under the eaves which he thereafter referred to as his studio.

But sculptors are born, not made, Herman discovered shortly, for the talent was just not in his fingers. His attempt to model Spring-heel Jack ended in the creation of a kind of waxen snowman, with one large sphere for a belly and a smaller ball for a head.

He realized that what he had done was not good. Not good enough, he amended hastily, for anyone to pay sixpence to view it. The trouble was, it didn't really look like anyone. Annoyed and discouraged, he built a fire and melted the wax down into a pot. "What I need," he thought, as he moodily stirred the bubbling mass, "is a model! Someone to sit for me. That's what all artists have."

Allowing the wax to cool, he put on his jacket and slipped down the back steps and around the corner to the neighborhood pub. With the true spirit of an artist, he was going to the people for his inspiration.

BESSY O'DAY was the first representative of the people that met his eye. Miss O'Day, weighing in at a jovial 200 pounds, was employed by Nicholas the barkeep because her blooming good health and cheerful nature were a good advertisement for business, generally considered to be something less than salubrious. The sight of Bessy, head buried in a pint of ale, making gurgling noises of enjoyment, was a usual signal for the whole pub to draw another round. For this service, Nicholas allowed her to drink her fill.

It was the end of a long, hard day for Bessy when Herman met her and when he announced that he was seeking a model for his wax sculpture, it did not take much imagination for her to confide that once she had been the toast of the artists of Paris. Gladly, she accepted an offer to pose and accompanied him back to his attic storeroom where the wax had cooled to the pliable consistency of clay.

Once perched on a stool, however, the warmth of the fire and her weariness overcame her, and Herman looked up in annoyance from stirring the wax with a paddle when loud snores announced that the former toast of Paris was dead to the world.

Angrily, he peered down at her relaxed face. He had already paid her off by buying her two mugs of ale, and now he was being cheated, clearly. In sleep, the red flush had drained from her round face and her skin was almost

THE WAXWORK WAKE

waxen itself. If she would only remain quiet, thought Herman, still irritably, she could easily pass for a wax image.

Bessy did remain quiet. Her snores stopped and her head dropped forward and her skin became more waxen than ever. Hubble shook her by the shoulder and she tumbled unresisting from the chair. Overloaded with ale, Bessy O'Day was dead.

"Eh, you can't do that here!" Hubble cried in alarm and shook her again. Her lips relaxed into a pleasant smile as he knocked her head back. It was no use.

"Opportunity wasn't just knockin'," he explained later, "it seemed to be kicking the door down."

As though inspired by his chance, he ran over to the pot of wax, ladled out a portion on the paddle and carried it over to where Bessy lay. He hesitated only a moment, then he stopped and swiftly he coated her dead face and hands with the wax. Then he sat her upright in the chair, arranged her clothing neatly and straightened her lank hair.

While the wax hardened, he painted a sign, stating clearly so no one could make any mistake, "Wax image of Bessy O'Day, modeled by herself."

When the wax had dried, he used the rude paints on Bessy, reddening her full lips, and fat cheeks. When he had finished, Bessy looked startlingly lifelike, with the same graven resemblance to reality that the figures at Madame Tussaud's achieved. Hugely pleased with himself, Herman stretched and yawned and went downstairs to eat the hearty dinner which his sister had dutifully left steaming in the kitchen.

From accident to murder was a small step. In the freezing garret, Bessy kept well. But she needed company, Herman thought. He could hardly open an exhibition with just one exhibit.

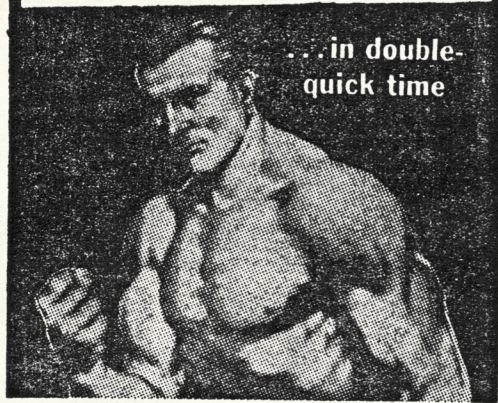
"I'M AN artist now," he informed his skeptical sister. "I'm going to charge sixpence a view, just like Tussauds. I've just finished a model of Bessy O'Day, you know, 'round at the pub."

"Humph," sneered his sister.

"Wouldn't you like to come up and see it?"

Still sneering, she followed him up the stairs. His sister made an attractive 'model', as he persisted in calling his victims. A sweeping feathered hat hid the ugly hole he crushed into her head and the wax, which he spread on more evenly and expertly this time, was highly effective. He descended into the kitchen to fetch his young nephew's paint box in order to do a creditable job in retouching his latest creation.

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JHAN ROBBINS

"Where's mama?" whined the nephew, whom he had never liked very well anyway.

"She's gone out," he told him, sprinkling a little rat poison in the child's cup of tea. His sister and her son made a charming family group in the attic and they were much better tempered and more pleasant than they ever had been in life. In fact, with her sharp tongue stilled and a streak rose across her cheeks, his sister looked so lovely that he almost wished he could speak to her.

The incredible crimes aroused no alarm. Evidently Bessy was not missed by anyone sufficiently to cause an investigation. His sister's husband, who is not mentioned in the case records at all, had probably deserted his wife and son many years before. At any rate, no one posed Herman any questions that he could not answer.

Herman himself was in high spirits. "I'm opening an art show next week," he informed the neighborhood impressively, "just like Madame Tussaud's." Cleverly, he played on their curiosity. He intimated that he had an attic full of wax sculptures representing prominent local figures, and each person he spoke to was quite sure he meant him. Thus, a goodly number of men and women made up their minds to attend Herman's opening, even when warned of the sixpence admission price.

But something happened on the day before his grisly premiere. The weather changed. A warm wind blew in from the quixotic Gulf Stream and all at once icicles began to drip, then melt in fast running streams.

The temperature in the attic gallery rose perceptibly and though the wax masks remained solid, a faint but distinctly nauseating odor began to rise from the three bodies.

Success, however, smelled so sweet to Herman that he hardly noticed the other. He stood happily in his front doorway collecting sixpences. A sizeable crowd had turned out. He kept a sharp eye out for any representatives of Madame Tussaud's. He very much wanted to have the pleasure of turning them away, but no identifiable scout appeared.

Late in the afternoon, the stench in the attic became overpowering. "You ought to clean out the gutters on your roof," a customer complained. "They smell like something died up here."

"What did you think of the figures?" Herman asked eagerly, ignoring the advice.

"Oh, fine," said the critic. "Very lifelike indeed. Clever of you to think of modeling your sister, although I don't think you quite caught the likeness."

Word spread of Herman Hubble's talents, for the next morning a sizeable crowd swarmed at the door. In the vanguard were Nicholas

THE WAXWORK WAKE

the barkeep, Bessy O'Day's former employer, and his bosom companion, a dome-hatted London bobby.

The air was sour and overpowering. Clutching their noses, the morning customers toured the gallery quickly and hurried down the steps into the open. Nicholas, however, was more inquisitive. He recognized an old friend.

"Gorblimey, it's Bessy!" he cried. He wrinkled his nose. "Lorlumme, Bessy, ye always smell bad enough in truth."

As though in protest to this insult, the dead body of Bessy O'Day, now thoroughly thawed, suddenly toppled off the chair and fell stiffly at the barkeep's feet.

Nicholas jumped back, but not fast enough. The heavy body bowled him over and the two rolled on the floor. Herman rushed to his object d'art, the policeman to the aid of his friend. But the barkeep sprang easily to his feet and he and the bobby each seized one of Bessy's arms and attempted to heave her to her feet.

"Heavy!" puffed Nicholas.

"And smashed, too," added the bobby regretfully, "her bloomin' face is all—Hey!"

HERMAN HUBBLE made no attempt to escape the horrified bobby who had stumbled upon one of the wierdest crimes of that decade. In court, however, he continued to insist that it was art, not murder. That he should, have been adjudged criminally insane is obvious, but the stern English courts of that period had little patience with such pleas.

The mad sculptor was hanged summarily in March, 1894, but the artistic recognition he had craved in life was not denied him. The following fall, when the Tussauds opened a newer and bigger Chamber of Horrors in their renowned wax museum, 2000 Londoners each day payed sixpence admission to gaze upon the statue of the hideous Herman Hubble.



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THORNE LEE

(Continued from page 32)

around him, towards the tight funnel of the gorge.

"The waterfall!" I gasped. "Paul . . . the waterfall!"

We ran in single file, skirting the waterfall and fighting the waist-high undergrowth to the pool below the rapids. We found Sturdevant jammed headfirst between two boulders with the river churning over him. We got him out . . . but not the life of him.

On the other hand, maybe we did get the life of him. We got his paintings, the floating chips of redwood, every one of them. The varnish was miraculously resistant to the flood. In a few cases the water had altered Sturdevant's reproduction of the forest scene, but the effect was strangely similar to the liquid forms of the painter himself. That day, for the first time, I got the full, startling effect of the man's art—his turbulent, tormented conception of the living and the dying. I must take these home, I thought, study them. . .

PAUL FOLEY went home by himself that night. He had a tight, unyielding look in his eyes. "You thought I would murder you for your wife," he seemed to say. "You'll never make that up to me, understand, Harlan Metcalf!"

When Paul had gone, Eunice and I sat stiffly by the campfire, not looking at each other. My tongue kept working at a question. I wanted to know about the two of them, how they got together last night, but I couldn't find the words to fit.

"Eunice sprained her ankle. I heard her calling," Paul had explained. My eyes traced down her booted legs to find some sign of a sprained ankle. With a terrific effort I killed the impulse, yanked my head away, and shifted to the rigid whiteness of her face.

Eunice was staring at her lap, lips trembling, "It was you, Harlan!" she pleaded. "I was trying to save you, not Paul, when I hit you with that frying pan! You would have smashed his face. You'd never live down a vicious thing like that. I couldn't let you trample an innocent man. You see, Harlan, I knew Paul could not possibly have done the thing you said he did. I knew he had no opportunity last night to arrange that horrible death trap. I knew he was innocent . . . of murder! He had to be."

I tossed a scrap of wood on the fire, and watched the flames leap up to caress it. My mind produced the final question and rejected it. No more questions.

I didn't ask her how she knew.

COPPERHEAD

(Continued from page 75)

snapped. "Look!" He snatched up the head of the copperhead and held it aloft.

"Don't—you utter fool!" the Professor cried.

And the snake struck as though it were still alive.

It struck with blinding quickness, and the fangs slid out and sank their length into Dane Vernon's wrist. They sank, and muscles contracted and venom squirted in thin streams directly into the wrist vein in Vernon's arm. Then the snake hung flaccidly, limpetlike, completely dead.

Dane Vernon felt the horror congeal like ice about his heart. He twisted the snake's head free and flung it across the room and saw the rubbery dots of blood standing stark and terrible on his skin.

"Anti-venom—copperhead!" the Professor barked to his servant. "Fast, man, for God's sake!" And then, as the man turned to race to the laboratory, the Professor's voice said a few more words. "Not the big jars," he finished, "those are milk cultures for feeding. The small jars on the lower shelf."

Dane Vernon gasped, feeling the first blind terror of the words sinking into his mind. He felt the stirring of Tom Riverton at his side, and he knew then how very badly he had planned.

"Accident!" he heard the Professor say. "I thought I warned you. Snakes strike by reflex for minutes after death. But hang on, help's coming—"

Dane Vernon heard no more. He was screaming then, as hell raced directly through a vein toward his heart. He saw the dead eyes of the snake watching from across the room, and then his hand lashed out for the machete in a last effort to slay Riverton.

And then, like the copperhead, his last reflex gone, he lay and knew no more.

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