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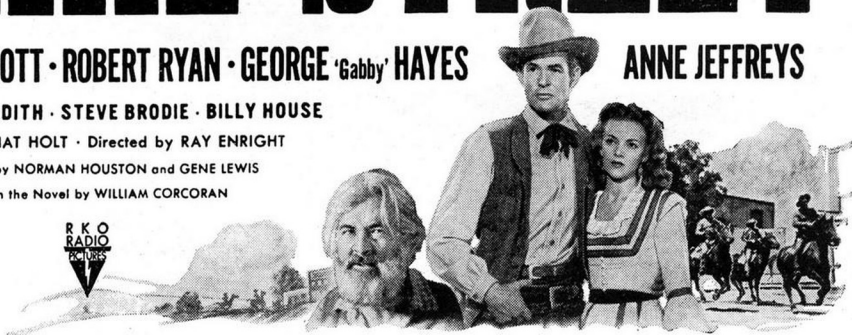
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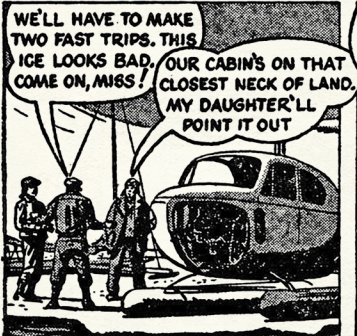
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WE'LL HAVE TO MAKE TWO FAST TRIPS. THIS ICE LOOKS BAD. COME ON, MRS!

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MY FOLKS WORRY IF I'M LATE. MAY I USE YOUR PHONE?

2 HOURS LATER



TELL THEM YOU'LL STAY ALL NIGHT, IT'S ALMOST DARK AND WE'VE NEVER HAD A MORE WELCOME GUEST

••NOR ONE WITH MORE WHISKERS



...AND HERE'S A RAZOR

THANKS. I NEED IT



WHAT A FAST, SLICK SHAVE! THIS BLADE IS PLENTY KEEN!

I THOUGHT YOU'D LIKE THAT THIN GILLETTE. I NEVER USE ANYTHING ELSE



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WHY, DAD! THAT'S THE ANSWER TO YOUR INTER-PLANT TRAFFIC PROBLEM!

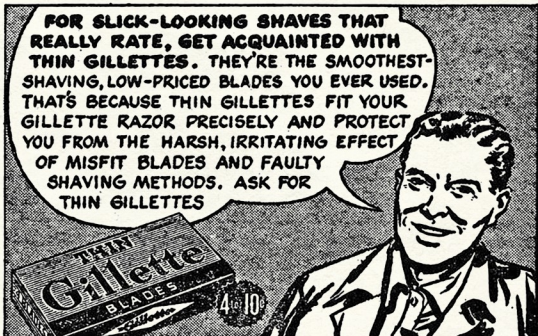
HE'S HANDSOME



NEXT MORNING

THURSDAY MORNING AT MY OFFICE, THEN . . .

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Volume 34

May, 1947

Number 4

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**TWO COMPELLING MURDER-MYSTERY NOVELS**

- WE ARE THE DEAD!**.....Day Keene 6  
"This is it, Grave-bait, and all the loused-up shells you ever made can't blow you back from where you're going!" Thus spoke a long-dead GI for a thousand of his buddies!
- ALIAS MR. SATAN**.....Francis K. Allan 76  
Joe Darcey dwelt in a lost limbo of madness . . . And who he was, or into what dark, deadly path he was heading, only one man, whom the Devil himself had exiled from hell's flaming pit, could tell!

**TWO SPINE-CHILLING NOVELETTES**

- LITTLE KILLER, WHAT NOW?**.....Dorothy Dunn 38  
The task that lay before Officer John Brady was as grim and heart-rending as any one man could face, and still keep sane!
- A HEAD OFF HER SHOULDERS!**.....Cyril Plunkett 52  
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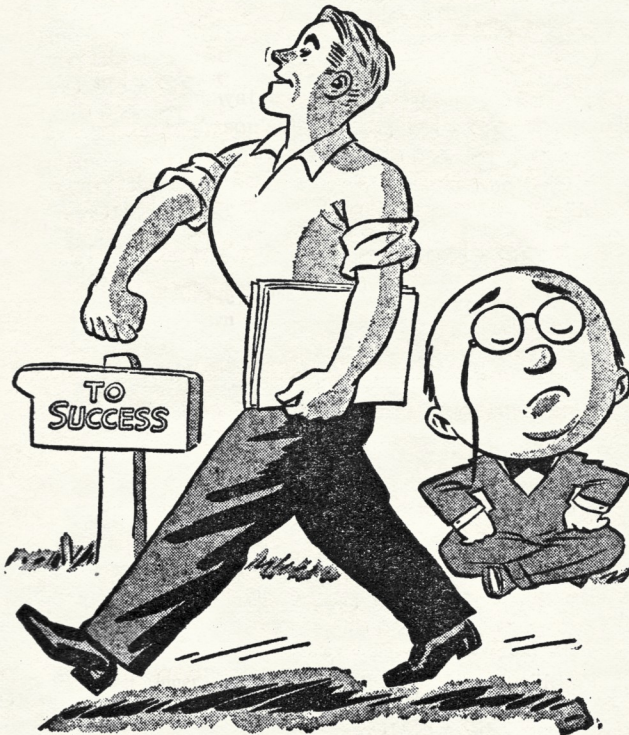
**FIVE POWERFUL SHORT STORIES**

- THE DARK CAN'T HIDE YOU!**.....Don James 25  
When the hidden past of her husband came roaring back to life, Alice Moser was caught in the path of death's red tornado!
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- CORPSE COLLATERAL**.....Dave Sands 48  
With every tick of the dead man's clock, I was getting farther away from Easy Street—and closer to my own post-mortem career!
- I'D LOVE YOU DEAD!**.....Stewart Toland 64  
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- THE DEVIL'S HIDEHOLE**.....Ted Stratton 70  
When Bumpy Boyd saw the twisted remains of his friend, the Duke, he laid special plans to ensure the killer a grim reunion in flesh-charred terror!

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*"Blow that out of your home-sick bugle, Grave-bait," the dead GI said. "This is it, and all the loused-up shells you ever made can't blow you back from where you're going!"*

## CHAPTER ONE

Smart Up, Soldier!

**S**AM SALTER was the first of the three men to die. There was no sorrow at his passing. No bells tolled. If ever a man deserved it, he did. A former hoodlum and thief, he had grown rich, fat and quasi-respectable on the blood of men whose shoes he was not fit to tie. It was the manner of his dying that intrigued the public interest; the manner of his dying and the last few words he sobbed over the phone from behind the bolted door of his expensive hotel suite. "I'm dying," he sobbed frantically. "Six

dead young soldiers have just murdered me!"

Cynical, brittle, all knowing, accustomed to handling wealthy drunks, the girl on the switch-board sympathized, "Oh, I am so sorry, Mr. Salter. I'll report your death to the house detective immediately. You go right back to bed now, sir, and think nothing more about it."

So saying she broke the connection and promptly forgot the matter. Frantic, Salter jiggled the hook. There was an acrid, coppery, taste in his mouth. His throat was con-



The voice, wistful and young, seemed to come out of nowhere. "Just like me, huh?"

# WE ARE THE DEAD!

Spine-Chilling Novel of  
the Talking Dead

By

DAY KEENE



stricted. His stomach was lined with flame. It was growing difficult to breathe.

Reluctantly he hung up the receiver. The girl on the switchboard didn't believe him. She thought that he was drunk. He had been, but he wasn't now. He was dying.

Tears of self pity streaming down his flabby cheeks, he staggered from the phone to the hall door with body-racking convulsions halting him at every other step. With fast numbing fingers he fumbled at the complicated series of locks and bolts on the door but there was no strength in his hands. The bolts installed to keep death out effectively kept it in.

In the name of God would no one help him? He turned his faltering steps toward the bedroom, whimpering:

"Renée! Renée! Wake up. I'm sick. I'm dying. Get a doctor."

Pain muffled his voice. The hall leading to the bedroom was endless. The thick pile of the carpet tripped him time and again. Now he could see Renée's face outlined by a shaft of moonlight. If only he could touch one bare white shoulder, shake her awake and get her to call a doctor.

"Renée! Please wake up. I'm dying."

Her crisp black curls a fragrant halo around the fragile beauty of her face, the girl slept on.

His legs failing him, Salter fell heavily to the floor but continued to inch crab-wise toward the bed. He couldn't die. He wouldn't die. He, Sam Salter, had ten million dollars. He could afford the highest priced doctor in New York and any punk intern with a stomach pump could save him. Still feet away from the sleeping girl, a harder convulsion than any that had preceded it twisted his body into a knot. When it had passed he raised himself on his knuckles and looked at the bed for the last time.

A cloud had obscured the moon. Renée's face was no longer visible. At last this was it. This was death. Salter lowered his flushed and swollen face to his fat arms, sobbed three times in fear, and then lay still.

In life he had not been handsome. In death he was ludicrous, a scar-faced, pot-bellied, old man, the hair on his massive chest a thick mat of black against the pale heliotrope of the expensive silk pajamas he had purchased for his bridal night. . . .

**I**T BEGAN with the voices. That had been six months before. Salter heard the first voice when he was on the steps of the Senate office building. At that time, lacking positive legal proof that it had been Salter's munition firm that had manufactured the defective mortar shells, the investigation bogged down in

a maze of technicalities and red tape. Certain of his guilt, but unable to prove it, the investigating committee had been forced to dismiss all charges against him. He had, in not so many words, been told to go and sin no more.

And that was fine with Salter. The war was over. There was no more easy money to be made in small arm and munition contracts. But he had gotten his while the getting was good. The back of his hand to Washington. To hell with the state of the nation.

He was no longer Sam Salter. He was *Mister* Salter now, with more millions tucked away than the long-nosed treasury snoops would ever be able to smell out. True, every dollar was stained with blood and sweat and tears. But that didn't bother Salter. Nor was he bothered by the fact that he had built his bloodstained financial empire on a corner stone of money advanced by old Mike Ryan. The back of his hand to Mike, too. The old racketeer was a fool. He actually hadn't expected the new firm to make money. He had hoped to be serving his country. He had been shocked by the revelation of the slipshod methods of manufacture of arms and munitions on which men's lives depended. As if the lives of a few G.I.s made any difference. There had been twelve millions of them. Getting the money was what counted. And Salter had gotten it.

He was in an expansive mood when he parted from Blaney and Caldwell, his seconds in command, on the Senate steps. Both men were still perspiring freely. "Stop sweating," he told them in parting. "No one can touch us now. We've gotten away with murder."

It was then he heard the first voice. Male, coldly impersonal, it agreed with him, "*Murder. That's its right name, louse. Did you ever see a man blown to pieces by a defective mortar shell?*"

Starting, Salter stared around him wildly. Caldwell and Blaney had gone. There was no one on the steps but himself and a slip of a girl, obviously a clerk or secretary, who had stopped to powder her nose.

"Did you say something?" he asked her.

She said, "I did not," gave him a dirty look, snapped her compact shut, and walked on down the steps.

The two voices were not the same. It had not been the girl who had spoken. Still, he had heard a voice, distinctly. His cigar no longer tasting quite such pure Havana, Salter considered calling Blaney and Caldwell back and asking them if they had heard the voice. But it was obvious they hadn't. Neither man had turned his head.

Salter dismissed it finally as a figment, a voice conjured up by over-taut nerves. He had been bucking the old man with the



whiskers. He had been under a nervous strain for months. Had he ever seen a man blown to pieces by a defective mortar shell? No, he had not. What was more, he didn't want to. But he did. That, however, came much later in the parade of disembodied voices that dogged his footsteps from that day on.

He heard the second and third voice in New York after leaving a new car sales-room where he had just paid a two thousand dollar bonus for the immediate delivery of a custom built sixteen thousand dollar job.

"Boy. What a nice job, eh?" the second voice admired.

"Yeah," a third voice said sourly. "I always wanted to drive a boat like that. But I'll never get a chance to now." It added, more in resignation than in anger, "You know, there's something screwy somewhere. I get my car shot off for sixty-six bucks a month. He stays home and manufactures shells and he can pay sixteen grand for a car."

"That's why he can pay it. Smart up, soldier. He chiseled all along the line."

This time he would not be stampeded into fear. This was a gag of some kind. Someone was ribbing him. His face flushed with anger, Salter sought the source of the voices—but could find none.

A battered panel laundry truck stood at the curb with its driver busily checking a list. The closest person to him was a colored porter whistling mournfully as he plied a broom across the walk. Closer to the curb, two women were deep in a discussion of some movie they had seen. Salter's scalp crawled as the voices began again.

"Ten million bucks they say he tucked away."

"G'wan. There ain't that much money."

"I'm telling you."

"Well, maybe so. They was so sloppily made there at the end that a mortar crew wouldn't fire one of the damn things except at the end of a hundred yard lanyard."

Salter lost his self control and caught the porter by the arm. "You stop that derogatory talk."

The porter gaped at him. "You crazy or what, Mister. I ain't derogating no one. You better go home and sleep it off before you get picked up by a cop."

From the direction of the women now, a hearty male voice chuckled, "Look. He thinks it was the porter talking."

Salter strode toward them and demanded, "Did you hear that?"

"Did we hear what?" one of them puzzled.

His whole body drenched with sweat, Salter begged their pardon and walked stiff-legged down the street. One point was established. He wasn't being ribbed. No one but himself heard the voices.

From time to time he heard the voices again and turned around to glower, once at a sweet-faced old lady and once at two giggling high school girls who acted as if they thought he was attempting to flirt with them. That time the voices admired:

"Wow. Look at the gams on that babe."

There was unutterable sadness in the answering voice. "My old lady's was just as good. But we never really got to know each other. We had only been married two weeks when I shipped out."

This way lay madness. Salter had to know. This couldn't go on much longer. If it did he would be a raving maniac. "Who are you?" he demanded.

The high school girls stopped giggling. One of them said, "Sir!" He never knew what the other one said because male voices that seemingly came from everywhere and no where drowned her out.

"We are the dead," they answered. "We are the men you killed."

Almost sobbing now, Salter turned and hurried on, refusing to look behind him again no matter how hard the voices pelted at his heels. When he reached his hotel, one said:

"He lives in here. They say he has a suite that costs fifty smackers a day."

"No kidding. And wait until you see the doll he's hooked up with. You talk about your old lady's gams. Wait until you get a gander at hers."

In the revolving door, Salter stopped and screamed, "You stay out of here, hear me. You can't come in."

Then he realized that the doorman was eyeing him strangely and pulled himself together with an effort. This couldn't go on. The thing for him to do was to consult a psychiatrist in the morning. But what could he tell the man? He couldn't retract the statements he had made before the committee. He couldn't admit he had knowingly shipped defective shells and the men whom they killed had returned to haunt him.

The whole thing was absurd. He was allowing his mind to run away with him. The dead were dead. They couldn't return. And even if they could there was no way that they could harm a man.

Renée, as beautiful as ever, and as coolly detached, was waiting in the suite. She allowed him to kiss her but evaded his possessive hands. "Tomorrow night," she smiled. "Remember?"

Salter poured two drinks and gulped his eagerly. Here with Renée it was quiet and peaceful. Here there were no voices. The voices were nothing but nerves. He had pushed himself too hard. Once he was married to Renée he would no longer hear voices. Her young loveliness would ward them off.

He studied her as she sipped her drink. He had no illusions concerning her. She didn't love him. She was marrying him tomorrow afternoon for what he could give her. But it was a fair exchange. She was clean and fine and decent, everything he was not.

He moaned as the voices began talking again.

"See. What did I tell you, chum. Is she a babe or not?"

"She's a babe," the other voice agreed.

Salter had slipped one arm around Renée's waist and he felt her body go rigid. "You heard that? You heard those voices?" he demanded.

She hesitated, said quietly, "Why—no. I didn't Sam. What voices do you mean? We—we're alone in the apartment, aren't we?"

"Yeah. Sure," Salter said sourly. It wasn't a trick. It wasn't a gag. Only he heard the voices.

"You have a lot of money, haven't you, Sam?"

He said he had and the information seemed to please her. She even allowed him to kiss her again but got up to pour two drinks before he could pursue his gains. It was one of the things he liked about her. Renée was a lady.

If only his head would stop pounding. If only the voices would go away. They didn't, but Renée did. She left at nine o'clock. At ten o'clock Salter started to drink heavily. At midnight the first figure appeared, a blood stained, slithering figure that flitted furtively around the walls of the living room to be joined in a few minutes by a second and a third and a fourth and a fifth and a sixth. The suite was a babble of voices now. Sometimes they addressed their remarks to him and replied logically when he answered. At two o'clock, in a drunken rage, Salter called for the house detective and ordered him to clear all the dead soldiers out of his suite or he would check out in the morning. Things had come to a pretty pass when a man had to share his suite with six dead soldiers, some of them bleeding all over the carpets and all of them making snide remarks.

Instead, the man gave him a bromide and put him to bed. "For shame, Mr. Salter," he reproved him. "And you getting married tomorrow."

He left but the dead men remained. Toward morning, Salter slept only to be awakened by a deep rumble of gunfire. The bedroom wall had faded out. Six soldiers were crouched around a mortar. And then the defective shell exploded.

Screaming in fear, Salter waded through ankle deep blood to reach the phone. This time the houseman was not so suave. "Now

look, Mr. Salter," he said frankly, "we appreciate your patronage. But any more scenes like this and we're going to have to ask you to check out. For the last time there are no dead soldiers in your apartment."

Salter knew better but had sense enough not to argue. Any trouble with the law, to be arrested now, would mean a trip to a psycho ward. In his present condition he couldn't allow that to happen. He had too much to hide and his mind was too dulled with the sedative and too blurred with whiskey to be nimble. With drunken cunningness he agreed not to make any more scenes if the hotel maintenance man would add two new bolts to the outer door.

The new bolts seemed to help. There were no more bloody scenes. The slithering figures did not return. With morning, even the voices faded. They had been in his mind after all. Tonight, with his bride beside him, everything would be different.

But it wasn't. The voices, peering now, were waiting in the suite when he and Renée returned from the City Hall late the next afternoon.

"Ha. Look who got married," one of them greeted the bridal pair. "Look at the pot on him, would you. He should ought to have better sense, an old man like him marrying a chick like that."

Another voice scoffed, "Aw. It's his dough she's after. He's got ten million tucked away, they say, in cash."

"Yeah? Where?"

"I'll be damned if I know."

His nerves torn to tattered ribbons, Salter screamed, "And you'll never find out, damn you! Get out! Get out of my apartment, you—" In his terror and anger, his thin veneer of culture cracked and he swore foul, filthy oaths.

Her eyes wide with fear, his bride cried, "Sam!"

**D**ESPERATE, Salter caught her to him. "Don't be a little fool, Renée. I wasn't swearing at you. I was swearing at the voices."

The girl's eyes narrowed slightly. "You must be drunk or out of your mind."

He wouldn't tell her. He couldn't. It wasn't something that a man could tell his bride. If she knew the truth she would probably leave him. She was fine and good and decent. "Forget it. I was just joking," he said.

She slapped at his reaching hand. "No. Don't touch me. I don't care if I am your wife. I don't even want to see you again until you have sobered up."

Wrapping her dignity around her like a protecting cloak, she walked down the hall to the bedroom, slammed and locked the door behind her.

Salter stood where he was, staring after her. There was no use trying to explain. There was no explanation. From where he stood this looked as if it was going to be one hell of a wedding night. He poured himself a second and a third drink. After that he lost count. He knew that shortly before midnight he staggered out of the suite, through the hotel lobby and into Thistlewaite's drug store where, dreading a repetition of the scenes he had witnessed the night before, he ordered a bottle of bromide.

"Something strong. Something that will knock me out," he insisted. "Also something for indigestion."

Doc Egg compounded the bromide himself. He knew Salter and disliked him. "That will be seventy cents for the bromide and two bits for the wafers," he told him. "But if they were poison, and you'd take them, Sam, I'd give them to you for free. But what's the idea of the bromide? Renée lock you out?"

Salter winced at the truth of the chance shot, laid a bill on the counter and returned to his hotel. Renée had unlocked the bedroom door but she was either asleep or pretending to be.

Dressed for bed, Salter drank half of the bottle of bromide then went back into the living room for a drink of whiskey to take the cloying taste out of his mouth. As he drank, the bloody figures he had seen the night before re-appeared. They were silent now, watching him, seemingly waiting for something. Then he suddenly knew what it was. There was a burning sensation in his stomach and a decidedly metallic, coppery taste in his mouth. *The six dead soldiers had poisoned his whiskey. He was dying.*

Fear sweat standing out on his forehead in great opalescent beads, he staggered to the phone and clawed the receiver from the hook.

## CHAPTER TWO

### You're Next, Chum

**T**HE WINDOW, gray with dawn, was of a color with the smoke filled room. The game had been going on for hours. A bright-eyed, bald, little man in his late thirties, whom neither late hours nor high stakes ever seemed to affect, Doc Egg, saw Paddy Ferrel's five hundred dollar raise and kicked it another five hundred.

He could afford to. He was reputed to be worth a million dollars, all of it made the hard way. To out-of-town visitors his business on the corner of 44th Street and Broadway was merely another drug store, better stocked than most. To the initiate of Broadway, it was a gold mine. But few men who

knew Doc begrudged him his good fortune.

No one had given him his gold mine. He had battered it out of hard work. Born into a poverty stricken family on New York's lower East Side, he had wanted a pharmaceutical education. And he had earned one with his fists. In his day, as a leading feather-weight contender, he had fought the best men of his weight. And every dime that he had fought for had gone into his dream.

In time his drug store had become a Mecca for the sporting and theatrical crowd, and for the underworld as well. Broadway both liked and respected him. He had never turned a hungry man away without a loan or ever given a dime to a known leech and chiseler. He could still fight and often had to.

His boyhood pal, and adult best friend, Lieutenant Dan Carter of the Times Square Homicide Detail, described him best. He called him one hundred and ten pounds of concentrated dynamite ready and eager to explode in your favor, or against it, depending on whether you were a right or wrong gee.

If Doc Egg had a weakness, it was pretty women. They had cost him thousands in the past. But as he, himself, admitted with a twinkle in his eye, "I don't regret a dime that I ever spent on a woman. It's the nicest way to waste money I know of."

Both Pete Anders and Phil Beakman stayed. Assistant District Attorney Rand dropped out. "You boys are getting way over my head. Unfortunately I don't own a drug store, a smash revue, or a pro football team. John Q, Public pays my salary."

Sam Gold, the loan broker, looked from his own slim stack of chips to those heaped in front of Rand. "I am weeping for you with tears in my eyes," he said dryly. "If I could play poker like you can—" He stopped short as Sho Sho, Doc Egg's valet, materialized through the smoke screen.

"There is a Lieutenant Dwyer at the door," he reported to Doc Egg. "He say there's a murder heah in the hotel and he want to see you about it. Shall I tell him you ain't in?"

Dwyer loomed through the smoke behind him. "I hardly think that would be wise." He looked from the chip littered table to the faces of the men around it. "I suppose you fellows know that there is a law against gambling."

Egg said, "My God. Don't tell me that while Dan is on his vacation, you've taken to raiding poker games. I thought you were on the homicide detail."

"I am," Dwyer said dryly.

Known on the Street as an honest John, he was also known to be ambitious, a cop who would arrest his own grandmother for mopey if it would lift him a rung higher.

"Then speak your piece or get out," Gold said. "Already I'm in the pot a thousand dollars. I'm facing a thousand dollar raise. So gambling is against the law. Why don't you come in to stop me before I'm meeting such a situation?"

Dwyer was ambitious, but no fool. The influence of the five men around the table reached into strange high places. "Go ahead. Play out the hand," he said grudgingly.

Gold saw the two five hundred dollar raises and took the pot, his first that night, with a full house.

Egg tossed his hand in the discard and pushed back his chair. "Now, I believe Sho Sho mentioned a murder. Who is dead and why come butting into my apartment?"

Lieutenant Dwyer countered with a question of his own. "How long have you been playing poker, Thistlewaite?"

"About twenty-two years," Egg told him, sober-faced. "I believe I was seventeen when I lost my first pot."

Dwyer's face colored slightly. He had tangled with the little man before and always come off second best. "I mean tonight."

"Since I locked up the store," the druggist answered. "My God. Don't tell me you're accusing me of murder. Who is it I've killed now?"

"I," Dwyer admitted, "am not accusing you of anything—as yet. But do you happen to remember filling a prescription shortly before you locked up tonight?"

"Yes," Egg admitted, "I do. One, as I recall, for Sam Salter." He beamed on Dwyer. "Don't tell me I accidentally, on purpose, put cyanide in his bromide, I hope?"

The color in Dwyer's face deepened. "There is nothing funny about murder. Salter is dead."

Gold stopped stacking his chips. "Good," he said emphatically. "He was a disgrace to the name of Sam." He pushed his chips toward the center of the table. "And if you are collecting to buy a medal for the man who killed him, I will cheerfully begin the subscription with—"

Dwyer lost his temper. "Damn it! Cut it out! So the man was a heel. He's dead. And this is a murder investigation." He stabbed his finger at Doc Egg. "You. Come on upstairs with me."

"That's a request or an order?" the little man asked quietly.

"I'm telling you," Dwyer said.

Egg looked at Assistant District Attorney Rand. "In that case you'd better come with me, Charlie. This monkey has been trying to pin a murder rap on me for years and one of these days it might just be he'll do it."

"Now just a minute." Rand got up from his chair. "On what grounds are you involv-

ing, Doc, Lieutenant Dwyer, may I ask?"

Dwyer considered his answer and said, "I'm not involving him, as yet." He scowled at Egg. "But you do admit that when you sold Salter that bromide, you told him that if it was poison, and he'd take it, you'd give it to him for free?"

Sighing, the druggist got up from his chair and slipped into his coat. "That's what I said," he admitted. "Me and my big mouth . . ."

Salter's suite was in the same hotel, three floors above Doc Egg's. But it looked like no other suite in the building. When he had leased it for a term of years, Salter had insisted on being allowed to remodel and refurnish it. It was the first time that Egg had seen it. It looked, the druggist decided, like a cross between a vestal virgin's dream and a hoodlum's conception of heaven, and was probably as close to either as Salter would ever get.

Huge mirrors covered most of the walls. The floor length drapes were a heavy, pale blue silk. The carpets were white and ankle deep. The furniture was ultra moderne, mauve, and overly over-stuffed.

Renée was not in sight but Egg could hear her sobbing somewhere in the suite. The tech squad had already arrived. So had the reporters. A group of them were arguing angrily in one corner with young Ryan, the house detective. Joe Curtis, the medical examiner, was kneeling beside the body in the bedroom. He glanced up as Doc Egg entered and called cheerfully, "This is one job I enjoy. Hi there, Doc. Where do you fit into this?"

"I'll be damned if I know," Egg told him. "That is unless Salter died of bromide of potassium, et al." On Curtis' invitation he squatted down beside him and studied the contorted face of the dead man in the flamboyant pajamas. "But seeing as Sam complained of indigestion when he was in the store last night, it looks more like corrosive sublimate to me. Bichloride of mercury," he added for Dwyer's information.

"He did complain of indigestion?"

"He bought some wafers for it."

Curtis stood up and dusted his knees from force of habit. "Then that would seem to tie it up. Of course I'll have to do a post but I'm willing to give even money that it was bichloride of mercury. Everything points to it."

Lieutenant Dwyer wanted to know if bichloride of mercury was tasteless and could be put into a bromide and looked disappointed when Curtis said it was not.

"Hell, no," the M.E. snorted. "It has a strong coppery or metallic taste. What's more, I don't envy you the time element in

this case. If Salter had indigestion the poison could have been taken or administered any time in the last two to six days. The average duration of fatal cases, as I recall, covers that space of time." He amplified his statement. "However, I believe there have been recorded cases where death occurred within half an hour and others where life was maintained for ten or twelve days. You can take your choice."

Dwyer swore softly and wanted to know what the ante-mortem symptoms were.

Egg told him, "Nausea. An acrid taste in the mouth. Constriction and a burning sensation in the throat and stomach. Sometimes there is pain. But not always. The face may become flushed or swollen, or pallid and drawn. Death occurs by collapse, coma, or convulsions."

"And Salter has been dead how long?"

"I'd say since shortly after one o'clock," Curtis said.

A technical squad sergeant by the name of Campbell reported to Dwyer that his men had been unable to find any foreign substance in either the bottle of bromide or in the opened bottles of whiskey. "And there are no fingerprints in the suite but Salter's and his wife's and those of some other dame, probably the maid. We're checking on her now."

"Which," Egg said quietly, lighting a cigarette, "would seem to let me out."

Assistant District Attorney Rand stayed to discuss the case with Dwyer. The druggist walked back into the living room in search of Renée. The girl had disappointed him badly. Appearing on the Broadway scene some months before, her talent and her beauty had soon earned her a place in the spotlight as the featured singer at the Silver Slipper. Wealthy men around town, himself among them, had flocked to the light of her youth and freshness as the proverbial moths to a flame, only to have her pass them all by to marry Salter. And his disappointment in the girl hadn't stemmed from jealousy. He simply couldn't conceive of how a girl with her obvious refinement, character, and innate decency could marry a man like Salter.

Cork Kelly, of the *News-Tribune*, spotted him as he entered the living room and wanted to know if Egg believed the yarn about Salter saying that six dead soldiers had murdered him. Egg said it was the first time he'd heard it. "What are you doing? Kidding me?"

"Or we're being kidded," Cork said sourly. "Come over and listen to this."

He guided Egg over to the group in the corner. Ringed in by reporters, the perspiration on his forehead gleaming almost as brightly as the gold ruptured duck in his

button hole, Ryan the house detective was protesting, "So help me, I'm not lying, fellows. Every word I've told you is the truth. Salter had me up here twice the night before last, claiming that six dead soldiers were bleeding all over his carpets and making snide remarks. He said he had been hearing their voices for days and either I cleaned them out of his suite or he'd cancel his lease and check out. That's when he had the two new bolts put on his door. And then this morning, check with the girl on the switchboard, he pulls the same thing again only I've tipped her not to pay any attention, to just humor him if she can and get him to go to bed."

Forrest of the *Telegram* asked for Salter's last known words.

"As I got them from the switchboard girl," Ryan told him, "they were, 'I'm dying. Six dead soldiers have just murdered me'."

The reporter ran his fingers over his face. "And I'm supposed to phone that in to my editor? Hell no. Not me. He'd swear I was stinking drunk and bounce me from here to Hoboken."

Ryan said he could do as he pleased about it but he was giving it to them straight, just as he had given it to Lieutenant Dwyer.

**D**OC EGG wanted to know who found the body.

Ryan said his wife had found him at four-forty-five that morning. At least that had been the time when she had phoned the desk screaming that he was dead. He added, "Her story is they had a quarrel shortly after they got home last night, that he swore at her something awful and thinking that he was drunk, or had suddenly turned crazy, she shut herself up in the bedroom, locked the door, and cried herself to sleep."

"This on their wedding night?" Kelly scoffed.

"I'm telling you what she told me," Ryan said. "And I for one believe her. She says that around one o'clock she woke up and thinking maybe he was in his right mind she unlocked the door and came out but he wasn't in the suite."

"That's about the time he came over to my place for the bromide," Doc Egg offered.

"So," Ryan concluded his story, "she says she went back to bed and the next time she woke up there he was stiff on the floor."

The reporters split into little groups to discuss the story. Some of them phoned their papers the yarn verbatim. Others advised their editors to hold off.

The wheels of justice continued to grind. Hastily dressed, their eyes still puffed with sleep, Blaney and Caldwell, Salter's former partners, were brought in by two members of Lieutenant Dwyer's squad. Neither man

seemed to regret Salter's passing but both men insisted they had nothing to do with his death. Both described his dying words as fantastic but paled as they heard them.

Doc Egg said dryly, "None of you three boys, of course, having anything to fear from any soldier dead or alive, the charges that you knowingly shipped defective shells being pure malice on the part of the investigating committee."

A cadaverous man in his forties, Blaney said that was what the charges had amounted to.

Caldwell admitted, "Sure. We may have cut a few corners in the interest of efficiency to expedite production, all big manufacturers did during the war. But the charges against us were a pack of lies."

"I'll just bet," Egg said.

Ryan seemed to be having difficulty in keeping his fingers from balling into fists. "You scum, you filthy scum," he said quietly. "What with the boys that you three murdered, it's a wonder you don't all hear voices."

Three fourth of the reporters were former service men. A low growl swept the group and Blaney and Caldwell pressed closer to the two detectives accompanying them.

A sour taste in his mouth, Egg continued his search for the widow. He found her in the second bedroom, guarded from the press by a bored uniformed patrolman. Even in tears she was lovely. But there was more than tears in her eyes. There was fear.

"On your way, Doc," the patrolman ordered Egg. "You can't talk to her until she has been booked. No one can. Lieutenant Dwyer's orders."

Egg asked, incredulous, "You mean Dwyer is accusing her of killing Sam?"

The patrolman shrugged. "Someone did. Her and him was alone in the apartment. She admits no one else came in." He snorted, "And no matter what he said over the phone, it's a cinch he wasn't killed by no dead soldiers."

Egg recognized Dwyer's technique. When in doubt make an arrest, no matter whom you arrested. You could always release them later with apologies. An early arrest gave the public a goat, in this case a lovely one, and it also kept the newspapers off of your neck. He wished Dan Carter was not on his vacation. Dwyer was a blundering fool.

Ignoring the patrolman, Egg sat down on the bed beside the girl. "Why did you do it, Renée? I mean why did you marry the louse? I don't see how a girl like you could stomach him."

A filmy negligee moulded to her lithe young figure, tiny blue satin slippers peering out mouse-like from under the long, voluminous skirt of her equally filmy bridal gown, she

averted her face and continued to cry on.

The patrolman tapped the little druggist on the shoulder. "I said—"

"I heard you," Egg cut him short. Putting his fingers under the girl's chin, he turned her face to meet his eyes. "Don't be a little fool, Renée. It can be that you're in a spot, a bad one. Did you kill Sam?"

Her voice was small. "No."

"And how about the voices? Did you hear any of those voices Sam told the house dick he heard?"

She hesitated briefly, "No."

"And the hall door was locked and bolted when you found him?"

"Yes."

"How about this indigestion business. Had he complained of nausea before, I mean in the last two or three days or so?"

The patrolman tried another tack. "Look, Doc. Please. Don't get me in no trouble. I'm just doing like I'm told."

The girl added her plaint to his. "Go away. Please, Doc." Sobbing, heavily, she clung to him a moment. "I—I'll be all right, I guess."

She got to her feet and stood staring out the window. Shrugging, Egg returned to the living room where Dwyer was putting Caldwell and Blaney over the jumps.

Both men insisted they had been on the best of terms with Salter. There was no partnership insurance. They had nothing to gain by his death. Nor did they believe his bride of one night had murdered him. Both men were insistent on that point.

"Hell no. She couldn't have killed him," Dwyer said sourly. "You guys couldn't have killed him. No one could have killed him. He was murdered by six dead soldiers that burst in through a locked and bolted door and, after putting on the battle of the Bulge, poured bichloride of mercury down his throat. Damn such a case."

Egg asked if Dwyer wanted him any longer. With obvious reluctance the detective said he did not and Egg walked down the stairs to his own suite. He didn't envy Dwyer. It was a hell of a case. In his own mind only one thing was certain. Egg made a mental correction. Two things. Salter had deserved to die. And, despite the voices Salter had heard, or claimed to hear, no dead man had killed him. Despite its fantastic setting, it was plain and simple murder for a purpose.

He reached for his keys and, feeling an unfamiliar object in his side coat pocket, he continued down the hall to study it in the now bright daylight streaming through the window. It was a small box plainly labeled—"Bichloride of Mercury". He lifted the lid and examined its contents. As a pharmacist, he knew from the size and shape of the box that it had originally contained six small

blue tablets shaped like miniature coffins. Now two of them were gone.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Good-bye Broadway, Hello God!

THERE was a crowd gathered around the front doors of the bank but neither Blaney nor Caldwell paid much attention to it. They had waited too long for this moment to allow anything so minor as a crowd to detract them from their purpose.

"Let's go in the side door," Blaney said. He glanced casually at an ambulance parked at the curb. "There seems to have been an accident of some kind."

Skirting the crowd they walked around the corner to the side door opening directly off the stairs leading down into the vault. With Salter, they had deliberately chosen this small out-of-the-way, up-town branch bank as a spot the Federal men would most likely overlook. They had. There had been no reason for the treasury agents working in conjunction with the investigating committee to suspect that a fifteen dollar a year safety deposit box rented three years before under the names of Cramer, Gleason, and Schaeffer, held the undeclared and excess war profits that might have proven their guilt of the various charges against them. And now Sam Salter, thank God, was dead. They could split the take two ways instead of three.

Blaney smiled as he started down the stairs. He didn't want to remove the money. He merely wanted to look at it, assure himself that it still existed. Voices. Idiotic. Salter had been a fool to allow his conscience to catch up with him. The dead harmed no one.

Caldwell said, "What the hell?" Blaney's smile faded as they reached the bottom of the stairs. The vault room was crawling with police. A husky young plainclothes man was standing in back of the desk where the aged vault clerk usually stood.

It was too late to turn back. The plainclothes man had already seen them. "Yeah? And what do you want?" he demanded.

Caldwell knew a moment of fear. "Why, we want to get in our safe deposit box. Why? What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

"Plenty," the plainclothes man nodded. "Someone knifed the old clerk an hour or so ago," his nod included the paper littered floor behind him, "and also played hell with the files. Is it important you get into your box?"

Blaney hesitated, said it was. The plainclothes man crooked a finger at a weeping girl file clerk. "Check this guy's signature, will you, sister?" He added to Blaney, "We

dusted the vault and ante-rooms but the big boys from Center Street may want to go over them again. So don't touch nothing but your own box, will you, Mister."

Blaney said that he would not, signed the name Ray Gleason on the slip and handed it to the girl with his key. As he waited for her to check, he asked, "What was it, robbery or something personal?"

"We ain't found that out yet," the plainclothes man expanded. "But nothing don't seem to be missing so that makes it look personal." He jerked a thumb at the file clerk. "The girl here, see, is upstairs when it happens, running an errand for the old man, and when she comes back again he's lying here alongside the desk with a knife sticking out of his back."

Caldwell scoffed, "And no one saw the killer?"

"If they did, they ain't come forward," the plainclothes man shrugged. "You see it happens right after the bank opens and, while the vault don't get much of a play, the cages upstairs are always busy on a Monday on account of the neighborhood merchants banking their week end receipts."

"Oh," Caldwell said. "I see."

The girl returned to the desk to say that the signature checked and Blaney and Caldwell walked with her into the vault, being careful to observe the plainclothes man's instructions.

Using both keys the girl unlocked the box, slid it out of the vault and handed it to Blaney who, with Caldwell at his heels, carried it into the small private room a uniformed policeman pointed out.

"For a moment," Caldwell admitted, "I was afraid someone had tipped the Feds we had a box here."

"So was I," Blaney said.

He lifted the lid of the metal box and his lips went suddenly white. There was no money in it. The fortune it had contained was gone. He turned toward the door, turned back.

Caldwell was swearing softly. "Damn, Sam. Damn his rotten soul to hell. He didn't trust us. He didn't mean to play square. He cleaned it out before he was killed and left us holding the bag." He swung angrily toward the door and Blaney caught his arm.

"Don't lose your head now," he warned him. "We can't report the loss. To do so would be tantamount to a confession of guilt. Sam had to stash the money somewhere. It's up to us to find out where. Let me handle this."

He tucked the box under his arm, walked out in the vault again and, handing it to the girl, asked her, "I don't suppose you could tell us the exact date that our partner, Mr.

Schaffer, was last here? Can you recall it?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid that I can't, sir. That information would be in the file that was upset," she began to cry again, "when poor Mr. Garvey was murdered."

"It's quite all right," Caldwell assured her. "Please don't cry."

The plainclothes man back of the desk was asking a housewife if it was important that she get into her safe deposit box. She said it was and he turned her over to the girl.

"You see," he explained to Blaney, "we can't legally keep folks out but I have orders to check on who does go in. Was everything in your box okay?"

"Not a thing missing," Blaney lied tight-lipped.

The plainclothes man sighed. "Everyone says the same. You watch the papers. It'll turn out like I told the lieutenant, strictly a personal matter."

Their feet leaden, Blaney and Caldwell climbed the stairs. The crowd was still in front of the bank but the side street was almost deserted. Thank God there were no reporters who might recognize them and stir up the old mess again.

"Damn it," Blaney swore softly. "We earned that money. I mean to have it. No man, dead or alive, is going to cheat me out of ten million dollars."

The voice was low and mocking in his ear. "*No? How did you earn that money, bud?*"

A second male voice jeered, "*How did he earn it? Come, come now, sad sack. What do you think you died of, over-eating?*"

Sudden perspiration beading on his forehead, Blaney swung toward Caldwell. "Did you hear that?" he demanded.

White-faced, Caldwell said, "I did."

Both men stared around them wildly. But there wasn't a male in sight. There was, in fact, no one near them but a sweet-faced old lady and two bobby-soxers who were admiring a display in the window of a store adjoining the side door of the bank.

**T**O TELL Lieutenant Dwyer or not. That was the problem in a nut shell. And a hard nut it was to crack. If only Renée were not so lovely. Doc Egg lowered his eyes from the ceiling to the table beside his bed. The box hadn't evaporated. The four miniature blue coffins still nestled on the cotton. And they were coffins, at least coffin fillers. Probably three grains each, he decided, enough to kill four more men. He had no doubt that Renée had slipped them into his pocket when she had clung to him sobbing—

"Go away. Please, Doc. I'll be all right, I guess."

Of course. No guesswork about it. How

could she help but be all right once he had walked out with the evidence? He swung his feet to the floor and walked to the window. The afternoon was wearing thin. He had to stop stalling pretty soon and make up his mind what he intended to do.

Sho Sho knocked and entered the room. "I've started toast and made fresh coffee for times," he complained, "only to have you doze off back to sleep again. You goin' to get up all the way this time, or do I have to join a union?"

Egg looked at his watch. It was a few minutes after four. "I'll drink it this time," he promised. "Make it black and strong, and bring all the papers in with you."

"They are sure somethin' to look at," the colored boy admitted.

Scrunched down in an easy chair by the window, Egg read them as he drank his coffee. All of them headlined Salter's death. All of them quoted his dying words—

I'm dying! Six dead soldiers have just murdered me.

How Renée had gotten him into that frame of mind was something to wonder about. Or had she? Was it possible he was misjudging her? He hoped so. But in that case, where had the box of deadly blue coffins come from?

He was pleased to learn that the District Attorney's Office had refused to ask for an indictment in the face of Salter's admitted fantastic last statement and the fact that while a post mortem had revealed bichloride of mercury in his body, there was no proof it had been administered in his hotel suite nor had any evidence of poison been found there.

The strongest point against Renée, in the papers, was the fact that as Salter's bride, if only for a few hours, she stood to inherit the many millions he was reputed to be worth. She had refused to make a statement.

Ryan's story of Salter's conduct on the night before, also that of the maintenance man who had installed the bolts, was printed verbatim in most papers and it was generally agreed that no matter who had killed him, Salter's mind had snapped before he died.

There were also long reviews of the report of the committee that had investigated the munitions empire of Salter, Blaney, and Caldwell. And the known facts being few, the re-write men had allowed their imaginations to run wild with both Blaney and Caldwell marked as 'next' on the list of some mysterious avenger.

As he dressed, Egg tried to remember Salter's face as he sold him the bromide and the indigestion wafers. There had been a wild glitter in his eyes but he had attributed it



at the time to drink, or perhaps a quarrel with his bride.

Dressed for the street, the little druggist took the elevator up to the eighth floor. According to the operator of the cage, the police had come and gone all day but there was no stake-out in the suite.

Renée answered the bell, pale but dry-eyed. "Hello, Doc. What do you want?"

"You wouldn't know?" Egg asked.

She shook her head, seemingly puzzled. "N-no. No. I would not."

"I want to talk to you," he said.

She shrugged slim shoulders and stepped aside to allow him to enter the suite. She was wearing a simple tan dress and made no pretense of grief. She looked younger and prettier somehow than Egg had ever seen her. It was as if some heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"You said you wanted to talk," she said.

Egg hesitated briefly, took the box from his pocket and held it out to her. If the girl had ever seen it before she was an excellent actress. "Yes. I'd like to know," Egg said dryly, "what you expected me to do with this. Why didn't you just throw it out the window or flush it down the drain instead of slipping it into my pocket when you put on the sob scene last night?"

Her forehead knitted prettily as she repeated, "Sob scene? Slip it into your pocket? Don't be absurd, Doc. I never saw the box before. And I certainly didn't put it in your pocket. Why? What's in it?"

Watching her eyes, he told her, "Bichloride of Mercury."

She said, "Oh," took the box from his hand, opened it, and stared at the tiny blue coffins with interest. "So these are what killed Sam." There was clinical interest in her voice but nothing more. She might have been discussing the high cost of living. She closed the box and handed it back. "Aren't you breaking the law, hiding evidence or something? Shouldn't you give this to Lieutenant Dwyer?"

If it was a bluff it was a good one. Egg dropped the box into his pocket. "You didn't kill Sam then?"

Renée sat down on the arm of one of the fantastically over-stuffed sofas and smoothed her skirt over her thighs. "No. I intended to," she said simply. She raised her eyes to the window and far away. "That's why I married him. But it would seem someone beat me to it."

"Maybe I'm crazy," Egg thought. "Maybe I'm hearing voices." He asked, incredulous, "You married Sam because you intended to kill him. Why?"

Her eyes and her voice grew bitter. "That's my business. You see, as originally planned

we were to leave for Bermuda immediately following the ceremony. We were to have a suite with a private deck and I intended to push him over-board as soon as we were well out to sea. But something happened to our reservations and we had to come back here." A shudder rippled the girl's slim body. "I thought I could go through with the marriage, wait my chance. But I couldn't." Tears started in her eyes. "I couldn't bear to have him touch me. So when he started drinking and swearing at the voices, I swore he was drunk or crazy and locked myself into the bedroom." She wiped the tears from her eyes and they grew suddenly large and luminous, avenging eyes filled with hate. "And the next time that I saw him, thank God, he was dead. More, he had died as he deserved to die, in pain."

Egg pressed his cupped palms to his aching forehead, then ran them back over his hair. Either Sho Sho had put something in his coffee or he or Renée was crazy. "You told Lieutenant Dwyer this?"

She asked, "That I intended to kill Salter? No. Why should I? It's none of his business."

"And these—er—voices you spoke of, the ones that Salter heard. You didn't hear them, of course."

She said, "I did. I lied to you last night. I heard the voices several times." The corners of her lips turned down. "They almost frightened me to death the first time I heard them. Then I realized what they were. So I lied to Sam because I knew it would worry him even more if he thought no one but himself heard them. Don't ask me to explain where they came from. I don't know. But they were the voices of men whom he had killed with his defective shells just as he killed—" She broke off abruptly and asked if she might have a cigarette.

Egg put one between her lips and lit it. "These, er, voices," he asked cautiously, feeling his way. "What was their general tenor?"

She thought a moment, told him, "Well, when we came into the apartment yesterday afternoon one voice said, '*Ha, look who got married. Look at the pot on him, would you? He should ought to have better sense, an old man like him marrying a chick like that.*'" Renée paused, continued, "Then another voice answered, '*Aw, it's his dough she's after.*'" She insisted, "Of course, I wasn't. But there was no way for them to know that, they probably being in a different outfit than Tom's and not knowing how much reason I had to hate Salter. Then, still another voice said, '*He's got ten million tucked away, they say, in cash.*' Then the other voice wanted to know where the money was and the voice said he

was damned if he knew. And that was when Salter started swearing and I locked myself into the bedroom."

"I see," Egg said. He got up and walked to the window. It had happened at long last. This was it. The little men with the long grey beards had finally caught up with him. This was what came of playing cards and drinking whiskey. Even as a pre-view of an insanity plea it stunk. The only thing in Renée's recital that made sense was the name Tom. The way her tongue had caressed the name he had been someone whom she had loved. He looked over his shoulder to see if the girl was deliberately making a fool of him. She didn't seem to be. The question gaged him but he asked it. "These—voices. Whose voices were they?"

Renée's tone seemed to indicate she considered him not quite bright. "Why, the dead," she answered promptly. "The dead G.I.'s in the mortar outfits whom Salter and Blaney and Caldwell killed by using defective materials to pile up their huge war profit."

As Egg was still chewing on the statement the door bell chimed. Renée opened the door and Blaney and Caldwell walked into the suite as if on cue. Both men were obviously laboring under a terrific strain of some kind. Both men's faces were grim and set as they looked from the girl to Egg.

"So," Blaney said coldly as if coming to some decision. So that is the way the wind lies." He slipped a revolver from his coat pocket and leveled it on Doc Egg. "Well, it won't work, little man. You may have scared Sam with your trick voices. He never was anything but a petty hood at heart. But you aren't frightening me."

Caldwell wanted to know how they could be certain Egg was their man.

Egg shook his head but it refused to clear. What Blaney and Caldwell had just said made no more sense than Renée's fantastic recital. Everyone but himself was crazy and he wasn't any too certain of his own sanity.

"Search him," Blaney ordered.

Caldwell crossed the room and ran experienced fingers down Egg's body. "No gun," he reported. His searching fingers felt the box. "But wait a minute. What's this?"

"Ah," Blaney said when he saw the box. "That proves it. So that's why she wasn't indicted. She was smarter than we thought. She found it in her bag, slipped it to Doc Egg last night and he waltzed it out of the apartment right under Lieutenant Dwyer's nose."

"Okay," Caldwell said coldly. "Come clean, Thistlewaite. Where have you got the dough stashed?"

"You are out of your mind. What the hell are you talking about?"

"Money. Ten million dollars in large sized bills," Blaney said. "I see the whole set up now. When she slipped you bichloride of mercury last night, Renée also tipped you off to where Sam stashed the money he stole from our joint safe-deposit box. Or maybe you had the dough even before Sam died." He tapped the mercury tablets with his finger. "You having this in your possession would seem to indicate that you and Renée have been working hand in hand all the time."

Caldwell sneered, "And then you tried to scare us out of doing anything about it with a manifestation of phoney, dead G.I.'s voices. Come clean, little man. You're caught. What did you do with the dough?"

He slapped Egg with the back of his hand. That was a mistake on his part. The little druggist hit Caldwell so hard he catapulted across the room into one of the huge mirrors, shattering it into seven years' bad luck.

Ten million dollars—Voices—Dead G.I.s—I intended to push him overboard as soon as we were out to sea—safe-deposit boxes—what did you do with the dough? He was up to his neck in mad men and mad women. Egg hoped this taught him a lesson. From now on, henceforth and forever, maidens and young widows in distress, however shapely and starry-eyed, would have to find themselves another Sir Galahad. No maybe, if, or perhaps, about it. This time he was cured.

**YOU GUYS** are out of your minds!" he stormed. I don't even know what you are talking about."

"Yeah?" Blaney jeered. "I don't think so." His thin face was satanically evil in his disappointment and anger. He swung his gun viciously at Egg's head while the still groggy Caldwell scrambled to his feet and clamped a palm over Renée's mouth to stifle the girl's screams. "Give," Blaney panted hoarsely. "Where did you stash the money?"

Egg danced on the balls of his feet, evading the flailing gun barrel, waiting for an opening to whittle the larger man down to his size. He danced in and out, got in a hard blow to the heart, another to the side of Blaney's head.

But the tall, gaunt man was past feeling pain. He took three blows to give one, and swinging the barrel of his gun in ever widening, more vicious arcs, finally crowded Egg into a corner where, the sill of one of the tall windows hard against the back of the smaller man's legs, Blaney suddenly changed his tactics. He stopped swinging and chopped savagely. Egg saw the blow start, reflected a dozen times in the shattered mirror, but was powerless to avoid it. The barrel of the gun landed flush on his left temple. He heard

the thud distinctly. Then in a sudden blaze of light the room of mirrors exploded and he was sky-rocketing through the red-hot, endless space. He wondered if this was death. "Good-bye, Broadway, hello, God." Then the spluttering fuse of the rocket petered out and all was cold and still.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Grave-Bait

HERE, in the huge unheated warehouse on the Manhattan waterfront, the cold, actual cold, was even more intense. Grey wraiths of fog spiraled from the river up through the gaping cracks in the rough board flooring of the pier and settled in a fine mist on their clothing and their faces. Outside of the slap of the waves against the piling, the distant moaning of a fog horn, and the scampering of the rats among the bales, the only sound was the muffled sobbing of the girl who huddled close to him in search of non-existent warmth.

It was a shame, Egg thought, that anyone so young and beautiful should die.

Between sobs, she asked him for the twentieth time what he thought Blaney and Caldwell would do with them when the two men returned. Egg told her he didn't know. He did. Now they had gone this far there was only one thing they could do. But there was no use worrying her. She was on the verge of hysteria now.

"I don't care. I don't care," she repeated. "I haven't done a thing to them. But all I tried to do, I did for Tom."

Tom, Egg knew now, had been her husband, a husky young twenty-three year old lieutenant who had been killed by a bursting, defective shell that had wiped out his entire mortar crew. It was small wonder the girl had hated Salter.

His bound hands and ankles had begun to swell but he continued to flex his fingers and the muscles in his legs on the off chance that he might get another opportunity to use them. He had been a fool. He could see that now. He should have defied Blaney and forced the man to shoot him in Sam Salter's suite. But he hadn't been thinking about himself and, under the circumstances, there had been little else that he could have done.

Egg's lips twisted in a wry smile. Perhaps a hundred people, young Ryan the house detective and Sam Gold among them, had seen him walk through the lobby and out of the hotel under his own power. They had also seen Blaney and Caldwell and Renée. But the little druggist doubted greatly if any of them had realized there was a gun in the folded newspaper that Blaney had.

"I want that money," Blaney had warned him in the suite shortly after consciousness had returned. "I mean to have it. So I'm waltzing you out of here to a place not quite so public where we can talk this over without fear of police interference. But don't get any funny ideas. One bum move, one false gesture out of you, and I'll blow Renée's spine in two."

The statement was matter-of-fact. The gaunt man meant what he said. The loss of the money for which he had traded his honor had driven him out of his mind. Without it his life had lost its purpose. He would wade through blood to recover it. For Renée's sake, Egg wished he knew who had it.

He also wished, despite the cold, that he could remove his hat. Blood had cemented it to his head and his scalp itched. The thought amused him, grimly. Here he sat waiting for death and he was bothered because his head itched. Damn all pretty women. If Renée had been a man he would have turned the poison over to Dwyer the moment he had found it and none of this would have happened.

He still didn't know who had slipped it into his pocket. But now that it was too late for him to do anything about it, he thought he knew exactly who had killed Sam Salter, and why.

Corrosive sublimate usually came in white crystals or in the form of a heavy white powder. It was not a common commodity to be sold over every drug counter. It was against the law to prescribe it as a medicant. It was used chiefly by surgeons as a disinfectant, as an injected specific, and by chiropodists as a soluble solution in the treatment of corns. Few pharmaceutical houses colored and shaped it into tiny coffins as a reminder of its deadly properties. Still Blaney had recognized the box at once, and that from across the room. Ergo, he had seen it before. It would be easy, even for a layman, to powder two of the tablets and put the powder into a capsule. Egg asked the girl if Blaney and Caldwell had stood up with them when she and Salter had been married.

She said they had.

"And after the ceremony you all went somewhere to celebrate and had a big dinner and a few rounds of drinks."

Renée sobbed that was correct.

"And then when Salter complained of the indigestion he had been suffering from for some days, either Blaney or Caldwell gave him a medicine capsule saying it was something that had helped them."

She said she vaguely remembered something of the sort but had been too upset over the cancellation of their steamship reserva-

tions to remember anything very distinctly.

Egg considered the situation. In his short and not unhectic life he had been mixed up in a lot of screw-ball deals but this one took the frozen custard Oscar. The voices he discounted. Salter had been suffering from a guilty conscience. Renée had been hysterical. It did make sense that Blaney and Caldwell would poison Salter for his share of the millions before he poisoned or did away with them. It further made sense that the two men would attempt to shift the blame onto Renée by slipping the poison into her purse. But who had found it there and passed it onto him? And if Salter had looted their joint deposit box before he died, what had he done with the money? The affair hadn't made sense from the start and it was getting no better fast.

He sat erect, sensing, rather than hearing, something near him. The whole atmosphere of the frigid warehouse had changed. It had become suddenly electric. He could feel unseen eyes hot on his face, not unfriendly, rather wary, watchful eyes. Now all he needed was to hear a disembodied voice or two. An old fear caught up with him. Maybe he had fought one fight too many. Maybe he was walking on his heels and didn't know it. But he would swear that he and Renée were no longer alone in the warehouse.

"Do you feel anything?" he asked her.

She said that she felt cold.

Egg waited, tense. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Then there was a distant slamming of a door and Blaney's cadaverous face bobbed through the darkness of the pier shed, highlighted by the electric lantern he was carrying in one hand. "Are you ready to tell us what you did with the money?" he demanded. "Or do you want another beating?"

"You can't," Doc Egg told him soberly, "beat information out of me that I don't possess. I don't know anything about the money."

Caldwell stepped into the circle of light and kicked Egg brutally in the ribs. "You lie. Sam took the money from the box thinking he was going to take a boat ride and leave us holding the bag. Renée tipped you to where he had stashed it. Talk, damn you! Talk!" He kicked Egg again.

"Please," Renée begged. "Believe me. I didn't give that box of poison to Doc. I never saw it until he brought it up to the suite this afternoon. And neither of us know a thing about the money."

"So you say," Blaney sneered. He set the lantern on the floor and, opening the hand bag he was carrying, took out a small blow-torch. "We've tried to be reasonable with you, Doc. But if you insist on being tough, we can get tough, too." He began to pump up

the blow torch. "There are, as you know, quite a few ways of making a man talk. And if I have to burn it out of you, one inch at a time, I intend to have that money. Why be a mule? Why not make it easy on yourself, Doc?"

"I would if I could," Egg said simply.

Blaney stopped pumping the torch and looked at him. "Either you have a lot of intestines or you are leveling."

"Leveling hell!" Caldwell sneered. "Of course he has the money. Who else could have it?" He stooped, adjusted the valve on the blow-torch and lit it. "Hot stuff, eh, Doc? And look." He lifted the lantern so it shone on an open trap door in the pier. Black, oily, water reflected the rays of the lamp. "Talk and it could be we'll take a chance and let you and Renée live. Keep clammed up the way you did during our last little session and that's where you're winding up, through the trap into the river. And we won't know a thing about it. Believe me, chum, we're miles away with an iron-clad alibi. Come on. Wise up, chump. Make it easy on yourself. You haven't got a chance."

The voice, sad, wistful and young, seemed to come from the open trapdoor. "*Just like me, huh?*"

Caldwell's hand that held the lantern wavered. "What the hell?"

Still squatted beside the torch, Blaney whirled on his haunches, tugging his gun from its holster. "Who said that?"

"*I did,*" the youthful voice continued calmly. "*Pfc. Johnny Gibbons, serial number 34408133, first cross to your right as you come in the gate of the American cemetery in Amiens.*"

Great beads of sweat standing out on his face, Caldwell tugged his own gun from its holster, screaming, "It's one of the voices that Sam heard. Shoot. For God's sake, shoot!"

"At what?" Blaney demanded hoarsely.

A grey spiral of fog rose from the open trap and, Doc Egg and Renée forgotten, still holding the lantern high with shaking fingers, Caldwell approached the opening cautiously only to whirl as a second voice jeered from the vastness of the warehouse behind him:

"*Just look at the stupe, would you, Johnny? He thinks you are down in the drink. So help me. He was so busy making money he don't even know where Amiens is.*"

His face a sickly grey in the light of the lantern, Caldwell turned to face the second voice only to have a third and a fourth voice pelt him.

"*Look at the rat shiver.*"

"*Yellow, that's what he is. All three of 'em was yellow. Well, we got one of 'em last night. What are we waiting for? Execu-*

tion squad front and center. Let's take Blaney first."

Still on his knees, Blaney emptied his gun at the voices in blind terror and the reverberation of his shots was echoed by a raucous chorus of jeers.

"Mark up a Maggie's drawers."

"He thinks he can kill us twice."

"The stupe is strictly snafu. He doesn't believe we're dead. He's as dumb as Salter was."

Blaney reloaded his gun with trembling fingers. The voices couldn't be real. "We—we just think we hear them," he told Caldwell. "They—they're just voices in our minds."

"In your brass hat," one of the voices jeered. "Blow that out your homesick bugle. This is the end of the road, Blaney. And not all of your war profits can do you any good."

"I haven't any profits," Blaney screamed. "Doc Egg stole them from me."

"A likely story."

"Listen to the grave-bait lie."

"He did. He did." Fear froth slobbering on his lips, Blaney leveled his reloaded gun on Egg. "Tell them. Tell them the truth, damn you! Tell them or I'll kill you!" His finger whitened on the trigger. There was stark madness in his eyes. "I'm going to kill you anyway. Those voices can't be real. You schemed this up. This is a trick of some kind to drive us out of our minds. But you're not going to do it, hear me. I'm going to kill you—now!"

The single shot was clear cut and distinct. Egg braced his body against the impact but there was none. Instead, his gun unfired, Blaney was staring, incredulous, at the spreading stain on his white shirt front. This was death. He laid his gun carefully on the floor as if it were something fragile and laced his fingers across the wound. They were stained red in a moment. Whimpering, the gaunt man got to his feet painfully. "They shot me," he

told Caldwell. "My God! Someone shot me."

He took a step forward, stopped, raised a clenched fist as if to rap on an invisible door. Then the invisible door opened and he pitched through it—dead.

"Oh, God. Oh, God," Caldwell whimpered and ran sobbing, blindly, down the pier, the forgotten lantern bobbing in his hand. It became a pinpoint of light and disappeared with the slamming of a door.

Egg sat motionless in the dark, the only light the spluttering flame of the blowtorch, listening to the faint rustling of unseen bodies. Then all was silence again except for the slap of the waves, the distant moaning of the fog horn, the scampering of the rats among the bails, and the muffled sobbing of the girl.

"Now—now do you believe me?" she sobbed.

"Yes. I believe you," he said quietly. He inched his way across the floor to the flaring torch and, ignoring the pain, held his bound wrists against it until the burned rope parted. Then he freed his ankles and untied the girl.

A new sound had entered the night, the distant wailing of a siren. Someone had heard the shots on the supposedly deserted pier and had reported them. In four or five minutes at the most the pier shed and the warehouse would be swarming with police. Egg made a quick decision. If he and Renée were here when the police arrived they would find them with a fantastic story and a dead man to explain. And Lieutenant Dwyer did not believe in ghosts.

A wry smile twisted his lips. Neither did he, especially in ghosts able to materialize a very real and deadly gun. But it had been cleverly staged. He saw the whole thing now and could have kicked himself for not having reasoned it out before. It had been so plain all the time. He knew now what it was all about. He knew who had saved his life by shooting Blaney. He knew who had found the poison in Renée's purse and had slipped



... ITS QUALITY

HITS THE SPOT! ☆

it into his pocket to save her. He knew who had the money the firm of Salter, Blaney, and Caldwell had stolen in war profits. More, he was reasonably certain that the 'voices' he had heard were on their way to do something about it.

One good turn deserved another. It could be they might need help. Stuffing Blaney's gun into the waistband of his trousers, he helped Renée to her feet.

"Stop crying," he reproved her gently. He hurried her down the pier toward the street and the girl demanded to know where they were going.

"We," he told her with satisfaction, "are on our way to help some men see a dog about some money."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Taps for a Heel

IT WAS, Egg saw by his watch, a few minutes after two. Washington Square lay silent and deserted, drugged with sleep and bathed in moonlight. Only a few windows around the Square were lighted. He ordered the driver of his cab to drive around it slowly and saw what he expected to see, a light, panel delivery truck parked in front of one of the swank, remodeled, studio buildings on the south side of the Square.

He told the driver to park opposite the Arch and asked Renée to wait in the cab. There might be trouble. He hoped there would be. But there was no need for the girl to become more deeply involved in the affair than she already was.

"Just tell me one thing," he asked her before getting out of the cab. "Who handled your steamship reservations, the ones you told me were cancelled?"

She told him and he said, "I thought so. Wait."

He walked briskly through the arch and across the Square. Here there was no fog but a cold wind was lashing the bare branches of the trees into a frenzy. It was, Egg decided grimly, a beautiful night for a heel to die.

A husky colored boy standing beside the panel truck looked up sharply as he neared it. Egg was conscious of still other eyes watching him from the shadows, the same eyes he had felt in the pier shed.

Somewhere in the night a whip-poor-will called urgently, "*Whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will,*" and a cold shiver ran up the little druggist's back. There were, of course, no whip-poor-wills in New York. They did not, like their cousin the nighthawk, inhabit cities. But he had never realized before how much the bird cry sounded like the first two bars of "*O-ver-there, O-ver there.*"

As he passed the truck, he said pleasantly, "A nice night, eh? Cold but nice."

"Yes," the colored boy answered soberly, "Cold, but a nice night, sir."

Egg walked on briskly and turned south on Sullivan Street. As he remembered, the house had a small back yard accessible through a maze of narrow areaways and connected airshafts leading off the side street. Few people knew of this back way. He doubted if the 'voices' did. But he had played here as a boy when he and Dan Carter and Sam Gold and Pete and Phil and Paddy had thought they were being adventurous in roaming so far uptown. There were a lot of advantages in having been born a poor boy.

He found the dark areaway he sought and wound his way back through the ash and trash cans to the door in the high board fence that bounded the back yard of the studio building. The first two floors of the building were dark but the third, and top, floor was brightly lighted. A rusted fire ladder led up into the night and curved over the cornice. His foot on the first rung, Egg hesitated. This really wasn't his party. He hadn't been invited. But his life and freedom had been endangered. And while he knew little about 'ghosts', he had a hunch that there might be times when a flesh and blood contact would be helpful.

The iron was cold. The rusted rungs burst the puffed blisters on his hand. One floor, two floors. Now he was level with the bedroom of the third floor apartment. The room was lighted, clothes tossed hurriedly on the bed, but he could see no one. He climbed on up over the bulge and onto the roof.

There should be a sky-light. There was. It took up the whole front quarter of the roof. Egg tiptoed toward it and peered in. The room was as large and almost as fantastically furnished as the living room of Salter's suite.

Caldwell, his face a pasty green, was hastily stuffing packets of money into a suitcase. He got them in and couldn't close the lid. Swearing, he tumbled them out again, took two suits and some shirts from the bottom of the case and started to repack the bills only to stop short, staring at the door of the apartment. *It was seemingly opening of its own accord.*

Doc Egg could see his lips move but couldn't hear what he was screaming so he smashed a panel of the skylight with his heel. Caldwell didn't even hear the shatter of the glass. He was too terrified to react to normal sounds.

"No. No," he was screaming. "Get out of here. This is my money now and no one can take it from me. Get out of here. Leave me alone. I didn't kill you. Sam did. It was all Sam's idea. All I did was tag along."

He fumbled more bills into the suitcase, then snatched it up and retreated slowly from the ghastly apparition that now showed in the doorway. The figure was wearing Army fatigues covered with muck and slime and blood. Where the face should be there was only a ghastly hole.

Insane with fear, Caldwell continued to retreat across the room until he disappeared from sight, the apparition following him slowly.

Egg left the skylight and hurried back across the roof to the small shed that housed the inner stairs. He had a fair idea of what Caldwell was trying to do.

"Nix. You can't get out this way," he told him when the frightened man attempted to start up the stairs to the roof. "I'm not dead and I'm not a voice. But after that session on the pier, you sure as hell will be if you try to rush me." He showed Caldwell Blaney's revolver. "Better go back and face it, Caldwell. God knows you have it coming."

Still clutching the suitcase to his chest and whimpering like a scolded child, Caldwell reentered the apartment. But his attempted flight had been purely reflex action. He was no longer frightened of the waiting ghastly figure. He would never be frightened again. His mind, stretched to the breaking point, had snapped.

Egg walked down the stairs and into the apartment after him. "Okay. Take it off, Ryan," he said quietly.

The youthful hotel detective took the blood stained mask from his face. "So. You know."

"Yes," Egg nodded. "I know. I knew back there on the pier when you shot Blaney to save my life. But your name should have tipped me from the start. You're old Mike Ryan's son?"

The younger man nodded. "I am. But this was my own idea. Mike was for killing the three of them like the rats they are. But I wanted them to suffer, suffer like they made other men suffer. I wanted to drive them out of their minds and then catch them with the goods."

Egg lighted a cigarette. "I should have known. It *had* to be you. You were the one man in the hotel who had free access to Sam Salter's suite. And if he saw, or thought he saw, six dead soldiers in his apartment, it had to be you who made them materialize. How did you do it? Rig a projector behind a panel and use those mirrored walls as screens?"

Ryan nodded. "That was part of my equipment. But I also wired the apartment for sound." He grinned. "I could materialize from one to six voices. You want a technical explanation of just how I did it?"

Egg said that wouldn't be necessary. "And

the panel truck that's parked out front?"

"Contains a portable sending set." Ryan's lips twisted in scorn. "It was really very simple. And if Salter and Caldwell and Blaney hadn't had such guilty consciences, one of them would have realized the truck was always standing at the curb whenever they heard voices. We used it the first time in front of the Senate office building with the widow of a G.I. wearing the amplifier that asked Salter if he had ever seen a man blown up by a defective mortar shell."

Once started talking, Ryan couldn't seem to stop. Words bubbled out of him as he removed the bloody costume he was wearing. "We conceived the idea while they were still on trial. If the investigating committee had convicted them, nothing would have happened. But we meant they shouldn't go free."

"We?"

"Yes. We. A handful of G.I.s who saw their buddies die, two or three of our buddies' widows, two kid sisters and one mother. We used all of them at different times, all of them wearing amplifiers connected with the truck." Ryan's smile was grim. "But we were always careful, that is up until tonight, that we never poured on the voices when anyone but Salter or Blaney or Caldwell could hear them and perhaps explain them away. We wanted them to think they were hearing their conscience speak. We wanted to drive them crazy, mad with fear." He pulled up his shirt to disclose a criss-cross of ugly red scars. "There is my personal motive. And I was lucky. I only spent eight months in a hospital because of a shell manufactured by the company started with my old man's money."

EGG asked, "And Renée?"

Ryan's face clouded. "Renée was a problem. We didn't know how to figure her. We still don't know why she didn't get curious about the voices and try to find out how come." Ryan's clouded face grew even darker. "I deliberately used the voice gag while she was in the apartment to try and scare her away from Salter. You see, I knew her husband Tom Hanson well. He died not ten feet away in the same shell burst that got me. And I was about to ask her to work with us when she began to shine up to Salter."

Doc Egg told him the story that Renée had told him and the cloud lifted from Ryan's face. "So she was out to get the rat on her own. Good girl. I might have known." He grinned, a trifle embarrassed. "You know, I could go for that kid."

"You and me both," Egg thought. "What's more, I intend to." He looked from Ryan to Caldwell. Squatted tailor-fashion on the floor, the former munitions manufacturer was unpacking the sheaves of bills and stacking them

as if they were blocks. He noticed Egg watching him and beamed, "I have a lot of money. I have ten million dollars."

Egg looked at Ryan. The younger man shook his head. "To hell with the money. That wasn't what we were after. All we wanted was justice."

"And the bichloride of mercury?" Egg asked. "It was you who slipped it in my pocket?"

"I did," Ryan chuckled. "You see, as I reason it out, Blaney and Caldwell were afraid that Salter intended to double-cross them so they slipped him the poison in capsule form somehow right after he and Renée were married, then put the rest of the stuff in Renée's purse to divert attention from themselves and call attention to her. I found the box in her purse when she asked me to hand over her marriage license from it, right after she had called the desk to report the murder."

The druggist took the box of poison from his pocket and weighed it on his palm.

"But what I don't get," Ryan puzzled, looking at Caldwell, "is how he got his hands on the money. They were plenty disappointed this afternoon when they came out of the bank where the old vault clerk had been killed."

"What old vault clerk?" Egg asked. "Remember, I haven't seen a paper."

Ryan told him the story as he knew it. The police were still investigating the death of the aged man but nothing had been taken from the vault and, to date, the police had not been able to establish a motive for the murder."

The druggist lighted a cigarette and stared at the glowing tip. "I think I can," he said quietly. "Caldwell killed him."

"Caldwell?"

"That's right. And something was taken from the bank, the date slip that he signed, showing he had been in the vault that morning. That's why the file was upset." He admitted, "I don't know the details but I can guess just about what happened. Knowing that Salter was dead and intending to double-cross Blaney, Caldwell showed up at the bank as soon as it opened this morning and looted the box. Then, with the money in his possession he realized he wouldn't live to enjoy it once Blaney learned what he had done. But, if he could pin it onto Salter that was another matter. It was Monday morning. The bank was rushed. The file clerk, you say, had been sent on an errand. Either there was no vault guard at the branch or he was helping the lad on the first floor and Caldwell suddenly realized that no one but the old vault clerk had seen him. So he stuck a knife into his back, snatched his

signed date slip off the spike, upset the file and scrambled out the side door."

"That sounds to me," Ryan said.

Egg continued, "Returning to the bank a few hours later with Blaney took nerve. But he was gambling for ten million dollars. And he almost got away with it. Blaney naturally jumped to the conclusion that Salter had double-crossed them and stashed the money somewhere else. Then, finding the poison in my pocket strengthened Caldwell's hand. He knew if he could convince Blaney that Renée and I, working together, had found Sam Salter's stash, he was safe for all time. That's why he was so tough about it."

Ryan repeated that the solution sounded to him. "And all the time he had the money here in his apartment."

"So it would seem," Egg agreed.

"Well," Ryan said quietly, "I guess that's it. I've done what I set out to do." His lips tightened. "I don't see it that way, but my shooting Blaney, I suppose, is murder." He nodded at the phone. "So I suppose you had better call Lieutenant Dwyer and get this over with."

Egg snuffed out his cigarette, stared a long moment at the ashes then raised his eyes to meet Ryan's. "I don't know what you are talking about. Scram. Go on. Get out of here." He hesitated briefly. Renée was young and very lovely. Now that her score with Salter had been settled, it wasn't inconceivable that she might learn to care for him. On the other hand, Ryan was her own age. It would take her a lot less time to learn to care for him. Perhaps she already did. "And pick up Renée on your way," he added. "You'll find her sitting in a cab on the far side of the Square."

Ryan protested, "But how will you explain things to Lieutenant Dwyer?"

"I'll be damned if I know," Egg admitted.

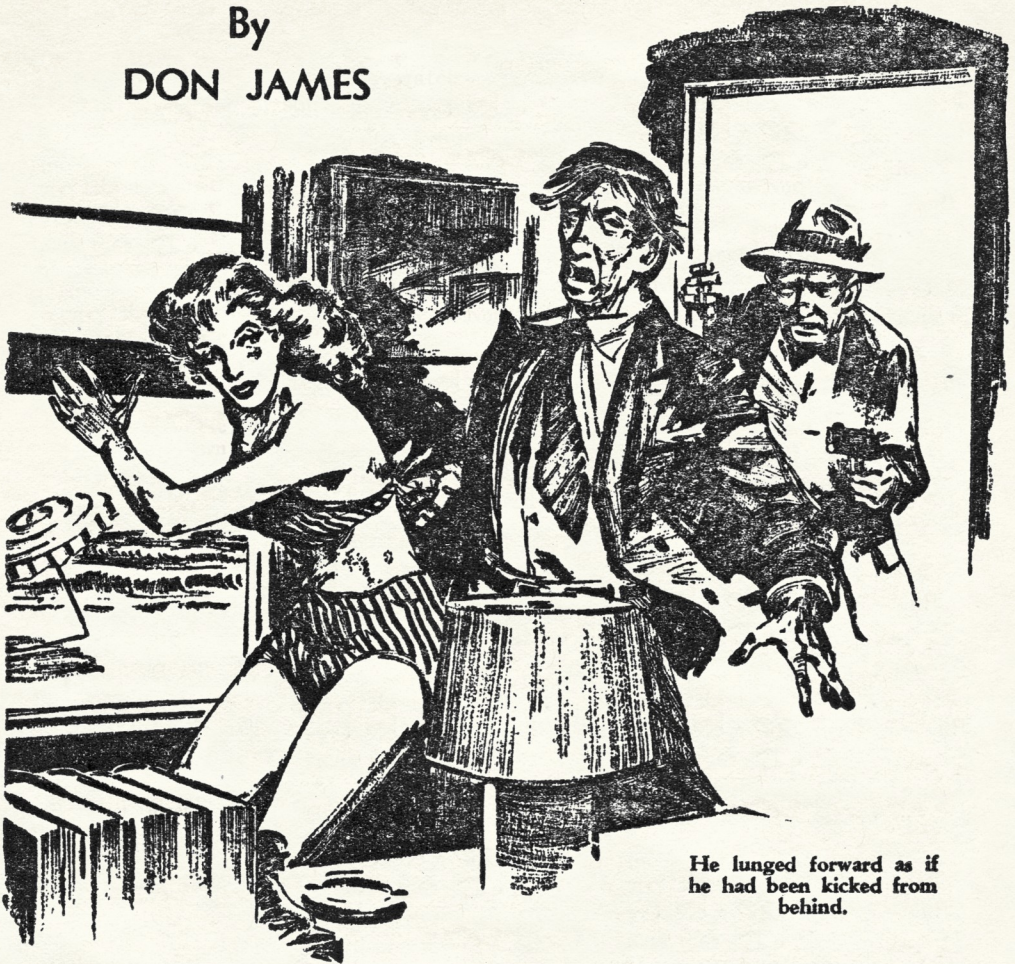
A grin split his face as he pushed the younger man out the door. "I'll probably tell him the truth—with variations."

He turned back and studied Caldwell. The man's eyes were blank, his lips were slack, he was tossing loose bills in the air and laughing with childish delight as they floated back to the carpet. Caldwell was his answer. The man's mind was gone forever. He was guilty of at least one murder. Why not pin the whole thing on him, voices, dead soldiers, Blaney's death, Sam Salter, the aged vault clerk, all wrapped up in one package deal? He could tell Dwyer the man had confessed just before his mind had snapped. More, he had the money to back up his story.

His grin widened as he picked up the phone, dialed Centre Street and asked for Lieutenant Dwyer's extension.



By  
DON JAMES



He lunged forward as if he had been kicked from behind.

## THE DARK CAN'T HIDE YOU!

**T**HIS WAS it. Some day your luck ran out. The payoff came and no matter what you did, or tried to do, it wouldn't help.

He shut his eyes, and that didn't help. It was strange. No pain was there—only the numbness where the bullet had gone into his side. Shutting his eyes only made him feel more clearly that he was dying. He opened them again and the carpet and the table leg

near him became very personal, intimate things. They were the last things he would ever see. Living, you saw beautiful girls and mountains and traffic on city streets, but when you died, maybe you only saw a ceiling or a rug or a table leg.

For a few seconds more he would have his identity. Johnny Moser would mean a living man. Then he would die and "Johnny Moser" would mean something inanimate.

*There on the soft sands of the blue Pacific, Alice Moser saw one brief moment blaze into an eternity. . . . For her husband's hidden past life came roaring up, and left in its wake a nightmare of mayhem against a gruesome backdrop of shrouds.*

He didn't want to die. Desperately he tried to press his hand against the wound, tried to hold life within him a little longer. It was no use. His strength was gone.

Then just before he died, he thought of Alice and how it was by the beach in California—the white stucco house where breakers made a symphony of rhythm. Alice in her white swim suit, her hair golden in the sun, her skin brown from the sun.

He stared at the table leg and it became dim and blurred, and quietly a great darkness came.

**I**N FRONT of the hotel, two men hastily crossed the sidewalk and climbed into a black sedan. The driver, a thin, sallow-looking youth, slipped the car into gear and edged into traffic. The other man, who was medium-sized, middle-aged, and looked as if he might be a salesman, removed an automatic pistol from a pocket and put it in the glove compartment on the dashboard.

"That's half the job, Mort," he said to the driver. "We go to California for the other half." He said it like a man discussing a business deal.

"A dame, isn't it?" the youth asked.

"A beautiful dame."

Mort neatly slid through a traffic opening. "I don't like it when they're dames, Pete. Especially when they got looks."

Pete gave him a disdainful smile. "You don't want to let dames get in the way of your work, Mort. You want to watch that."

The youth scowled and concentrated on his driving. After a while he said, "They got us reservations on the late plane. We pick them up at the field."

"What names?"

"Our own. Pete Lech and Mort Titan."

The other nodded.

Mort said, "I don't like it. We can be traced."

"So what? They've got to have a reason to trace us."

"I just don't like it."

Pete shrugged. He lit a cigarette. "I was off an inch," he said. "He probably lived five minutes after we left."

"Maybe the silencer throws you off."

As if Mort's words had reminded him, Pete Lech dug the silencer from a pocket and put it in the compartment with the gun.

"We've got about three hours," Mort said. "How about a show?"

"Yeah. A good western. I like them."

Mort would rather have stopped at a burlesque, but he recalled Pete's crack about his interest in women.

"Okay," he said. "I like them best, too."

\* \* \*

For a long time after Alice Moser re-

ceived the telegram from the New York police, she sat at an open window overlooking the beach and the breakers. It was very early in the morning and she wore a terry cloth robe over pajamas.

She was young and vibrant and the thoughtful frown on her forehead could not detract from her beauty. She lit a cigarette with boyish motions and smoked quietly on the window seat, her legs drawn up beneath her, the wind stirring her rich, blonde hair.

"I should feel more," she thought. "He's dead. Even with the way it was, there should be something else in how I feel."

After a while she went to the kitchen and made coffee. While the water heated, she changed into a white swim suit. She had to go down to the beach in the sunshine. The sun would drive away the chill in her body; the chill in her mind.

She was drinking coffee when a battered sports coupe stopped in the driveway and Dave Craig got out. He was hatless and very tan—a tall young man wearing slacks and sports coat. He moved with a lanky carelessness, but alertness was about his eyes.

Alice went to the door and opened it.

"I suppose you saw it on the AP wire," she said.

He nodded. "I got here as soon as I could."

She took him into the kitchen and poured coffee for him. They sat at the kitchen table, the young man sprawling, with his chair sideways to the table so that he could stretch his long legs. He frowned at his shoes and lit a cigarette.

"How do you feel about it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm not sure. Maybe if I had loved him—" She let the sentence die.

"The New York cops wired you?" he asked.

She nodded.

"It was murder," he said.

"Yes. That's what they said."

He searched his pockets and brought out a flimsy from a press association teletype. He put it on the table and she read it.

NEW YORK, Aug. 27 (AP)—Johnny Moser, one-time west coast band leader, was found dead in a hotel room early this morning. Police state that he had been shot through the left lung by an unidentified assailant.

She placed the flimsy on the table without comment. Craig finished his coffee and looked at her.

"I'm worried about you," he said.

"Don't. I'm all right."

"I don't mean about how you feel. I meant about you. I think you're in danger."

It was like her to show no alarm nor fright.

Instead, she let her forehead cloud again with the thoughtful frown. "But my part in it was so small—"

"That doesn't matter. They had to kill him and now you're the one who can tell the cops how it was. You're the definite link. Without you, the cops can only suspect. With you, the cops have names and material facts to work with."

"I couldn't tell much. Just that Johnny was mixed up with the syndicate, and a crime syndicate sounds like fiction."

"Not to the cops. They *know*."

"What should I do?"

"I'm going over and get Hal Bryce before he leaves for his office. He's one of the D.A.'s assistants. I'll bring him here and we'll talk with him. I want you to tell him all about it and then we'll let him decide the best thing to do."

"What do you think he'll do?"

"Put you under police protection first. That's important."

She studied his face and saw the worry in his eyes. She smiled.

"You do a lot of worrying about me, Dave."

"Why shouldn't I? The way I am about you."

He stood and scowled down at her.

"This isn't exactly the time or the place," he said. "But I've been waiting until you were absolutely free—" He hesitated and then said, "Skip it for now."

Slim and rounded in her bathing suit, she came around the table so that she faced him, her eyes searching his face.

"I know," she said. "But I haven't loved him for a long time, Dave. I don't know if I ever did. It's been nice to pretend this friendship between us, but—"

"But what, Alice?"

She stood on her toes and her arms were about his neck. He held her to him. Their kiss was hard and final.

"But we've waited long enough," she said.

"That I'll buy," he grinned. "Now I'm going to make the D.A. put you on ice for me. I'll be back within an hour."

**I**N THE early morning hours the air was rough out of Cheyenne and Mort Titan was sick. He was so sick that he never wanted to see a plane again; so sick that he even had lost interest in the comely stewardess who was looking after him.

Pete Lech watched him with sardonic amusement.

"Can't take it, huh?" he grinned.

Mort gave him a venomous look and retched again. He wished Lech would get sick. A smart guy, Lech. Smart but tough. He remembered how Lech had shot the guy back

in the hotel room. There was something in Lech's eyes after he did it. It was something wild and hot as if liked killing guys.

The younger man shuddered and tried to keep the sickness down. He had got a big kick out of it when they told him he was flying to the west coast. When he was a kid on the east side he'd watched planes and wondered if he'd ever ride in one.

Well, things like that happened if you worked for the syndicate. Of course, a lot of other things had happened first. The syndicate didn't pick you up unless you had a reputation. The cops had wanted him, too, only they weren't sure. But the syndicate knew exactly who had killed that bookie, and the guard in the payroll stick-up, and the little Italian in Brooklyn.

The syndicate knew, all right, and now he was working for it. They did things right. If they needed you in Los Angeles, you went first class in an air liner. He didn't know of any other kid who had lived in the neighborhood who was riding places in air liners.

But he hadn't known he would be sick. They could have their damned planes from now on. Or maybe he should have chewed the gum like Lech had told him to do. He hadn't because Lech acted so smart about it, like he knew all the answers.

The plane droned through the gray dawn-light and after a while the air became smoother and he felt better.

He wondered if the dame was beautiful like Lech said. He didn't like killing dames. Not young, beautiful ones. If a babe has all those looks, why kill her? Why deal out death when there is all the rest if you keep her alive?

It all became a little confused in his mind and he eyed the stewardess with renewed interest.

Lech saw his glance and said, "Don't you ever keep your mind off dames?"

Unexpected anger flared in Mort. "Why don't you go to hell?" he snapped.

Lech's eyes narrowed. "Listen, punk—"

"I'm tired listening."

"You're taking orders from me, punk."

"I'll take orders, but that's it. I'm sick of your lip."

Suddenly Lech relaxed and smiled crookedly.

"Worrying about the job?" he asked.

"I'll take care of my part of it."

"Okay. That's a good way to be—if you want to live long."

Mort didn't answer. He kept his eyes straight ahead. Neither of them said another word until they landed in Los Angeles.

At the airport a small, dark man met them. Lech knew him and called him Harry. He didn't bother to introduce Mort Titan.

Harry led them to a gray sedan and they crowded into the front seat. The car looked like thousands of other tired cars of 1939 or 1940 vintage, but when Harry took it into traffic, Mort knew that the car was souped up. It had speed.

"Things set?" Lech asked.

"Set," Harry nodded. "She lives alone at the beach. Not another house in a quarter of a mile. There's a place to park where neighbors won't see the car. I'll drive you there now. You do the job, lay over three days and go back by train."

Lech said, "We're alibied in case anything happens?"

"The boss will explain that after the job. You're alibied."

Lech reached over the back of the seat for the briefcase he had carried on the plane. He opened it and inspected the gun and the silencer without taking them from the case.

Harry looked sideways into the briefcase and smiled.

"You won't need the silencer. The surf will kill the noise."

Lech nodded in satisfaction. "Okay by me. The damn thing throws me off. I like a good, clean job. Especially when it's a dame."

**A**FTER CRAIG had left, Alice Moser finished another cup of coffee and quickly washed the cups, saucers, and dripolator. A small conflict of emotions held her and she hurried through her task so that she could go into the sunlight.

"I have to think about it," she told herself.

Then, abruptly, she knew that there was very little to think out. Once she had thought she was in love with a man named Johnny Moser and she had married him and for a few months she had told herself that she was happy. Only it hadn't been happiness. It had been a strange, breathless excitement that had come suddenly and decisively to an end one night when Johnny Moser had slapped her. Shortly afterwards they had separated.

Other troubles came to Johnny. His band broke up. He disappeared from the entertainment world. For months she didn't see him. She found a job singing in a nightclub and she had lost none of her skill that she had when she sang with Johnny's band. She kept the small beach home that she and Johnny had bought.

There was the day when Johnny came home to her, broken, desperate. It was pity that prompted her to give him shelter for the two weeks that followed. For two weeks she nursed him from the drunken nightmare that had forced him to her. For two weeks he told her the things that had happened to him, of the underworld into which he had slipped.

Twice men came to see him, eyeing her

suspiciously, waiting until she was out of the room before they talked with Johnny. His two words of explanation were, "The syndicate."

He left as suddenly as he had come and for a year she had heard nothing from him. She had waited until her nightclub contract was up before planning a trip to Reno.

And during the year of waiting, Dave Craig, the tall, young newspaper man, had come into her life. Eventually she told Dave about Johnny: his trouble, the things that had happened, all that she knew about him.

So now Johnny was dead and she would marry Dave and there wasn't much to think over. The thinking had been done and the answers were right. There was nothing to worry about except the danger, if Dave were right.

"He must be wrong," she thought. "They wouldn't kill me. There's no reason for them to kill me."

The worry in Dave's eyes was still in her mind, though, and suddenly she shuddered. *He might be right.*

She left the house and walked down on the beach into the sunshine and breeze. Near the surf she stretched out on the warm sand and shut her eyes. She couldn't stay long. Dave would be returning with the District Attorney's man. But for a few moments she could lie in the sun and let her mind empty itself of thought.

Down the sand two couples played with a beach ball, a young wife sunned her baby, and not far away in a parked car, three men watched Alice Moser.

"There she is," Harry said.

Lech's eyes narrowed and he glanced at the couples playing with the ball and at the mother with the child.

"What do we do?" Mort asked nervously.

"Get into the house. I'll stay there and you go down and bring her back to the house where those people can't see it." As he spoke he took the gun from the briefcase and put it in a coat pocket.

"Let's go," he said quietly.

The front door to the house was locked. So was the door between the garage and the kitchen. They went around to the back.

The house was on a steep bank. In front, the house was level with the street. At the back, it was a two story house with a full basement wall, facing the beach, and a door that was unlocked.

They went into the basement and saw a small party room, a shower stall, laundry trays, a furnace. Stairs led upwards.

"Now listen," Lech said. "I'm going upstairs where I can watch the street. You go down and get her. If anyone comes, I'll get out this way and we'll have to do it outside.

We can circle back to Harry and meet at the car."

"But what if those people on the beach see us and—"

"To hell with them. We've got a killing to do."

The wild, hot look was in Lech's eyes again. Mort stared at him. He said, "Geeze, you act as if you like to kill—"

"That's right, punk," Lech said softly. "Go get her."

\* \* \*

As Pete Lech and Mort Titan approached the white stucco beach house, Dave Craig sat at a breakfast table six miles away and talked with Hal Bryce of the District Attorney's office.

"I'm going to call New York," Bryce said. "I want all the stuff they can give me before I talk with the girl."

Craig said, "During the two weeks that Moser came back he told her plenty. She has names, things that happened, background. If you can get enough to help break his murder, you may be able to clean up a lot more."

"Why didn't she come to us before?"

Craig shrugged. "Why? Until now they were just things he had told her. No one had been hurt. Sometimes she didn't even believe what he said."

Bryce nodded. "I guess it could be that way," he admitted.

"You'll give her protection?"

"If what you think is right, she'll have plenty." Bryce tipped ashes into a tray. "If it was the syndicate, why did they rub him out?"

"He must have known something. He was afraid of them."

"Maybe New York knows," Bryce said. "Wait here. I'll call."

Moodily Craig filled a coffee cup as he waited. He wished they'd get over to Alice's place.

THE SAND made heavy walking. It sifted into Mort's shoes and dragged at his feet. At first it irritated him, but as he came closer he became more aware of the girl and forgot the sand.

Lech was right. She was beautiful. She was like something on a magazine cover. Her eyes were closed and instinctively he walked more softly. He didn't realize that the surf drowned all sounds of his approach. His only thought was to get close enough to look at her as she lay there in the sun without warning her.

Finally he stood beside her and his eyes were filled with the soft brown of her tanned skin against the whiteness of her swim suit. Excitement made his throat tight as he stared at her.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. Her body tensed and in a smooth flow of motion she lifted herself on her hands so that she sat up, braced back on her firm, tanned arms.

"Yes?" she said.

Mort pulled his eyes away from her body and looked into her face. He fumbled for words.

"You Alice Moser?" he asked.

She nodded.

"We want to see you at your house."

"We?"

"Yeah. A friend of mine and me."

She frowned, only the frown even looked good.

"You're from the syndicate, aren't you?" she asked.

He was thrown into confusion. It wasn't the thing she should have said. He didn't expect it. Nor was there fear in her eyes—just a calm, steady look as if she was carefully thinking.

"We just want to see you," he said.

But the question had brought back the purpose of his errand and without realizing he stared at the spot on the white swim suit

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where the bullet would go in. The white cloth would be stained red. The firm, rounded girl-flesh would no longer be alive. There would be only the stain and a dead body.

"Geeze . . . it ain't right," he thought. "Not for *her*." Not for a girl who had the kind of smile that she was giving him now; a full, pleasant smile that showed white teeth.

Alice was making a very conscious effort to smile. Abruptly and completely she was cold with fright, but her mind was brilliantly clear.

She knew why the man was there. She knew with certainty why he wanted her to go to the house. She also knew the look in his eyes. A girl with a good figure and features knows it. She catalogued it as the 'hungry-male look.'

The man probably lived by instincts. He was not too intelligent. The rough corners were too evident. From all this came the key to what she would say and do. The disarming smile was a part and she forced her voice into calmness.

She said, "You're here to kill me. I won't go to the house."

The man's eyes widened in surprise and after a few seconds he wet his lips nervously and glanced about them. "Listen, you'd better come with me," he said.

"No."

"Yes!" Now he was trying hard to be tough and dominant. He narrowed his eyes and his mouth became a tight line as if he had practiced the expression before a mirror.

For an instant she let her eyes leave him long enough to look down the beach at the two couples. There was protection!

The wind whipped the man's clothing against him. There was no revealing bulge of a gun beneath the cloth.

"All I need is a start—just a few feet," she thought. Carefully she kept the smile on her lips. It was confusing him. He was puzzled and he was becoming wary.

Her body tightened as she planned how to do it. She would roll away from him. Just a half turn until her toes were into the stand and she could spring away in a racing start.

*Now!*

She did it quickly and neatly. Her toes dug into the sand and she uncoiled the muscles of her slim legs.

The man moved, too. For a fraction of a second she thought she was free. Then a hand pushed her off balance. She stumbled and tried to catch herself with outspread hands. She fell. The man bent over her. A hand clenched her left wrist. Strong fingers bent her thumb back. Paint ripped up her arm and she grimaced.

"Get up!" the man said.

The pain in her hand was agonizing. She got up awkwardly. She looked into his face and saw the pinched nostrils, the sharp, hard eyes.

"Up to the house," he said. He started to walk. The pressure on her thumb remained steady and painful. She walked with him.

"Why don't I stop?" she thought. "If he breaks my hand, there will only be that much pain. If I go with him, I'm going to die!"

She faltered. The pressure on the back-bent thumb increased and tears blinded her. She walked again. Panic became part of her. The excruciating pain was forcing her on in spite of herself.

Now the house was upon them and the man opened the basement door. He shoved her through the doorway. Inside the man stopped. The pressure on the strained thumb became less. She heard the man's quick breathing and saw his lips tremble. A singleness of purpose flared in his eyes as he looked into her face. His eyes left hers, centered on her mouth, became hot.

The fingers left the thumb, but the hand still clenched her wrist. Abruptly it forced her arm down, back, and up so that she was pulled against the man. The fingers that had abused the thumb now cupped her chin and lifted her face. The man's breath was in her nostrils and the face was becoming blurred with nearness through the tears. Instinctively she tried to pull away, but the man remained with her. His mouth descended upon hers.

Her strength was gone and it was only the new pain of the uplifted arm in back that made her stand erect. She fought for breath. Dimly she heard the sound of a door opening at the top of the stairs. A man's voice came down to them.

"Cut it, punk. You're not here for that. You're here to kill her. Bring her up. Quick!"

The man relaxed and held her away. He didn't say a word.

At the head of the stairs another man looked down at them. "Can't leave them alone, can you punk!" he mocked. "Dame crazy." He stepped back to let them by.

**T**HE STAIR landing was by the kitchen and the door was open. Alice walked past him and stopped by the electric stove. The man who had brought her stopped, too. The one who had stood at the top of the stairs closed the door and faced them.

"Mort's crazy about dames," he explained again. "But maybe a dame ought to be kissed good-bye. That was your last kiss, baby."

She watched his hands. As long as his hands were still she would live. Her life remained in the movements of his hands.

The man named Mort said angrily, "Lay off, Lech!"

The man called Lech smiled at him. "You don't like me," he said flatly.

"I hate your guts."

"You talk too much, Mort. You want to watch that, too."

"Go to hell!"

The hands still were quiet. They were square hands with strong fingers. Black hair curled on the backs of them. They didn't look any different from millions of hands, but they were going to kill her.

As long as they were quiet, time was passing. She knew that if she raised her eyes she would see the passing of moments on the electric kitchen clock on the wall. A small wheel whirled behind a slit and once every moment a black mark filled the opening.

With the passing of every minute that the hands were quiet, she would be alive. And with every moment that passed, it would be that much closer to the time when Dave would return with the man from the District Attorney's office. *She had to keep the man's hands quiet.* "Why are you doing this to me?" she asked dully.

"Mort, she wants to know why," Lech said.

Mort shook a cigarette from a package. His fingers trembled and one spilled to the floor.

"Why do you have to kill me?" she insisted.

Lech's fingers twitched a little and a cold knot settled in the pit of her stomach. Maybe it was coming now. But the hands didn't move.

"You know why, baby. You know he was causing us trouble. You know that he told us if anything happened to him, you had all the dope he was using to pressure us. That if he died, you'd go to the cops. Well, he died. And you're not going to the cops."

"He lied. I have nothing to tell them."

"That's what you say."

"I promise I won't—"

"It's no use. I don't give the orders. I just take them."

Had another minute gone by? Two minutes? Or only seconds? She looked beyond him at the clock. The black mark passed. She said, "I'll do anything you say. I'll leave the country. Anything! I haven't seen Johnny for a year. I was getting a divorce. We were all washed up and I haven't cared for months. There was nothing when he died—I mean, nothing in the way I felt. If you kill me it will be a waste. It isn't necessary."

The black mark still hadn't passed again. Lech said, "You're wasting your breath." His laugh mocked her. "And you haven't much left to waste. Has she, Mort?"

"Geeze, Lech! Can't you—" Mort's voice died in futility and he smoked jerkily at his cigarette.

Beyond Lech the black mark passed. Only one minute. She needed more. Much more. She needed time until she heard a car stop outside. Then she thought of something else. When the car stopped, it wouldn't stop Lech's hands—if she were still alive. There would be several minutes when the hands must not move.

She looked down from the clock into Lech's eyes. There was intense excitement behind their glassy hardness. His lips twitched. She knew instinctively what it was. He liked to kill. He was anticipating the kill. The drama of waiting, building it up, stretching it out, was doing something for him that he liked. Her mind raced in desperation. Thoughts were like quick glimpses of pictures on a bright screen. They blended into a plan.

She put her hands behind her and leaned back against the stove. Her fingers sought a switch. She prayed it was the right one. She cleared her throat sharply as she flipped the switch. The throat noise killed the small click. How did you handle a man like this? How did you get into his mind and the grotesque things hidden there?

"I can't stop you?" she asked.

"You can't stop me."

"Will—will it hurt?"

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"No. I'm good at my business. Just a little numbness maybe."

She controlled a shudder. She felt the first tinge of heat through the thin swim suit.

"Where?" she asked. "Where will you shoot me?"

"Your heart." He smiled thinly. "Your heart belongs to daddy. Me and my gun!"

Mort's voice exploded huskily. "For God's sake, Lech!"

"No sense of humor," Lech said. "You want to watch that."

Behind him another black mark crossed the opening on the clock.

Her eyes went to his hands again. Desperately she fought for time. Anything! And the plan. It had to fit the hazy plan. "Here?" she asked. She placed a hand over her lower ribs.

"A little toward the center."

"You won't miss? I'm afraid of pain."

He watched her with gleaming eyes. The game pleased him. "I won't miss," he said softly.

"Give me your hand," she whispered. "Let me show you where the heart beats are. If I've got to die, please don't let it hurt!"

"I know the place," he said grimly.

It was fantastic. It was becoming a nightmare to her. She glimpsed another black mark flick past on the face of the clock.

"Your hand," she whispered.

**H**E LAUGHED again, but held his hand out. "Show me, baby," he said. "I'll do you a favor. I'll put the bullet where you want it."

His wrist was cool in her hot palm. She closed her fingers about it and she felt the heat in back of her.

Suddenly she jerked, turned, pulled his arm forward and past her side. Her free hand clamped down. With desperate strength she pressed the palm of his hand down on the glowing stove plate that she had turned on. He screamed in pain and jumped back.

There was the smell of scorched flesh. She moved fast. Mort was motionless in surprise. As she dashed through the doorway into the dining room she saw Lech paw with his left hand at a pocket on his right side. His voice was a screaming shout.

"Stop her! You fool! Stop her!"

A sharp, spitting crack sounded. Mort stumbled forward as if he had been kicked from behind.

Alice heard him fall just as she released her fingers from the window sill of the open window. She dropped and hit the sand.

Even as she ran she heard the sound of a car in front. She screamed. A car door slammed and Dave Craig's voice shouted.

She crouched beside the house. Dave and a man stared at her.

"There's a man inside! He's got a gun!" she cried.

The flat, cracking noise sounded again and the windshield of the battered roadster had a splintered hole. Craig and his companion ducked low.

A gray sedan swerved down the highway toward the house in a grinding of gears. A small dark man was at the wheel.

Suddenly the house door opened and Lech sprinted across the lawn toward the approaching car. He had to pass within feet of Craig's parked car.

He hastily threw a shot from the gun in his left hand. It scarred grass three feet from the men. The gray sedan was hardly slowing and Lech was trying to time it right. He was close to the highway now and his eyes were intent upon the sedan. He jammed the gun into a side pocket. He started his leap a fraction of a second after Dave Craig lunged forward in a tackling dive. Craig's shoulder hit Lech's legs.

Lech half turned in the air and crashed. The gray sedan swerved, but too late. It jolted twice sickeningly, slowed a trifle, and then sped away. Behind it the still figure of a man lay on the pavement. His right hand lay palm upwards and Dave Craig and Hal Bryce could see the mass of blisters that covered the skin.

Alice groped her way across the lawn into Dave's arms. She felt them about her and she shut her eyes.

From the doorway of the house, Hal Bryce called to Dave.

"There's one in here. I think he's dying. He's talking. Get in here. I want you to hear. He's telling plenty. . . ."

\* \* \*

Mort Titan felt his lungs fill with wetness and his breath was hard to get. He had told the two guys what they asked. What did he have to lose? He wouldn't be dying if it weren't for the syndicate.

It was funny. He had felt worse on the plane. This was a choking and some pain, but on the plane he had been really sick. The stewardess. She had nice legs. He liked to watch her walk.

But the girl on the beach! He was glad she'd got away.

*It was getting dark.*

This was it and he was afraid. He didn't want to die.

He'd never see her again. Nor any girl. Nor feel lips again.

If he could just get his eyes open maybe she'd be there. . .

Quietly a great darkness came.



# TO CROSS A MOUNTAIN

By  
TALMAGE POWELL

*All the black bitterness and hate one man could ever know rose up in Jim as he stared at the surly peak of Old Baldy. . . . For to break the curse of that monster-mountain would take an army of shrouds — when mere human blood could do nothing at all!*

After that he recalled only endless stretches of icy, black water.



**W**ORKING his noiseless way through the trees over a carpet of dead pine needles and fallen leaves, he came down the mountainside. When he reached the edge of the timber line, he paused.

He was buried in the deep darkness of the vast Blue Ridge mountain night. A new-risen moon spilled soft silver over the scene before him. He smelled freshly turned earth; he looked at the shadowy, undulating land of the valley, falling gently away before him into the great maw of night. And off down yonder his gaze rested on the shadowy hulks of buildings: the smokehouse, the well-house, the barn, the oblong, box-like farmhouse that had been his home. Lamplight flickered in the windows and from the old stone chimney at the north end a wreath of gray smoke coiled its way skyward, catching a little of the silver of the moon.

The young man was trembling with fatigue; trembling, too, from something else, and as he looked at the farmhouse, he hacked the catch away from his throat with an animal sound. Beneath the heavy matting of beard, his face hardened.

He lifted his gaze up from the buildings, up over the valley and saw the ragged silhouettes of mountains piled, it seemed, to the ends of the earth. And there in the distance, the young man's gaze paused on Bald Mountain. Eternal, enigmatic and wise with the wisdom garnered from the birth of the earth, old Baldy stood with her solid granite peak glistening faintly in moonlight.

A screech owl sent up its nerve-shattering cry in the night. A breeze, heady with the smell of earth and green things growing, rustled down the valley, exploring the young man's face with night-chilled fingers. He

wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "I'm going to lick you, Baldy," his slow, liquid accent was a harsh whisper. "All my life you been standing there. Kind of the boss mountain, ain't you, Baldy? Hemming me in, and laughing at me when I felt things I still don't rightly know how to put into words. But I'm going to walk across your belly, Baldy! Tonight. Me and her. We're going to see what's on the other side!"

He seemed to draw strength from the short speech. Moving with the silence and stealth of the hunted animals of the hills, he made his way down toward the farmhouse.

A horse whickered in the barn. A lean hound dog came from under the house, sidling up to him, whipping his legs with a wagging tail as the young man crept up to the lighted window. Through the space between the calico curtains, his gaze swept the kitchen, taking in the aged, smoked walls of pine, the long pine table and cane-bottomed chairs, the big, black stove that had always eaten so much hard-chopped wood and that had been so cheerful on a winter morn when he was a young-un, sleepy-eyed, wishing the sun were up. Near the cupboard sat an old woman, bent a little in her chair, her weathered face a maze of wrinkles, her hair, white as virgin snow, done in a knot at the back of her head. She was peeling apples. A dishpan of the fruit was at her feet, a pair of apples in the lap of her voluminous apron. As he looked at her, pain scalded his eyes for an instant. His lips formed a word: "Ma. . ." And he thought of Rhodes. Herm Rhodes, the man they said he had killed.

He tapped on the window pane and saw her stiffen. She stared at the window, jerking to her feet, apples spilling from her apron and rolling unheeded across the wide-plank, sand-scrubbed floor. He dropped away from the window, and was standing beside the weathered back porch when she opened the door for him.

"Jim . . . !" Her hands reached out to him, touched his arms, explored the dusty matting of his beard, his gaunt cheekbones, and the dark-settled places under his eyes. "Jim, you're hungry!"

"I reckon I am. Anybody here?"

"Just me. Your Pa went over to brother Joe's and won't be back before midnight. Oh, come in, son, come in! It hurts me, seeing you looking like this."

"A man can't take to the hills and live off the land without losing a little weight," he said.

He entered the kitchen and shivered as the warmth of it enveloped him; he smelled recently cooked bread and bacon and his insides felt as if they were curling, the way the bacon might have sizzled and curled in the pan.

"THERE'S food in the warmer, Jim," she moved quickly to be so old, opened the stove warmer, set plates before him on the table. Caked with dust, he dropped the wiry, leather length of him in a chair. She sat beside him, not speaking while he wolfed the bacon, bread, and snap beans. But her eyes were eloquent. She had borne seven sons, and Jim, her youngest, she'd never been able to understand. In her quiet, groping way, she had tried. She had known that he was different. When a child, he'd been given to wandering in the fields, looking at the mountains ringing them in, watching clouds sail free and clean overhead. She knew that he hated the farm and in some manner was involved in a struggle with the hills. Yes, with old Baldy. Crossing old Baldy would be more than just a physical act with Jim.

It wasn't the mountains that had whipped her Jim. It was the old folks, she and Pa. Her face was bleak, tired. She could see it now. She and Pa had never meant any harm, but they'd never encouraged him to go, and he had stayed, because all the other boys were gone, on farms of their own, and he hadn't wanted to leave the old folks all alone.

"Jim," her voice sounded sudden and harsh in the kitchen. "Jim, you didn't kill Herm Rhodes?"

"No, Ma."

"And now you've come back? You're going to sheriff Rogers and. . ."

He turned his head slowly, looking at her, his eyes cutting her words off. "I'm going to cross old Baldy, Ma. I'm going to cross that mountain and spit in her face. I've tried your and Pa's and Ellen's way. I went to work for old miser Rhodes to show Ellen's pa that I could work for a man without ending up in a cuss fight. I wanted money for me and Ellen to get married on. I looked after the place here and worked for old Herm and somebody came along and knifed him. For all that money he had stashed away, I reckon. I didn't do it, but I knowed the minute I walked in the house and found him that they'd say I had. The old miser's money was the reason, they'd say, and who else could have done it? I was supposed to be the only one on his place that evening."

"But running away, Jim. . ."

"I'm going to cross old Baldy," he said grimly. "Just two reasons why I came back, Ma. To get Ellen to go with me. She'll go now. She'll know there can't ever be anything here for us. And to . . . to. . ."

"Yes, Jim?"

"To borrow some money, if you've got it."

"I've got almost fifty dollars, Jim. Keep on eating. I'll get it." She went out of the kitchen and he drank strong, black coffee. He had finished the cup when the old woman re-

turned. Her eyes were too bright, and as she pressed the money in his hand, the first tears spilled over her lids. "Go quick, son. Go alone—and don't look back."

"Alone?" he pushed himself slowly up from the table. "What are you trying to tell me, Ma?"

"Ellen, son—her Pa was here just this morning. Wanted to see if they'd caught you, I guess. He told us. Son, Ellen is going to marry Burgess Hanks. . ."

"I don't believe it!"

She said nothing, except with her eyes, her old, eloquent eyes that were so full of pain for him. He stared at her a moment. Then he turned, pushed his way out of the kitchen.

The moon rode higher. The night had grown cooler, silencing the cricket choruses. Here and there in low places, the earth was beginning to level as fog rose in wraithlike shreds.

Across the clearing was the Campbell farmhouse.

Jim stood in the shadows of a gnarled oak, looking at the house. He felt wrath seething in him and let it rise, taking a hard, bitter comfort from it. Ellen Campbell. The girl he was going to cross Bald mountain with. But crossing old Baldy was no good now. Not without Ellen.

She was marrying Burgess Hanks.

Well, I'm a fool, Jim thought. Maybe I should have known. Always it's been Burge, in Ellen's Pa's opinion. Burge would say yes to the old man. Burge was solid and quiet and had none of the crazy longings of Jim Lanham. Burge worked his small farm like a stolid ox. He had been born on the farm and would one day be buried on it, beside his father who had worked it before him.

For an instant, Jim shifted his gaze from the Campbell farmhouse. Off yonder old Baldy's dome was gleaming in moonlight, never before so bright, never before sneering at him so. I've got to hear it from her own lips, Jim thought. He'd been living on hope too long to cross old Baldy alone without this last, final pain of her telling him herself.

*I'm marrying Burgess Hanks!*

Breath rasping in the dead, wilderness silence, it almost seemed that he had heard the words spoken in his ear. But he was alone. Off there was the Campbell farmhouse. Somehow he would get to see Ellen to try to talk her out of it. He'd come too damned far to start backing water! Doggedly, he started across the clearing toward the house.

Lamplight was glowing in half the house. He angled in across the yard, heading for a window. If she were up, he had to get her attention. If she were in bed, he'd have to work his way around the house to the window of her room.

The silence of the night seemed deeper than it had ever been before. He could almost hear his heart beat and count the times it hammered. It was as if the hills were waiting, wise and sardonic, until he had heard it from her own lips. Then the hills would chuckle at him and old Baldy would wear her arrogant smile.

He was within a dozen yards of the house when he heard the snapping of a twig behind him. He spun about, quivering, but not in fear. In a half crouch, he strained his gaze into the night. He was a born woodsman. He had approached the house with the stealth and silence of the fine hunter. But there were many woodmen in the hills, and somebody was out there in the night, stalking him.

The heavy shadow drifted closer to him. A heavy, stolid voice came to him quietly: "That's you, ain't it Jim Lanham? I'm glad you drifted over."

It was Burgess Hanks.

"What are you doing here, Hanks?"

"Me? Nigh onto ten o'clock, but I figured to come on over and show Ellen what I bought her in Colterville today. Walking up the road, I thought I seen a shadow crossing the yard. Thought I'd have a look-see. I'm kind of glad it's you, Lanham. When I'm through with you, I'll give Ellen the ring that I bought in Colterville today."

"You reckon you'll marry her?"

"I aim to. Her Pa likes the idea. And I'm glad you're here, Lanham," Hanks said, like an ox with its stolid mind inflexibly fixed on one purpose. "I never did like you, Lanham. Always figured you was a little too good for your neighbors, didn't you? Always had your nose buried in a book. Always feeding Ellen a lot of fancy talk, damn you!"

Hanks came shuffling closer. Jim could hear the man's heavy, flat breathing. He'd never realized exactly how Burgess Hanks felt about him until now. But now he could feel Hanks' hatred oozing its way to every corner of the black night.

"I'm going to be the man who delivers you to Sheriff Rogers," Hanks said. "But first you're going to get on your knees to me, Lanham—Ellen's going to know who's the best man between us!"

Hanks exploded a punch that would have knocked a mule kicking. Jim side-stepped. The blow caught him on the shoulder, and his left arm went numb. A cold lump of jelly quivered in his stomach. He knew this was a mountain to cross. There was no avoiding it, no going around it. He felt a blow sizzling at him; it landed on his cheek, laying the flesh open. He set his teeth and bored in, throwing punches of his own. He and Hanks came together with a shocking impact that seemed to cause the hills to reel.

IT WAS grim and silent. It was the battle of two powerful creatures of the hills, neither asking nor expecting mercy. It was knees in groins, thumbs hungry for eyeballs, and the earth shuddered when they slammed against it.

Jim fought in close, wearing Hanks down, turning the stolid man's face to bloody pulp. He was sobbing breath, moving in and out, blinded with blood and rage. He felt a shock that ran to his shoulder and knew he had found Hanks' jaw with that one. The blow carried the heavy man up on his toes. He wavered like a giant tree about to fall.

He clinched, tying Jim up. He buried his face against Jim's chest, and his face shielded in that way, Burge Hanks began screaming.

His screams laced out over the dark countryside. Jim punched the man's kidneys, but Hanks held on. Jim sobbed futile curses at Hanks' violation of the hill man's code of battle. If he'd lost, Jim would have expected to be delivered to Sheriff Rogers. In winning, he was entitled to a chance to make a run for his freedom, taking Ellen, if possible, leaving Hanks' unconscious form behind on the bloody earth. But Hanks wasn't seeing the fight through to a finish, when one or the other would lay senseless on the earth. Hanks was screaming, and any moment now, Ellen's household would awake. Ellen's father would burst out in the night with a rifle in the crook of his arm.

Jim tried to break away. Hanks clung to him, screaming like a shoat with a knife in its side.

Then Jim heard the heavy shout near the house, and knew it was old man Campbell.

He clawed at Hanks' face, dug his fingers in the flesh and pushed the face back. He uncorked his other fist with all his remaining steam. For an instant, he thought he had broken his hand. He had landed the blow at the base of Hanks' chin and the heavy man went staggering back, flailing his arms, trying to regain his balance and cut in at Jim. Jim eluded him, racing for the timber line and Hanks bawled hoarsely, "Get him, Pa Campbell! It is the dirty murderer—Jim Lanham!"

The shadows of the timber line rushed closer. His breathing cut in and out of Jim's lungs. Behind him, the rifle cracked, and he heard the bullet snipping off leaves. He heard a woman cry out, and knew it was Ellen. Ellen, he thought. The picnics we had up at Clingman's Ledge, where you could see the whole earth spread out beneath you. Our secret place—Clingman's Ledge. The way we'd talk about crossing old Baldy together, half joking but dead serious. Ellen. . .

The bullet burned into him, almost tearing the muscle out of his right armpit. He missed a stride, picked it up, and then the timber

swallowed him up. Timber and darkness.

The pain was not long in coming. Blood sheeted down his right side and he knew the bullet had torn a gaping wound. Fire began spreading over his back, and he fought the pain. But not for long. Drops of sweat rolled down in his eyes. Things began to get hazy. He was still on his feet and knew he would be on them for a long time, once he settled in the hell of pain. It was like getting a second wind. He knew that he had to find a stream, water to cover his spoor. Even now old man Campbell would be cranking the phone in his house, calling Sheriff Rogers. ". . . That's right, Sheriff," old Campbell would say, "right in my own yard. Don't know, but I might have got him with that last bullet. You'd better get the dogs. . ."

The dogs, Jim thought. Again. Five nights ago, the dogs when old Herm Rhodes was murdered. Wonder if I can stand the dogs again. Water, a stream to shake them off the scent. . . A man is in a damn poor fix when he ain't as good as a dog, when they're using dogs to run him down.

A thousand years later, Jim stirred and cracked his lids. Gray light smote his eyes. Dawn. The night was over and done. The day was coming to life. He began to remember, though none of it was clear. He'd found a stream and worked his way up. The stream had forked. That had been good, adding to the confusion of the men guiding the dogs. After that, he recalled only icy water and black night. He had moved through a bog of pain. Every few hundred yards took a few inches of guts, not knowing where he was going, some moments not even caring.

He looked up and saw the vast overhang of rock over his head. Clingman's Ledge. His and Ellen's own secret place. He'd been thinking of it when the bullet had hit him last night. Somehow he'd made his way here to Clingman's Ledge. . .

He was very cold. He looked down and saw that he was naked from chest up. He was lying on something—a coat. A woman's coat.

He heard her step then, and saw her face. A mirage, achingly remembered.

"Ellen!"

She kneeled beside him. She had torn his shirt into strips, dipped a piece of the shirt in the spring nearby, and it was dripping water. She pulled her coat up about him, spread his jacket over his chest, leaving only his wounded shoulder bare. He saw the tears brimming in her eyes. "You'll catch cold," she said. "You pushed your cover off."

He lay on her coat, beneath his jacket. She saw the question in his eyes and said, "This is the third time in six days I've come here to the ledge, Jim. I thought while you were out in the hills, you might come here

and I would find you. Last night, after Pa had gone with Burge Hanks and Sheriff Rogers, I came here."

"The dogs?"

"On Hayes mountain by this time."

"I was coming off Hayes mountain yesterday," he said. "I guess you're going to marry Burge Hanks?"

"Pa's been telling folks that." She worked on the wound with the cold water. Her fingers were so gentle as she bandaged the wound with the shirt strips that he felt knots in his throat. He looked at her face, her tumbling brown hair, for a long time.

Then he said, "And what are you telling folks about it?"

**H**ER fingers touched his face, his temples. Slowly he sat up, watching as sobs began to rack her. "Jim!" She rose as he rose, pressed herself against him and the sobs shook her like a storm. "I'm telling folks that I think Burge Hanks has got a nice farm, but he'll have to find somebody else for it!"

He kissed her on the hair and held her very close while minutes trickled away. "Tonight," he said at last, "we'll cross old Baldy."

"No, Jim."

"But I didn't kill Rhodes, Ellen! I'm innocent—but they'll send me up for it!"

Her voice sounded strangled. "That's not my Jim talking," she said. She raised her head, searching his face, and her voice changed. "Can't you see what it'll do to us? Always running? Look at her over there, Jim. Look at old Baldy with the early sun on her dome. She's hating you, Jim, because you've always hated her. She wants you to run—because she knows it'll mean she's conquered you, she knows that it'll die, Jim. All our love will die!"

"But they'll send me. . ."

She stepped back from him. Her hands knotted. Her voice lashed him. "What do you think I've been doing these last days?"

What do you think your Pa's been doing? And Sheriff Rogers? They want you, sure, because you're the most likely man to have killed Herm Rhodes. But Sheriff Rogers is beginning to want one or two others, too. It'll mean danger. It'll mean a cell for awhile. But you've got to go back and prove your innocence! You've got to beat the hills, Jim, before old Baldy can be crossed the right way. You've got to find the one thing maybe you've always lacked. *Jim, you've got to have faith!*"

Her voice died in the vastness of the hills. A rabbit scurried in a thicket nearby. The limitless miles of mountains began to take on the rosy glow of sunrise. And the girl's shoulders slumped. "All right, Jim," she said softly, "we'll do it your way. Button your jacket and pull my coat a little tighter around you. Rest, Jim. I'll be back tonight with medicine and food. Tonight, Jim, we'll cross old Baldy."

He hadn't moved. He watched her walk away down the steep hillside, moving slowly down the faint trail, not looking back. The morning breeze, pungent with all the life of the hills, toyed with her print dress, blew gently through her tumbling brown hair.

She had almost disappeared around the bend in the trail when the shout tore out of him: "Ellen! Wait! We'll go to Sheriff Rogers together!"

She stopped. He went shuffling down the hillside toward her. Then she was running to meet him. She clutched at his hand. He brushed the tears from her cheeks with his finger and her smile warmed him.

He glanced northward, at Bald mountain. And suddenly old Baldy was just that to him. Just a mountain. Just an old hill that had to endure the snows and rains and winds and suns of summer.

"It's a funny way to cross a mountain," he said. "Yes, sir, it sure is funny as hell, the way a man can cross a mountain and never set foot on the other side!"

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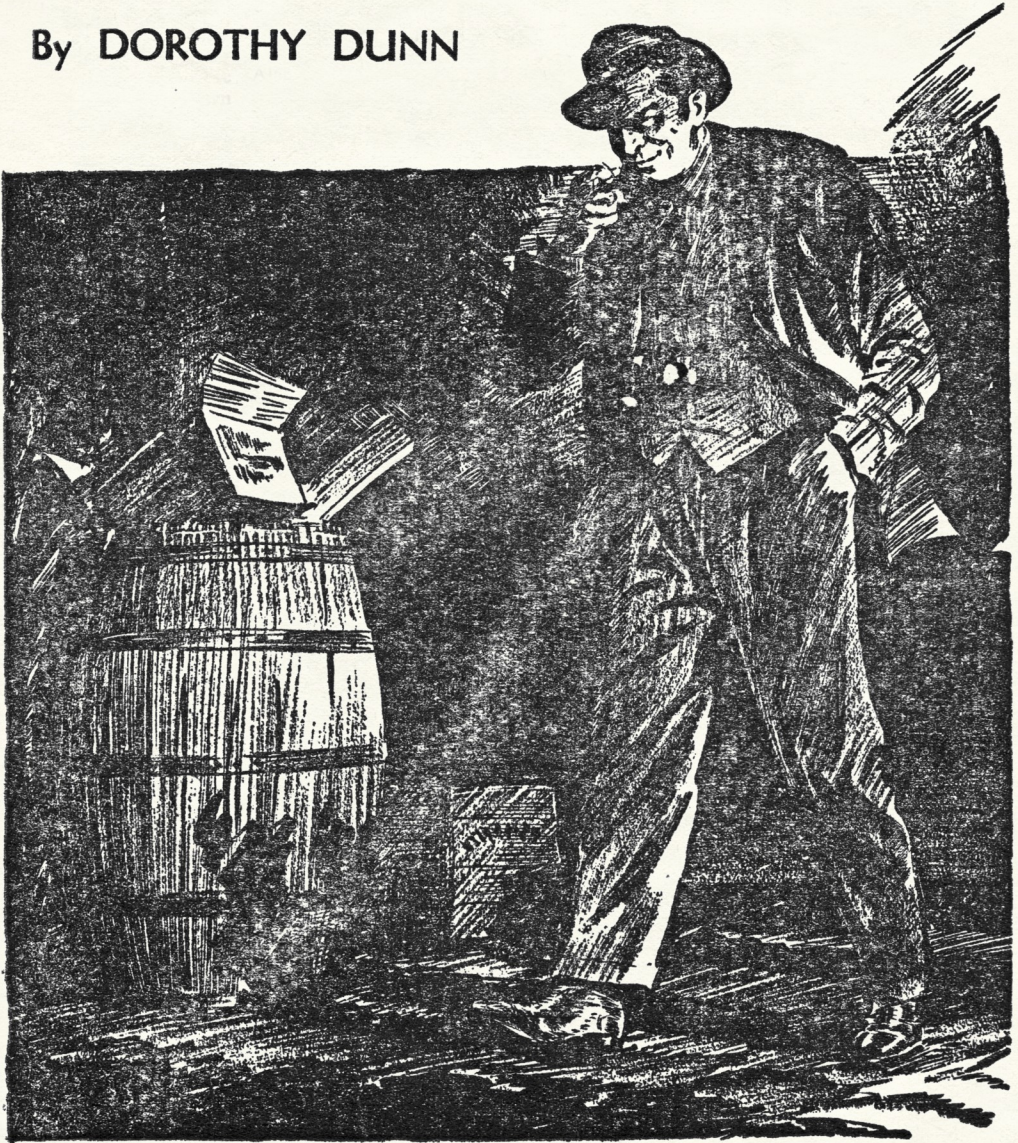
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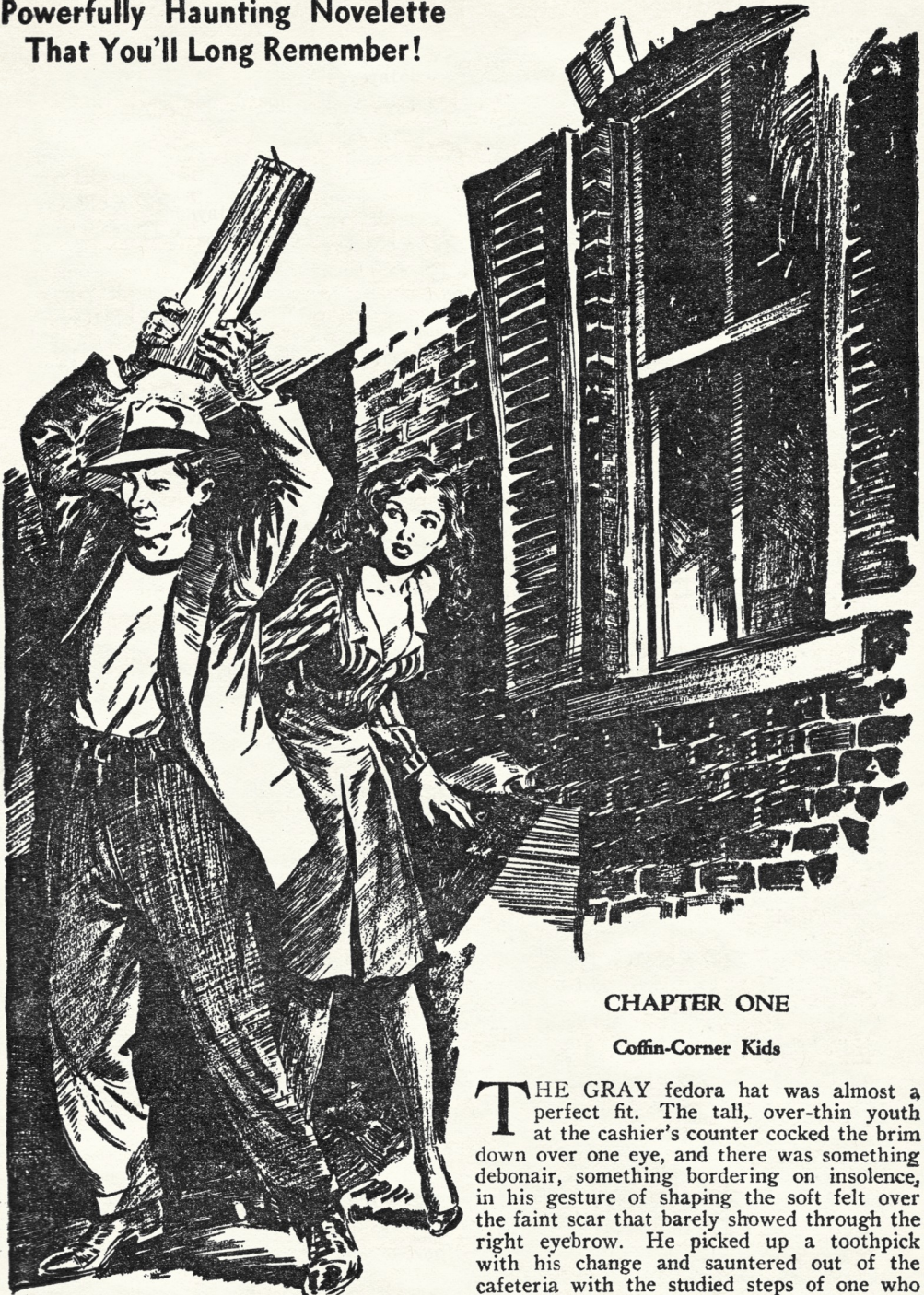
# LITTLE KILLER, WHAT NOW?

*Here is a story that packs such an impact in its vivid portrayal of a lost boy and girl headed wrong down a one-way, dead-end street, that—like it or not—we guarantee you the most penetrating shock you've felt in many a cold-blooded murderer's moon.*

By DOROTHY DUNN



Powerfully Haunting Novelette  
That You'll Long Remember!



"Whack him, Sammy," she  
breathed. "I'll lift the dough and  
we'll run for it!"

CHAPTER ONE

Coffin-Corner Kids

THE GRAY fedora hat was almost a perfect fit. The tall, over-thin youth at the cashier's counter cocked the brim down over one eye, and there was something debonair, something bordering on insolence, in his gesture of shaping the soft felt over the faint scar that barely showed through the right eyebrow. He picked up a toothpick with his change and sauntered out of the cafeteria with the studied steps of one who thinks he is being watched and wants to create the impression of nonchalance and daring.

The fact that nobody on Grand Avenue

gave Sammy Grimes a second look didn't occur to him. He was lost in the new version of himself that he was acting out today and all the mannerisms of his favorite screen crooks were being imitated. He was walking like George Raft, one shoulder a little high, moving from the hips down as graceful as a dancer or a boxer. He got that bold, fresh look on his face as a good-looking skirt went past, the kind of a look that Boston Blackie would give them. A gentleman crook, he fancied himself, but hard as nails and not to be crossed.

He stopped in front of a shoe store to light a cigarette and study himself in the window. The hat looked swell on him and he smiled with the memory of how easy it had been to lift it off the hook and walk out of the cafeteria, while the owner went back to the counter for a piece of pie. That was the way to do things. Easy and natural. Sammy had learned a long time ago that if you walk right and act natural you can fool people. He'd stolen plenty at school a few years ago, but the teachers hadn't suspected him. He'd known even then how to act so they wouldn't.

He turned up Olive Street and walked toward the old neighborhood, feeling pretty good. It took plenty of nerve to show his face around where people knew him, but Sammy Grimes has all the nerve it takes, he told himself. Plus a gun and a fat wad of folding money. He could handle any smart aleck who felt like tipping off the cops where he was. Any guy who can crush out of reform school and knock off three delicatessens for a get-away stake can surely go back to his own block for a few hours. And Sammy had to go back. Not to the lousy furnished rooms where he'd taken so many beatings from his stepfather and listened to the whining complaints of his old lady who used to drink nights and sleep it off days. That wasn't what he wanted to go back to. It was Wanda Patterson and the rest of the old grammar school gang that he wanted to see, and the back booth at Vick's Drug Store where they had huddled over cokes, bent the straws into funny shapes, carved their initials and planned their activities on the days they'd skipped school. The whole two years he'd been at Booneville, Sammy had dreamed of that back booth like some of the boys had dreamed of home.

At the paper box on Sarah, Sammy recognized the fat, shapeless mass of boy that was Roy Smith. Something happened to the inside of his chest as he hurried forward. Seeing Roy still here picking up small change by hard work, made time drop away and it seemed just like yesterday again when they were both kids in school.

Sammy clapped him on the shoulder and smiled.

"Hiya, Roy!"

The fat, innocent face looked startled.

"Gosh, Sammy! Whaddya doin' around here?"

The eagerness died out of Sammy, leaving him hurt and hollow-feeling. That was a great welcome from an old friend. Oh well, the big slob never had any sense anyway. Always scared of his own shadow, selling papers every night instead of lifting stuff he needed.

"Why shouldn't I be around here?" said Sammy in his silkiest tone. "Got anything against having me around, Roy?"

"Well, no . . . gosh no, Sammy. But the cops are hunting you. Brady was asking me just this morning if I'd seen you."

Sammy laughed and patted the bulge so Roy could tell he had a gun.

"Good old Brady! I'm glad to hear he's still got my best interest at heart. Boy, what a line those Juvenile Court guys hand you. They're as soft as old women with that big brother stuff and how proud they'll be if you bring in a good report while you're on probation. Brady gives me a pain."

"He's got tougher, Sammy. Betty got sent to some home for girls just last week, and he's watching the whole district like a hawk. He'll find you sure if you hang around here."

Sammy patted his gun again.

"I can take care of Brady, don't you worry. So Betty got herself in a jam, huh? What about Wanda? She still around?"

Roy looked embarrassed.

"Yeah, she's around. But since her old man died, she spends most of her time inside the saloon instead of the rooms back of it where they live. My folks won't let me speak to her anymore."

Sammy absorbed this information happily. He hadn't realized until now that Wanda might have been hard to find. Suppose it had been Wanda instead of Betty that was locked up! But it wasn't. She was just up the street at the same address and grown up enough to be in the tavern. And the old man had died during the last two years.

"Who runs the joint now, Roy?"

"Huh?"

"The saloon. Who took over?"

"Fritz, the old bartender. Seems to live there."

"Well, well. That guy never did like me," mused Sammy. "But I'm old enough to talk back now. Want to tag along and have a beer with me, Roy?"

The fat face looked worried and the big head shook violently.

"I can't, Sammy. I got to stay here on the job and . . . and . . ."

"And you're scared to take a drink,"



taunted Sammy. "You're scared you might get a spanking at home if you did!"

"No, I'm not! It's just that . . . well . . . uh . . ."

"Don't bother, punk. I know your kind. You're as big a baby as ever, but don't go bawling to Brady that I'm around here or I'll cut out your liver. Understand?"

"I wouldn't do that, Sammy. You know I wouldn't."

"You better not," said Sammy. Then he sauntered away from Roy, walking down Sarah Street with the lazy gait that would show the fat kid that Sammy Grimes wasn't afraid of anybody in the world.

The block hadn't changed much. It was early evening now, about seven, and the street lights threw a dingy glare over the familiar buildings. The confectionary was still there and Sammy felt like crossing over to look at the candy counter. He could buy every green leaf and licorice stick in the place now. But it hadn't been so long ago that the gang had hung around there after school or at noon, swiping what they didn't have money to pay for.

He didn't have time to cross over, though. He had to see Wanda Patterson first. Then he had to take one last look at all the old haunts and clear out.

He would take Wanda with him. They used to have a lot of fun together and they'd have more fun now. He stopped in front of the saloon.

The same joint. Two years hadn't changed the outside, except the windows were maybe a little dirtier.

He hung a cigarette on his lower lip and went inside, his eyes shifting about hungrily, taking in the familiar bar, the three sagging wooden booths against the far wall, the high stools with plushy women oozing over the tops and noisy men leaning beside them. There was the same smell of stale beer and cigarette smoke. And there was the same dirty water smell of the scum that was piled up under the floor boards behind the bar.

That used to be one of Wanda's Saturday morning jobs. Scrubbing under those boards. And Sammy had often helped her, so they could get an earlier start for the park, the show, or the Highlands.

He filled his shallow lungs with the stale smell. Boy, this was what he'd been dreaming of! For two years, he'd been missing this place and planning to come back to it for Wanda. Not coming back like a kid in the seventh grade to help her scrub, but walking in at night like a man to buy a beer and ask for his girl.

He swaggered over to the bar. "Hiya, Fritz. Draw me a beer."

"Go out and grow up first," the beefy man

snarled. "Who you think you're fooling with that man's hat on your head? I don't serve minors."

"Come off it, Fritz. You remember me." "Yeah?"

"Sure. Sammy Grimes. You remember."

The barkeep peered at him and Sammy pushed the hat back so the guy could see his high, smooth forehead with the little scar over one eyebrow, where he'd fallen on a broken bottle when he was ten.

"Sure enough. Sammy Grimes out of reform school! What did you do? Hop the fence out there?"

"Don't crack wise," said Sammy out of the side of his mouth. "I did enough time."

Under his breath, Fritz muttered, "There ain't enough time for you."

"How about that beer?" demanded Sammy.

"What I said still goes, punk. You're not over eighteen."

"And you're not over-bright, Fritzie. Bring it along if you know what's good for you."

A pie-eyed dame on his right horned in.

"Here, Baby-Face, take a sip of mine," she said thickly, shoving her glass over and lurching to the side along with it.

Sammy picked up the glass and shot the beer out of it behind the bar.

"That's flat, sister. We want two now," he said, glaring at Fritz.

The bar man stood there for a minute staring into his eyes. Then he shrugged and turned away to draw two.

Sammy laughed and flipped his cigarette ashes into the wet spot on the bar. He had seen the look on Fritz's face that he liked to see. I'm tough and he knows it, he thought. He doesn't want his joint wrecked, doesn't want any trouble. And he could see trouble when I gave him that look. He knows I'm not a punk he can push around. Not any more.

He threw four-bits on the bar, making it spin.

"Keep the change," he said. Then he picked up his glass and sauntered through the smoky room. He wished he'd see somebody from the old gang. Somebody who'd known him when he was the terror of the Eliot Grammar School. He wished he'd see Wanda.

He eyed a girl young enough to be Wanda, who wasn't. Finally, the girl leered up at him.

"See anything green?" she asked.

Her friend, a sallow-faced, dopey looking guy in a dirty loafer jacket, echoed her.

"Yeah, smart guy. Think you'd know her the next time?"

Sammy let his eyes go insolent, travelling from the girl's scuffed brown strollers and sox, past the cheap material of her rayon print, past the chipped nail polish and dirty-

looking hands to the dime store pin at the low neck of her dress. Then he turned to the fellow, took a swallow of beer, and said, "I could know her if I wanted to."

"Why, you—"

"Relax," drawled Sammy. "I don't want to."

He walked on toward the booths.

He heard the girl's voice trailing after him. "Of all the nerve! Bert, you shoulda clipped him."

"Aw, shut up, Baby. We're out for a good time. Forget it."

Sammy smiled to himself. Scared. That big jerk back there had been too scared to jump him. It was funny the way you could let people know that you were too tough to fool with.

The back booth was empty. He'd go back to the rooms where Wanda lived and bring her out here. But just then a girl clapped him on the shoulder. He turned so fast that he spilled some of the beer across his hand.

"Sammy Grimes! If you're not a sight for sore eyes."

He tipped his hat back on his head and smiled with complete happiness. This was it! This was being home again and feeling welcome.

"Hiya, Wanda. I was looking for you."

"Don't gimme that. I saw you looking at that blonde back there."

"G'wan, you know I like redheads. Here, slide into this booth. We got some talkin' to do. Want a beer?"

"That stuff! You could get me a coke, though."

Sammy put his glass down and went back to the bar for her coke. Gee, she hadn't changed much! Same old Wanda, saucy as ever, fun to be around. Exciting, too. There was something terribly exciting about her. Just the way her eyes flashed, the way she tossed her head.

She wasn't scared of anything. Never had been. Even Sammy couldn't scare her like he could other people. And when they'd been in the same room at school, she'd always talked back to the teachers. Yes, she was some chick. Plenty of fire in her. Sammy liked that.

He took the coke back and sat there just looking at her, keeping his knees still when she brushed against them with hers under the table. He wondered if she'd grown up very much in the two years he'd been gone. She must be sixteen now.

"What's new?" he asked.

Her mouth curled with distaste. "Nothing's ever new around here. We still live back of the saloon and Fritz hits it off pretty good with the old lady since my pop died."

"You mean Fritz is living with . . .?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "He's no worse than my old man was. And I got enough on him that he don't dare beat me for coming in here and being a customer whenever I want. He tried to keep me out at first. Whaled the tar out of me for hanging around in here. Well, he won't ever try that again!"

This was like old times. They'd always talked things over this way, telling each other about the dirty deals they got.

"What've you got on him?" asked Sammy. "Must be good to keep Fritz in his place. He's a sour guy."

"I got plenty," she said mysteriously.

That was Wanda, all right. She had a way of making things seem full of adventure. Like a good crime movie.

"How's your love life?" asked Sammy, lighting a cigarette for both of them. "Anybody taking my place?"

She dropped her eyes carefully. That was an old trick of hers. Sammy had seen her pull it at school often enough. When she did that, it meant she'd start lying like sixty the minute she looked up.

"I got no complaints."

"I asked is anybody taking my place?"

She gave him a funny look.

"What place?"

Sammy looked at her, feeling silly. They had been kids two years ago and it had all been kid stuff. Necking in the show and just horsing around. But he'd always thought of her as his girl.

"Oh—you know," he faltered.

"Yeah," she grinned. "We sure were crazy kids, writing our initials everyplace."

"We had a good time," said Sammy, some of the joy gone out of his voice.

"We thought so," she said, tossing her head restlessly. "Always looking for something to do."

Sammy got a little cold inside. Right now, Wanda didn't seem like herself. He'd thought they would go right on looking for things to do, raising hell together. He'd been dreaming of the day his two years would be up so they could have the fun they used to have. He hadn't been able to wait that long. He'd crushed out a few months ahead of time. But she seemed different. She'd just said that was kid stuff—crazy.

She yawned into her coke glass and looked around the bar.

"Am I boring you?" he asked stiffly.

"This place is," she said. "Let's go someplace else."

"Okay, kid. Anything you say."

He felt better now. He had twenty bucks. He'd take her out and blow it on her like a big shot. He'd show her he wasn't a kid any more.

They walked past the bar. Fritz stopped them at the door, grabbing Wanda's arm.

"Where you think you're going?" he rasped.

"Out. And take your hands offa me."

"You're not going out with him! If you had the sense God gave a pig, you'd know better than to go out with Sammy Grimes."

Sammy gave Fritz a shove and gave him the old killer look as he put his hand over his gun.

"Out of the way, Fritz. She knows who she wants to go out with."

Wanda pushed Sammy aside.

"Never mind, Sammy. Fritz knows better than to try telling me what to do. Don't you, Fritzie?" She gave him a sweet look and patted his arm. His face went white when she did that. It was like she was reminding Fritz of whatever it was that she had on him.

The big guy just wilted and went back to his bar towel.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Babes in Slayland

IT WAS nicer outside. The air was fresh and cool and smelled good. They walked for a few blocks and Sammy kept looking at things, as though he'd never be tired of looking. The old delicatessen on the corner by the school, the Drug Store, the place by the stone wall where the candy lady used to sit with her basket, selling hot dogs at noon and candy before school.

"Where we going?" asked Wanda.

"Huh?—Gosh, I dunno. Where you want to go?"

"Anywhere. Only, let's *do* something. Not just walk."

"Okay," said Sammy. "What?"

"Anything."

"Okay."

They walked another block.

"You got any dough?" asked Wanda.

"Yeah, sure."

"How much?"

"Enough."

"How much?"

"Twenty."

"Can you spend it?"

"Why not?"

It was all the money Sammy had in the world and he'd heisted a store to get it, but he didn't want to look like a piker. He could get more.

"Okay," said Wanda. "I know a place."

"You name it."

Sammy was kind of disappointed. He'd hoped they'd go to a show. He liked shows better than anything else, even when they were lousy.

"Come on, here's a street car."

They got on at Olive, heading toward town.

"What's the place?" asked Sammy. "Tune Town? Want to dance?"

"That hole! Over on the East Side, it's more fun," said Wanda. "God, you see everything over there!"

Sammy frowned.

"Say, who took you over there?" he asked.

"Oh, a guy I met. Nobody."

"He's somebody if he's a guy. Who?"

"Nobody special."

Sammy dropped it. You could never make Wanda tell anything she didn't want to tell.

"Will they let us in?" he asked. "Lot of places won't until you're of age."

Wanda scoffed.

"You don't look at a girl very close, do you Sammy? I got myself fixed up to look old enough. High heels and a good dress. I get around okay. You'll get by, too. That hat makes you look a lot older."

Sammy took off the hat and held it in his lap, looking it over idly.

"I copped this out of a restaurant," he laughed. "Easy as pie."

Wanda's eyes sparkled. "Same old Sammy! Hey, look—the guy's name is inside. Hadn't you ought to rip that out?"

Sammy looked at the stamped letters. He had to spell them out because he never could read very quick. He'd spent most of his time in school just pretending he was reading and then trying to bluff his way through the lessons. When they let him draw, he liked that. He'd spent a lot of time in the reform school drawing characters out of comic books. But reading never was any good. It was a funny name: G. W. Janina.

He asked Wanda how she would say it, and it was different from what he'd thought it was.

Just below Grand Avenue, the street car was held up by a fire engine that blocked the street. There was a crowd, but the firemen were already winding up the hose.

Wanda got that look of excitement in her eyes. "Come on, Sammy! Let's get off!"

"Nothing to see," he told her. "It's all over."

"Come on!"

He followed her out.

Grand Avenue again, he thought. Just a half-block from where he'd eaten and stolen the hat. And Tune Town was close. As soon as the engine left and the crowd scattered, Wanda was ready to board another car.

"How about one dance first?" asked Sammy. "Then we'll go across to the East Side."

That was okay with Wanda. Anything to keep moving. They went into the dance hall and danced a couple of times. The way Wanda had her arm around his shoulder, he had

to hold her very close and her breath fanned his ear. It was jammed in the hall and too warm. There was a juice stand near the back door.

"Want something to drink?" invited Sammy. He was thirsty himself. After they finished the soda, Wanda led him toward the back door. "Let's get some air," she said.

"Just an alley out there," Sammy told her. "We can leave now if you want."

"Oh, come on!"

She pulled him out into the shadowed alley and stood up close. "Why don't you kiss me, Sammy?"

He brushed his lips against hers. She laughed at him and he felt embarrassed. Then she threw her arms around him and started kissing him in a way that scared him a little. She was sure different, all right! She used to say that all that love stuff was hokey.

A fat man lurched past them, then turned back to laugh. He was dressed up fit to kill, but was plenty drunk.

"Y'got plenty of woman there, Sonny," he called. "You better take it easy. Know what I mean, Sonny? Some dames you halfta . . ."

"Beat it!" said Sammy, as the guy just stood there swaying and leering at them.

Wanda's eyes were flashing as she put her mouth close to his ear and whispered, "Let's roll him!"

"Huh?"

"Sure. He looks like he'd have a big roll. Let's take it, Sammy. Let's take it and keep going."

Keep going! Sammy had almost forgotten that Brady would be looking for him to make him finish the last three months of reform school. He'd intended to get Wanda before he cleared out. And she felt the same way!

"Okay," he whispered back. "You stay here." Sammy started to take out his gun as the drunk weaved on down the alley.

"Not that," said Wanda.

"I won't shoot it," said Sammy. "It's just to scare him into forking over. That's all I ever use it for."

"You don't have to scare a drunk with a gun," she said. "A little tap on the head is better. Wait a minute . . ." She looked around through the junk heap back of the dance hall and picked up a board. "Come on, Sammy. Just whack him with this. I'll lift the dough and we'll run for it."

Sammy took the board and they eased up behind the man.

You've got to be quick and Sammy didn't waste any time. He slammed the board against the fat man's head, knocking him down with the first whack. Wanda didn't waste any time, either. She patted the drunk's clothes and then lifted a fat wallet out of his

left side pants pocket. Her eyes glittered. "Let's beat it," she said, straightening up. Her lips were parted with the quick breathing of her adventurous spirit.

Sammy didn't know why he thought about picking up the board to put it back on the heap where Wanda had found it. Maybe he was thinking about fingerprints, which was silly on a rough board like that. But he reached for it automatically.

He couldn't lift it! It felt funny, as though it might be stuck to the ground. A trickle of fear along his neck made him drop his hold.

He knelt down, lighting a match to see the man's face. Then the trickle turned into an icy stream that set him shivering.

"Wanda! That damned board had a nail in it!"

Her eyes shifted up and down the alley, checking ways of escape. They were brighter now, fiercely alive.

"Is he dead, Sammy?"

"God, yes! There's stuff oozing out. I didn't know there was a nail in it! I didn't mean to . . ." Sammy's voice broke into a nervous sob.

Wanda jerked him to his feet and shook him. Then she pulled him down the alley to Grand, then over to Olive Street. She was taking over.

"Snap out of it, Sammy! We got to get moving and keep moving."

They took a street car down town, then a bus for the East Side. It was on the bus that Wanda said, "Say, Sammy, you lost your hat back there."

Sammy was hunched miserably in the corner of the seat. "Must have fallen off when you shook me. But it wasn't my hat. It's okay."

In East Saint Louis, they bought a couple of paper suit cases out of Sammy's twenty bucks. Then they got on a bus for Chicago. People smiled at them. They must have looked young, but nobody took them for minors. At least, nobody said anything.

"Act like you're in love with me," Wanda directed. "We'll say we're married."

Sammy didn't know how to act that way very well. He felt awkward trying to play up to Wanda's public caresses. He felt silly and lonely and sick inside. And scared. This wasn't at all the way he'd planned things to be. He had just spent his nights at reform school dreaming of having Wanda with him so they could go to the movies and horse around the way they did two years ago.

He'd wanted things to be just like they had been, only without school, truant officers, and the juvenile court man to worry about. And without his old lady and his step dad to slap him around. He'd wanted Wanda with him because they'd always had fun. But this

wasn't much fun. The way it was going wasn't at all the fun he'd dreamed about.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Alone in Crime

**G.** W. JANINA was a short, stocky man with sun-dried brown hair. His square face was settled into the heavy, humorless creases of the unimaginative. His eyes were small, dull brown and painfully intent. He tried so hard to understand. But he wasn't capable of understanding. He was muddled and tired.

Lieutenant Osgood was tired, too. He was going over it for the third time.

"You own a cigar store, Mr. Janina?"

Janina ran a stubby finger across his brow. "I have to tell you so often," he said. "Why do you ask me the same things so often?"

"Just want to get it straight," said Osgood, wondering how long it was going to take for this dumb ox to break.

"Your store is just off Grand Avenue?"

"Yes."

"Ever take bets on the horses, Mr. Janina?"

"No. I told you that. Every smoke shop isn't a blind for that."

"Just nearly," said Osgood. "All right, so your business is on the level. But you do admit knowing Frank Whalen?"

"Sure, I knew him. He used to come into the shop all the time."

"But you didn't like him, did you? You had a quarrel with him yesterday?"

"We had words."

"Over your daughter, Rose?" prompted Osgood. "Tell me about that part again, Mr. Janina."

"Whalen was no good and I didn't want him hanging around my Rose. He was too old for her, had smart ideas. When I saw he was making a play for my daughter, I just told him to stay out of my shop. That's all I did. I didn't slap him dead with that board! I didn't kill him!"

Osgood picked up the gray hat again.

"Do you have any idea, Mr. Janina, how your hat could have walked into the alley? Did it get there all by itself and sit down on Frank Whalen's chest?"

G. W. Janina dropped his head in both hands this time and mumbled the answer.

"I always eat lunch at the cafeteria on Grand," he said slowly, like a dull pupil trying to learn something by rote. "I hung my hat on a hook at noon yesterday. When I went to get it, it was gone. Stolen. That's all I know."

"But the cashier doesn't back you up," argued Osgood. "You lost a nice hat like this

—with your full name stamped on the inside band—and didn't even mention it! You know, I find that hard to swallow, Mr. Janina. A hat like this isn't cheap. Why didn't you report the theft?"

"I've already told you," sighed Janina. "It was hanging right beside a sign that said: 'Management not responsible for lost articles.'"

"And you believe in signs?" A sarcastic edge on that.

"They wouldn't know who took it. What could they do?"

Osgood sighed. Janina was too good a liar, he wasn't changing his story by a single word. And yet he must have killed Frank Whalen! Maybe he didn't mean to do it. Maybe he'd just intended to muss Whalen up a bit in his fierce desire to keep the man away from his Rose. But the Lieutenant wasn't getting to first base on the confession. He glanced down at his notebook.

"Mr. Janina, you were indicted for murder in 1938. Is that right?"

"You know about it. You've got the record," said Janina, locking his fingers together to keep them from shaking. "But it wasn't murder. It was self-defense, a brawl. The jury said it wasn't murder and set me free. I bought my business, I've worked hard all those years! And now this!"

"And now this," echoed Osgood. "Frank Whalen hangs around your daughter. You warn him to stay away and he doesn't. So you fly into a rage and kill him! Maybe you didn't know about the nail in the board, Janina. Maybe it was dark in the alley. Perhaps the jury would call this an accidental killing, too. Don't you want to tell us about it? It'll go easier with you if you tell us just what happened."

"I told you all there is," said Janina, his eyes desperate. "I didn't see Frank Whalen at all last night. I didn't kill him!"

Osgood sighed again.

"But you can't tell us where you were. Out for a walk! Nobody saw you, nobody can give you an alibi for ten o'clock last night. And your hat was there, so you must have been there, too. You know, Janina, I don't believe your hat was stolen at all! I believe you lost it in the alley when you killed Frank Whalen."

This direct accusation didn't make Janina talk. It made a few tears of bitterness well up into his eyes.

Osgood's own nerves snapped. This stupid guinea just didn't react, he was phlegmatic as a dumb cow. Osgood rang a buzzer for a guard, then yelled at Janina, "You'll talk, damn you! I'll make you talk if it's the last thing I do! Where's the money? Where's the wallet that you took to make Whalen's

death look like a robbery. Where is it?"

Janina muttered, "I don't know, I don't know. I didn't kill him! I didn't steal! I've got a family and I've been a good man for years . . ."

"Sure, you've got a family," thundered Osgood. "And you'd kill a man that was a menace to your daughter. You love your family, sure. Enough to kill! You took Whalen out through the back of your shop into the alley and nailed a board into his skull. You'll burn for that, Janina. You're cooked!"

Janina just stared at the lieutenant dumbly. Then he said with brimming eyes. "Please, I'd like to go home."

The guard came in on Osgood's frustrated laughter.

"Take Janina home," he directed. "To his cozy little cell. I'll give him a going-over tomorrow that'll make him wish he'd talked at the right time."

\* \* \*

John Brady traced the movements of Sammy Grimes as far as the tavern on Sarah Street. He wormed that out of Roy Smith, the fat kid that sold papers on the corner.

Fritz said, "Yeah, he was here last night and went off with Wanda Patterson. Wanda didn't come home last night and her poor mother is nearly crazy with worry over it!"

Brady didn't say anything, but he'd worked in the district too long to be fooled by Fritz's vindictive remarks. He'd known Mrs. Patterson ever since the last city clean-up campaign three years ago. Wanda's mother had been slick enough to escape booking, but nobody had to draw pictures for Brady.

And he'd watched Wanda growing up. A wise little urchin who seemed never to have been a child. A tomboy, yes. She'd got into plenty of scrapes with Sammy Grimes and was a regular customer at Juvenile Court, but she had never been scared by authority as most children were. Brady felt sure that she had enjoyed the attention that her escapades brought her. And God knows, it was the only kind of attention she got. And here was Fritz saying that Mrs. Patterson was worried because Wanda hadn't come home! That was good. Brady knew that Wanda had stayed out all night enough times for her mother to be used to it.

There was something personal in the agitation that Fritz was feeling. It made Brady a little sick to think that the set-up might be that lousy.

A description of Wanda was added to the district flashes that had been sent out on Sammy Grimes. And then Brady went back to his desk job.

It wasn't until four days later that he got a telegram on Sammy Grimes. It was from the Sheriff of a little town outside of Chi-

cago. "Holding girl believed to be Wanda Patterson. Advise."

Brady felt sure that Sammy would be where Wanda was. He sent an answering wire, giving the time of his arrival.

He couldn't find much sympathy in himself for the girl. He doubted if anything could ever be done for her now, but there was something likable about Sammy.

The Sheriff greeted him with a sour look and the usual senseless guff about this younger generation and what is the world coming to? Brady told him they weren't all bad and the world would come to what it always had, unless the atomic bomb got out of hand.

"Mebbe," admitted the Sheriff. "But that girl's the worst I ever saw. She was caught flashin' a gambler-size roll in a jewelry store. Buying a diamond ring, she was. The clerk stuck his neck out by holding her there until he got a cop. She still had a billfold with a man's name stamped on it. Said first it was her father's, then her husband's, then she switched to having found it in a Chicago subway. Told sixty different stories, I'll bet—one lie after another."

"What was the name on the wallet?" asked Brady.

"Whalen. Frank Whalen. Any blood kin to the girl?"

Brady caught his breath. This was bad. This was worse than anything he had imagined!

"Blood, all right," he said. "But no kin. Frank Whalen was murdered in Saint Louis several days ago."

"Y'don't say!" said the Sheriff. "Knew she was a wrong one. Knew it right off!"

"We're not sure," said Brady, his thoughts racing. "They're holding a man right now and they're pretty sure he killed Whalen. Maybe she did find the wallet. Where is she? Here?"

The Sheriff rubbed his chin.

"Wal, no. She isn't. She busted out, God knows how. Mebbe she turned the guard around her little finger, I can't get a straight story out of him."

Brady cursed, but the Sheriff stopped him. "Don't get so het up! We've got her again. In the hospital. She stole a car and tried to lam out too fast. Went over a guard rail on the highway heading east. She's cracked up bad."

"Was there a boy with her?" asked Brady. "Nope. All alone," said the Sheriff. "Come on. I'll drive you over."

Wanda looked more like a little girl than Brady had ever seen her.

"Hello, Brady," she said. She had always left off the Mister.

"Hello, kid." He was sorry for her. He couldn't help it.

"You get around, don't you, Brady?"

"Um-hum. So do you. Where's Sammy?"

"That twerp! Of all the babies I ever saw! What did he do? Phone you to come get him?"

Brady didn't answer.

"I knew he would," Wanda went on. "He's been nothing but a yellow skunk and I got plenty sick of nursing him along. Kept saying he wanted to go back and spill the whole story to you! Well, I don't care now. I don't care what you do to him for killing that drunk."

Brady felt a little sick. He'd never completely lost faith in Sammy. Rehabilitation—he'd thought it possible. And now this. Murder!

"You mean Frank Whalen?" he asked, not wanting to reveal his ignorance to Wanda.

"Sure. In the alley back of Tune Town. I saw him do it." Her eyes glistened a little now with the pleasure of revenge, of implicating a boy who had let her down in some way. "He wanted to use his gun, but I said he ought not to kill anybody. He wouldn't listen. He picked up a board that had a nail in it and said it wouldn't make any noise, that it would do the job right."

"How did you happen to have the wallet and the money, Wanda?"

"Sammy gave it to me. He was scared to spend any of it. He was scared of everything. Just sat in that dirty hotel room drawing pictures out of comic books. What a bird brain!"

Brady asked softly, "What hotel, Wanda? Where were you and Sammy staying?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"No," said Brady. "He didn't phone to give himself up. The Sheriff here tipped me off when they arrested you."

Wanda clammed then, but it didn't matter. There were only a few hotels in the little town and it wouldn't be hard to find a boy who was on the ragged edge of nothing.

"You comfortable, kid? Anything I can do for you?"

"I'm going to die," she said flatly. "I heard them say so when they thought I was asleep."

"That's silly," said Brady, trying not to think of her as only sixteen years old. "The doctor told me you'd be all right," he lied. She closed her eyes without answering. Brady patted her hand and left the room.

The worst hotel in town was the one. Typical flea bag, not too particular about the guests.

"Yeah," the clerk said, looking at the picture Brady showed him. "He's in 406."

Brady knocked several times, then went back to the desk for the pass key.

He swung the door open and flattened himself against the outside wall, out of range.

He wasn't forgetting that Sammy Grimes had a gun and was scared. A trigger-happy kid never knows who he's shooting.

But there wasn't any sound. Brady drew his own gun and then edged into the room.

Sammy was on the floor by the scaling dresser. There was a pillow next to his head, a gun beside his outstretched hand. The bullet had gone through the kid's head after ploughing through the pillow. Some feathers were all mixed up with the blood.

Brady's stomach turned over.

Suicide, or murder? It could be either one. Why should a suicide want to muffle the shot? Sammy was the dramatic type. He'd want to put on a good show if he were doing anything as important as taking his own life. And Wanda had been caught trying to leave town alone!

There was a note on top of the dresser in Sammy's hopeless scrawl.

Dear Mr. Brady:

I killed that man in the alley, but I didn't mean it. I didn't know there was a nail in the board. And that guy they are going to burn did not do it because I stole a hat that must have been his. There was a name inside. I will give myself up because I did not mean to kill that man and you will be my friend.

Brady tucked the letter into his pocket, feeling sure that Sammy had intended to mail it, not leave it as a suicide note.

Then he went back to the hospital to shake the truth out of Wanda Patterson.

A young intern was sitting beside Wanda's bed, holding her hand. When he saw Brady, he dropped it and stood up.

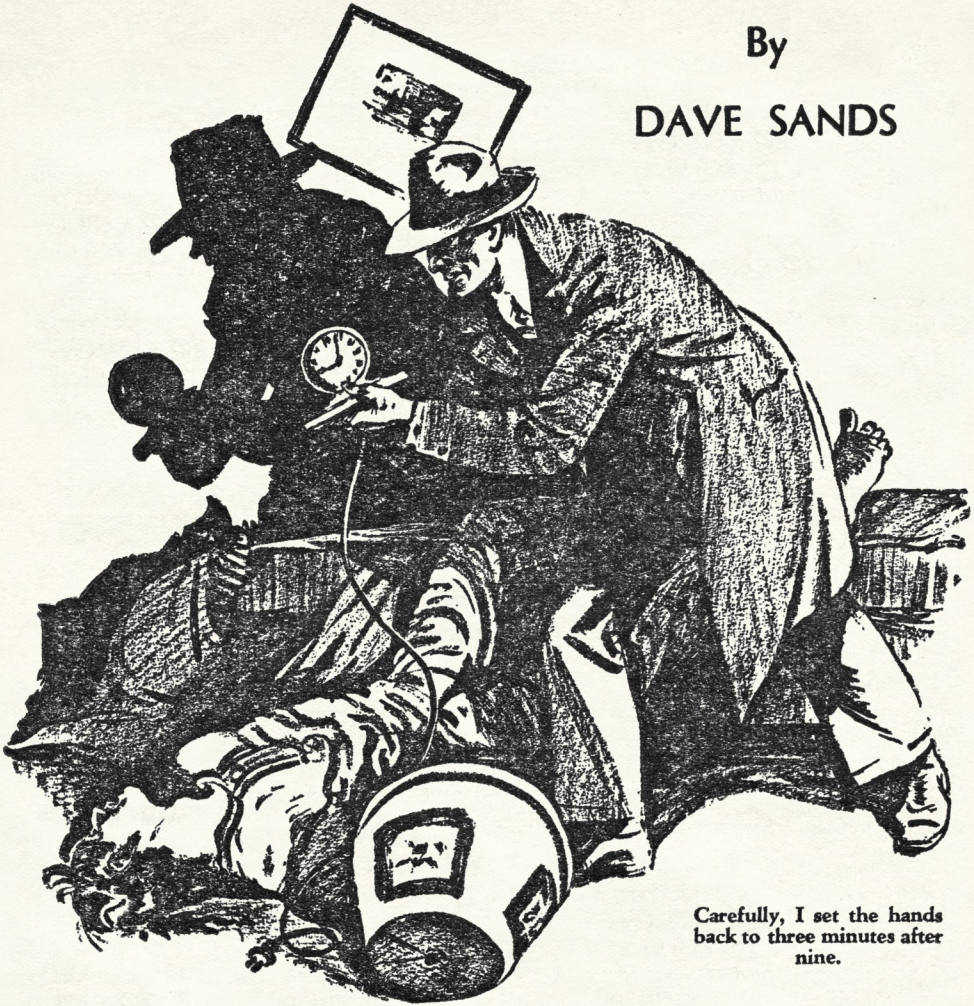
"The kid's dead," he said sadly. "Just a few minutes ago. Funny thing, she went out with a little smile. I was holding her hand and telling her how pretty she was. She was kinda pretty."

Brady stood there looking at her child-like face, perplexed. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Sammy *had* shot himself. Maybe he'd got panicky after Wanda's crack-up in the car. Wanda had seemed genuinely surprised that he hadn't talked to Sammy before coming to see her. Now that Wanda was dead, it didn't seem important somehow whether Sammy had shot himself or she had killed him.

"She musta smiled just when she was dying," the intern was saying. "Just the moment she went out. It's set there on her lips."

Brady tapped his coat pocket that had the letter in it. "Somebody else will be smiling on the way out," he said. "A man named Janina who's being held for a murder he didn't commit!—Me, I've got tears in my eyes."

By  
DAVE SANDS



Carefully, I set the hands  
back to three minutes after  
nine.

## CORPSE COLLATERAL

*With every tick of the dead man's clock, I was getting farther away from  
Easy Street, and closer to my own post-mortem career!*

**T**HERE HAD never been a better time for me to do it. Two months before, his father had died and left him the ranch. Then, on this spring day, young Tom Ordman sold the ranch for twenty-five thousand cash. We knew about the sale because Ordman left his teller's cage at the bank early and told us what he was going to do.

The deal was closed shortly after six o'clock and by eight that night Ordman was staggering drunk, displaying the crisp, new thousand

dollar bills in half the bars in town until some friends took him home to his small apartment above the drug store. They spread the word around that he had fallen into a drunken stupor and was safe for the night.

I heard about it after I had left the bank where I worked in a cage adjoining Ordman's. I'd finished dinner and was sitting in the lobby of the small resident hotel where I lived. They were talking about it.

"How long do you think it will last him,



Carruthers?" someone nearby asked me. I grinned and shook my head. "He's unpredictable."

He was more than that to me. He was the thing that kept me awake nights, fearing every knock on the door, every stranger who came to my window at the bank.

Not that I was any better than Ordman. I wasn't. I wasn't even as smart. I was the one who had taken the bank's money and carefully covered the losses. Ordman was the one who had discovered it. That was where he was smarter than I. He simply told me that he had proof of what I had been doing.

"But I'm not going to turn you in," he smiled.

He had invited me up to his small apartment. Outside, a winter wind blew snow down the one main street in town. I wet my lips and stared at the electric alarm clock on a table, watching the red hand silently count off the seconds and thinking that time always runs out sooner or later for everyone. It had run out for me.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Nothing as long as you see to it that I get fifty bucks a week," he grinned. He paused a second and added, "I don't care how you get it, just so you do."

Now, on this spring night, I was desperate. The bank wasn't large enough for me to get away with it much longer. Someone was going to discover the shortages. The examiners were due. If I were caught and accused Ordman of blackmail, he'd simply laugh and deny it. My word against his, and mine wouldn't be worth much.

As I sat in the hotel lobby and listened to them talk about Tom Ordman and his twenty-five, thousand dollar bank notes, the plan began to form in my mind and I knew that there never had been a better time.

All the gnawing hate and desperation that had walled itself within me became a living, plotting thing until it began to justify itself in my mind. Besides, there wasn't anything else left for me except the eventual trip to the penitentiary and all the good years I would lose behind stone walls and cell bars. I'd rather die than face that.

I'd rather kill than face that!

The plan grew swiftly and certainly. Almost of its own momentum, I found myself putting it into effect. I stood and stretched. "I think I'll take in the show at the Bijou," I said casually to the group in the easy chairs where we had been chatting. "I hear it's good."

"You'll be in time for the first picture if you hurry," someone said.

I left casually and strolled the two block to the show, bought a ticket, and took a seat on the aisle at the back where the usher would be sure to see me.

A few moments after I'd been in I dropped several coins on the floor and began to grope for them. Several persons about me heard the tingle of the metal and helped a little in the search. The usher flashed her light down. We found a quarter.

"That's all," I whispered. "They just rolled out of my pocket, I guess. Careless of me."

She smiled. "It happens quite often," she assured me.

I knew that she'd remember that I had been there. I watched the show, carefully remembering details. I wanted to be sure of it.

It was a double feature and after eleven when I got out. I walked quickly to the first corner and glanced about. No one seemed to be watching and I hurried down back streets where there was little lighting until I came to the back of the drug store.

Between the drug store and the store building next door I looked up. As I had anticipated, one of his friends who had brought him home had pulled up a window to give him plenty of air.

There was a packing box by the drugstore back door. It would work and I wouldn't have to find anything else. I had to jump, but I caught the window casement and managed to pull myself up.

In a few moments I was in the living room looking down at Ordman where they had covered him on his roll-away living room bed. His mouth was open and he snored loudly. I could smell the liquor.

I used a brass bookend from his living room table. It made a crunching, sickening noise and for a moment I thought I would be ill. I fought off the nausea and listened. His snoring had stopped and the only sound in the room was my own soft breathing and the gentle whir of the electric alarm clock.

I pulled his limp body from the bed and dumped him on the floor. I tore his pajama coat and ground a heel against his knuckles to make it look as if he had skinned them on a jaw.

His coat hung over a chair and his wallet was in the inside pocket. The thousand dollar notes were there. I crammed them into my pocket and glanced at other stuff in the wallet. A slip of paper had the serial numbers of the notes listed. I tore up the slip and dropped the pieces into my coat pocket, thankful that I had found his list. Otherwise they might have traced the bills. I wiped the wallet with a handkerchief and dropped it on the floor.

I wiped the bookend and put it near the wallet, then I laid a chair on its side to make it look as if it had been knocked over.

I did the same thing with the table, letting books scatter over the rug. I kept a handkerchief between everything I touched and my fingers.

Now the plan was working at top speed.

I jerked the electric alarm clock cord loose from a wall plug and set the hands back to three minutes after nine. Carefully, I wiped the clock and laid it near the books.

Five minutes later I was hurrying through back streets. At the hotel I nodded to several persons as I walked in. The whole thing had taken me about twenty minutes.

"Swell night for a walk," I told old man Hawkes, the night clerk. "And you ought to see the show at the Bijou. It's good."

"Never go," he grinned toothlessly.

I returned his grin and went up to my room.

**T**HERE WAS plenty of excitement the next day when they found his body, but business went on as usual at the bank.

With Ordman gone, I had to take most of his work at my window and it wasn't until after closing hours that I had a chance to do the job remaining before me. In fact, the additional work piled on me gave me a break. It was easy to explain that I'd have to work late. By six o'clock I was alone in the bank and finished with what was left over from the day in the cage.

I went to work on the other job before me. I owed the bank approximately three thousand dollars. I used three of the bank notes from Ordman's wallet to make up the shortage and took my few dollars of change. Then I turned my attention to the bookkeeping I'd juggled to conceal the thefts.

At seven o'clock I was finished. I left the bank, ate, and went to the hotel. The usual group was gathered in the lobby discussing the murder. Ted Johnson, who worked on the weekly newspaper, was the main source of news. He'd been following the case all day.

"Clyde Masters may be young, but he's got something on the ball as a sheriff," Johnson explained. "He went back east and took some kind of training. FBI methods and stuff like that. He dusted that whole apartment for fingerprints, took pictures, made sketches, measured things. He really goes to work on a case."

I was thankful I'd been careful about fingerprints. Mine were on file at the bank and sheriff's office for identification purposes.

"Any idea when he was killed?" I asked.

Johnson nodded. "There was a fight from the way it looks. An electric clock was knocked to the floor and the plug pulled. It stopped at three minutes after nine."

I smiled to myself. There were witnesses who would definitely state that I was at the Bijou. But they'd never be called upon to make the statement, I thought. There was nothing to tie me to the case. There was no reason to suspect me.

Johnson lit a cigarette. "Ordman may have

been heavy on booze and chasing, but he was the other way about some things," he said. "He kept a set of books on everything he got or spent. Must have been a crank on it. He even entered the amount he spent for beer and cigarettes and dates. Something funny there, too."

A vague uneasiness began to creep over me. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe I shouldn't be talking about this," he said, "but Masters didn't say it was off the record. Ordman was getting an extra fifty bucks a week. It was in his books."

Suddenly the lobby became cold to me. I tried to stop a shiver. "Where'd it come from?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Masters is trying to figure that out. A lot of stuff in the books is just identified by initials. Looks like a code."

I swallowed hard. I hadn't expected anything like this. I wondered if "P.C." was listed before those fifty dollar entries. "P.C." for Paul Carruthers.

Johnson stood and stretched. "I've got to go back to the shop for a while," he said. "I'll see you."

The group started to break up and I went to my room. Fear was beginning to gnaw at me. "The clock keeps me in the clear," I assured myself. "There's no reason for them to come to me in case they tie my name with some initials. There's nothing to make them suspect me. Why should I be paying him fifty dollars a week? How could I on my salary? And I've covered everything at the bank. I returned the money I took."

It wasn't as easy as that. The room seemed to close in on me. I got my hat and left the hotel for a walk. At the corner I glanced toward the bank. Lights were on and there was something ominous about the way they shone through the windows.

I strolled by and looked in. Old man Simpson, the president, was in there with Boyle, the vice-president, Dale, the bookkeeper, and Sheriff Masters. They were working over something. My throat got tight and I could hear blood pounding in my ears. I returned to the hotel and to my room, but I didn't sleep.

**I** ARRIVED at the bank the next morning at nine. The doors opened at ten, but Masters came in shortly after I arrived. He went straight to Simpson's office and in a few moments Simpson sent for me.

Sudden weakness made my knees shake. I stopped at the drinking fountain on my way in. My mouth was so dry I was afraid I couldn't speak. Simpson greeted me with a curt nod. Masters seemed indifferent.

"Sit down, Carruthers," Simpson said.

I sat in a chair across the desk from him.

"Evidently someone has consistently taken

money from the bank," he said. "A careful check of bookkeeping last night indicates that entries were changed, and then changed again to make things balance."

"You mean Ordman—?" I asked nervously.

Simpson shook his head. "There was some fancy shifting of ledger cards and deposit slips. Some of the ledger cards had a peculiar small pencil mark in one corner, as if someone wanted to remember them especially.

"We caught that last night and we noticed new entries on them," he continued. "Someone used a blotter to blot those entries and carelessly left the blotter where we found it. We called some of the despositors to see if deposits were made on entered dates. They weren't."

He hesitated a few seconds and stared at me. "We also found three thousand dollar bank notes that came in during the day. We checked every person who had deposited a thousand dollars or over during the day. None of them gave us a thousand dollar note."

I wet my lips and glanced at Masters. His eyes still were indifferent.

"I don't understand," I murmured.

Masters spoke then. "Carruthers, we are fairly certain that you were embezzling the bank. Your initials are in Ordman's private

accounts books and it looks as if he blackmailed you. So we wondered how you could pay fifty dollars a week—if they are your initials—unless you were taking money from us."

I took a deep breath and tried to stop the pounding of blood in my head.

"If you think I killed him, you're crazy!" I said. "Everyone says that he was killed at three minutes after nine. A disconnected clock showed that. At three minutes after nine I was in the Bijou. I dropped some money on the floor and several people and the usher helped me find it. They'll testify that I was there. I couldn't have been in Ordman's apartment!"

Masters nodded. "We've already checked that. But you told the hotel clerk that you took a walk after you left the show. Where did you go?"

"I—why, I just took a walk. It was a nice evening."

"A walk to Ordman's apartment?"

"Listen, he was killed at three minutes after nine! The clock showed that. How could I—?"

"When Ordman's friends took him home, one of them set the alarm clock for him," Masters interrupted. "Yet that clock didn't have

*(Continued on page 97)*

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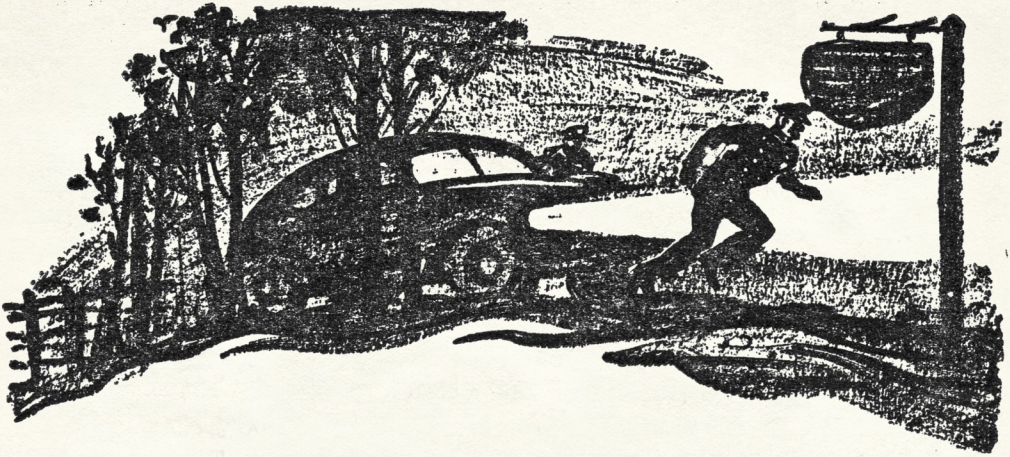
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# A HEAD OFF HER SHOULDERS!

By

CYRIL PLUNKETT

*When Sally's black bag flew open and those bloodstained blonde curls tumbled out, she knew then that even ten million steps could never quite carry her home!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Body in the Bathub

SHE WONDERED sometimes what he really wanted. Twice they'd quarreled, really quarreled, and twice she'd packed and almost left him. She couldn't understand him or why he seemed so jealous about Rex.

"You think I'm glad he likes you?" he would say—oh, any evening that Rex Jergens joined them. Any evening after Rex had dropped in for dinner or for bridge.

"Darling, he's our neighbor, he likes us."

"He watches every move you make."

"Don't be silly, Ian!"

"Oh, so now I'm silly? I meet you two walking in the park—"

"Please, Ian! I've told you repeatedly—"

"Yeah, accident," he'd say, sneering. "I know. An accident that I came along when I did. Well, never mind. Someday I'll—"

She knew he wouldn't do anything. She knew, deep in her heart, that he was too cautious. She knew he'd found it pretty nice that

she had all the money. A lot of money, a fortune. She knew, of course, that he loved her.

The third time that they quarreled, Death stopped briefly at their window to peer in and listen.

It started innocently enough. But she should have seen that he was tense. She should have walked on tiptoe until—until later in the evening. He'd rushed home for dinner because he had a seven-thirty appointment—something about business. By nine or ten, perhaps, he would have returned, mellowed after a few drinks. So she should have tiptoed through their meal. But instead—

She'd bought a hat, she said.

Oh?

Yes, this afternoon. She'd been downtown, shopping.

Drive?

Oh no. A cab. She'd intended to meet Sue, her sister, for lunch. Only Sue had phoned, something had come up—

"Lunch alone?" he asked.

Yes. She'd gone to Leoni's. That was about two; and she'd seen the hat across the street

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The scream had already begun—she could only try to stop it.

in a store window. She couldn't resist it.

"That's funny," he said.

She'd been pouring him a second cup of coffee. "What is funny, Ian?"

"Leoni's. Two o'clock. I was there myself. I didn't see you."

Her heart quickened a little, then subsided again. "Well, it might have been two-thirty, Ian."

"That's funny," he said. "I was still there at two-thirty. What's the angle, Sally?"

She looked at him. Two red blotches appeared on her cheeks. "Must there be an angle?"

"You wanted me to believe you were at Leoni's."

"I was at Leoni's."

He took a sip of coffee and put the cup back down. He touched his lips carefully with the snowy napkin. "What's the angle, Sally?"

She got up abruptly. She walked to their bedroom. She was about to shut the door, but he came in.

"I'm serious," he said in a tight voice. "I'm tired of subterfuge, quick touches of your hands with his, quick glances. I want to know precisely what this means now, Sally."

"You'll be late for your appointment."

"To hell with my appointment."

"Ian, I was at Leoni's."

He just stood there, glaring.

"And I'm sick of this—!" she said.

"Oh, sick of me now, eh?"

"Sick of your—your insane suspicions!"

"No fire where there's smoke, I suppose?"

"Ian, you should be ashamed!" she said.

Her cheeks were very white now as she strode across the room. It was a big room, beautiful, with twin beds and long draperies. There was a wide window and a view; and the window was still open, though the early night air was cool. They could always see the river; and between them and the river were the lofty silhouettes of buildings. She took a leather bag from the closet and snapped it open. Then she opened a drawer. She knew where she was going. Sue, her sister, lived out in the suburbs. So she would stay a while with Sue, until—

"Sally," he said, and now his face was flushed, his voice was getting louder. "I'm warning you. We've been through all this before, and you're starting things tonight that you can't finish."

She was humming. She ignored him. She looked gay. She knew the way she looked rubbed salt in the wound. She wanted it that way. He had pushed her in a corner, and this time she was going to show him. She took a black suit from the closet and tossed it on the bed.

"Sally," he said, "I'm warning you! Put that bag back or—by God I'll make it good.

I'll ask the first blonde I meet for a date."

She gave him one small look, one small moment. Her eyes were ice and froze him. What did he think, that she couldn't take a dare? Her lips curled a little as she said, "Why don't you?"

He slammed the bedroom door. He stormed across the living room. He slammed the foyer door, and the building superintendent, Calhoun, stood there in the hall and looked surprised and flustered to be caught here listening. Calhoun said, "Good evening, Mr. Fail." But Ian Fail just glared at him and stalked on past.

Then the door across the hall—Rex Jergens's suite—opened. Jergens looked out and said to Calhoun, "Door, huh? It startled me. I thought it was a shot. I say, what's the matter with Fail?"

Ian Fail had gone on down the stairs.

"They just had a fight," Calhoun explained, shrugging.

"The Fails?"

"He just told her he was going out to get himself a blonde."

"Ian Fail?"

"Now she's in there packing, I guess."

Jergens was a lawyer. He was tall and in the early thirties. He looked at his nails. Then he frowned and said, "Poor kid." He meant Mrs. Fail. "I don't like it. Fail's developing a nasty temper."

"Like the trigger on a gun!" Calhoun grinned. "Couldn't be he's working too hard, maybe?"

Calhoun walked on down the hall to the rear stairs. Jergens stood there a few seconds longer, just frowning. Then he returned to his suite.

He was twenty-six, Ian Fail. He was brown from golf and swimming. But his nerves were on edge. His brain seemed like a boiler with no valve, and the fires underneath it, in his chest, were raging. On the street below, he looked up and down, right and left; it was dark.

Two short blocks away a sign caught his attention. *BAR*. He turned in, and here there was no mockery or city din, but only soft lights and soft music. Here were lazy people shrugging aside their cares, sitting on chairs upholstered in pink leather. He looked at his watch, took the last stool at the bar and drummed with both hands on the wood. He could see his own reflection in the mirror. His eyes were too black—too staring. He looked at his hands and they were shaking.

"What's the matter," said the barkeep, "dry?"

"Make it double rye."

"Wash?"

"Soda."

His five dollar bill became four ones and

two coins in change. He tossed the drink away, then fingered the money. He looked around and on the next stool was a short stocky man in a gray suit. He had his back turned and was conversing with someone in brown. On the stool beyond them was a blonde girl.

*I'll ask the first blonde I meet for a date—*

She was in her early twenties. She didn't wear a hat and her hair fell gracefully around her shoulders. Her dress was silky and lime green, cut high at the neck and tied around her throat with a little bow. Fail looked at her through the bar mirror. She had ordered whiskey straight, and the cigaret she held was smeared with red, blood red, from her mouth. Nice mouth, full lips; nice teeth, white and even.

*I'll ask the first blonde I meet for a date—*

Fail still drummed on the bar and, began breathing faster. Gray Suit now was saying casually to Brown: "Have one more, Joe?"

"No, the little woman's waiting."

"Got the car?"

"No, I'll catch the bus."

"Hey, it's almost seven twenty!"

They left. They were props the stagehand had removed. There was no one between him and the blonde now. She pawed in her purse, and everything she did was feline. She took a compact from her purse and looked in it at her lips. She picked *him* up in the compact mirror—and then everything stopped. Five seconds passed. She didn't move, he didn't move. Then the compact closed with a snap. Her blonde head turned, she smiled, and he looked straight into her eyes . . .

Bedroom door slammed. Foyer door slammed. You remember? He was gone, and Sally Fail at once stopped packing. She was small and dark, and her nose tilted just enough to show she could be saucy. Now, suddenly, she wasn't saucy. She had blue eyes, very wide, and a dimple in one cheek.

Still her anger rolled like waves upon a beach, but now, between each foamy crest, there was a trough, a hollow. She would go through with it, she thought—and she snapped the bag shut and took it off the bed. But then, inevitably, came the trough, the hollow. Suppose he *did* become involved tonight with another woman? She had nursed this thought before of late, a secret fear. Suppose he *did* leave her? She was frightened. She slipped off the lounging clothes she wore and put on a black suit and a white frilly blouse. She laid out black gloves, but every move she made was slower. Now, with almost every movement she would stop and listen. All the while a voice within her mind would try and soothe, whisper. "He'll be coming back soon." She knew he had a cold, grim temper, but these flareups never lasted.

Now she was dressed for the street. She had her bag packed, her face fixed, she even wore her gloves. Now she had to decide; everything she did would either help or hinder. The trough between the waves was getting longer and deeper. She took the bag to the foyer, set it down and peeped into the hall. She'd half thought he'd be there, waiting. Mrs. Goddard, who lived in the suite adjoining, was coming from below with her hands full of mail. Mrs. Goddard saw her.

"Sally!" Mrs. Goddard said, and stopped, and forced a smile.

She was a tall, well proportioned widow of about thirty. She'd moved in next door a month ago but the trunks she'd brought still cluttered up her rooms. Her closets still were disordered. It was all due to the life she'd led, she said with disregard. Until this year she'd traveled with a circus. This year she'd just—traveled. She was very strange—one day very friendly and the next reserved. Sometimes she was even rude. Tonight, of course, she was ready to be friendly.

"You aren't going away, Sally?"

She'd heard the doors slam? She had seen the bag? Sally shoved it off to one side, with her foot. "I—I'm waiting for my husband."

"Oh?"

"He—he went down for the car."

"Oh?"

"And I—I'll meet him in a moment."

Mrs. Goddard's smile was satisfied and smug. Her pale blue eyes narrowed. "Then don't let me keep you."

"No. Goodnight, Mrs. Goddard."

Mrs. Goddard, smiling, went on to her door. And now the seconds began ticking away again and Sally trembled again, and wondered what she should do. Of course Ian didn't mean it about the blonde. That was simply something he had said in anger. And Ian knew—he surely *knew*—she didn't mean to leave him. All of it was talk, just talk. It would take a little time for him to get a drink and think and feel a little silly. Just as she felt silly. Of course she had her pride! She couldn't simply sit here, waiting.

She put the bag carefully in the center of the foyer where he'd be sure to see it. There now! He would know the minute he came in that she hadn't left him. She stepped out, locked the door and went on down. She turned right on the street and walked two blocks to buy a ticket to a movie. It was almost eight, and she had done the right thing. She was safe now. She looked at the screen and thought of Ian and never saw the picture.

Two hours wore away—and by this time, ten, he surely had come back. She walked out to the cool dark street. Her feet were like the wind, eager. She would come in on tiptoe. Ian would be sprawled out in the big chair

by the window. He would try to make her think he had been dozing.

"Good evening, Mr. Fail," she'd say.

And he'd open his dark eyes. He would wait a moment, embarrassed. "Golly," he'd say, "I was scared."

"Scared, Ian?"

"Hon, look. I'm a sap. I should learn to keep my big mouth shut."

"Ian . . . I just went to a movie."

"You did? Up the street? Well, you know what I did, honey? I kicked myself in the pants. That's what I did."

"I couldn't leave you, Ian, not really."

Oh, that's what she would say, and what he would say. She would end up in his arms. They would vow never, never to tempt fate again.

He wasn't in the big chair by the window. She snapped the light on and stood there in the foyer. She called, "Ian—?" But he didn't come in from the bedroom either. Everything was still in the apartment; and then she called again, more sharply, "Ian—!"

No answer. She closed the hall door behind her. She was angry again, at herself for arriving first. Then she had a new thought. He was in bed, pouting. *He'd come home.* She knew that now. The black bag had been moved. It was up against the wall, and not where she had left it.

"Ian!" She crossed to the bedroom. Oh yes, he'd been home. His bed was mussed, the pillow had a hollow in it. On the night stand she saw something else. A pair of gloves; not hers. And something else. A compact; not her compact. A cigaret lay in the tray, unlighted, but it had been between two lips. Not her lips. It was red with lipstick.

*I'll ask the first blonde for a date—*

She stormed from the bedroom. She picked up her bag and went down the back stairs, crying. "Oh, Ian, how could you? Oh, Ian." She walked blocks before she caught a cab. She rode miles before the thought occurred to her that Sue, her sister, might not be at home. The driver pulled into a roadhouse where she could phone.

Here was country and black night. Here were slender poplars, rustling. Twice, she phoned. No answer. The driver brought her bag in and she paid him. She couldn't sit on Sue's front porch outside in the night and wait. She sat in the last booth of the restaurant.

"No, nothing to eat, please. Just coffee. And don't look at me like that. I'm only waiting for Sue to return home. Waiting to phone."

The radio was playing, and at twelve the news came on. "The janitor saw the blonde girl arrive. Police admit they have no other clue to her identity."

That meant nothing. Why, oh why didn't Sue come home?

"The body lay in the bathtub, partly dismembered."

That meant nothing either, until—

"Police are now searching for Ian Fail and his wife—"

"Oh my God," she said. She spilled the coffee. Then she fainted.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Fiery Furnace!

THE RESTAURANT was no longer the same when she opened her eyes. Everything had changed in the space of a few minutes. She still sat in the same booth, but around her were people—and they all had eyes. Every eye was upon her, wide, unwinking. The radio was playing, but now it was music. It was lowdown jive. She began to tremble.

Someone said, "She'll be all right now, I guess."

Oh yes, she would be all right. What had happened? Nothing. Just a murder.

"Feeling better, lady?"

"Yes, I—I feel much better."

Lies, of course. All must be lies. She was sick. Her heart was thumping at her ribs, the blood rushing past her temples. She was gripping the table, her knuckles white, every nerve in her body aching, frantic.

"Should I call a cab? Should I call a doctor?"

Who was this, the counter man? The one with the blackest eyes? They were puzzled, she thought.

"Maybe," he said, "if you just take it easy a while, lady. There's no hurry."

No hurry? But there was! A girl had been murdered, in her apartment, in her bathtub. Take that easy? The pain ran in waves from her brain. The wheels inside her mind were whirling. Ian had come home; he had moved the bag. He'd brought someone with him—at least someone had been there; she'd seen the gloves, the cigaret, the compact. But then what? Not murder, not Ian. And yet, if he didn't figure in it somehow—how could the girl have gotten in when the door was locked?

Oh, she thought, if she could only bend her head and cry. She didn't bow her head, she didn't cry. She saw the counterman reach for the phone. Then her heart stopped beating as he cupped one hand around the mouthpiece. He would call a cab for her, a doctor? Then why did he cup the mouthpiece? So she wouldn't see and read his lips. So she wouldn't guess that he was saying. "Yes, we heard



about the murder. Then this girl let out a gasp and fainted—

He was calling the police! Her heart was beating again, madly. They'd ask questions. They'd look in her purse. And the minute they discovered she was Mrs. Ian Fail— She stopped thinking. Her mind was blanketed with fear. She could see only the door and feel that somehow, quickly, she must reach it. She fumbled from the booth and grabbed up her bag.

One step. Two steps. *Please God!* Six steps, and so few to go. Maybe two or three more seconds—

"Hey there, lady!"

The blood froze in her veins. Her legs began to ache, and her muscles turned to lead.

"Stop her!" yelled the counterman, from the phone. "Hey—somebody stop her!"

Two men slid from stools and stood between her and the door. She just looked at them. Two big men in leather jackets. Then the counterman came running up the aisle behind her.

"Golly, lady, you can't walk away like that!"

"My cab—"

"But you paid it off. You remember? Lady, you don't have a cab outside waiting. You're out in the country."

"Then I—I'll thumb a ride to town—"

"At night like this? And the way you feel? After just fainting?" The counterman turned to the two men. "Should I let her out like this? Let her collapse on the road? You guys live around here, don't you? Well, I just phoned for Doc Roan."

There was a mirror straight in from the door. She could see one side of his face in it. *He'd winked.* Doctor? Sheriff, he meant! Constable, highway patrolman! She could see it now, too, in the other faces. A change. Tension.

"Oh no, lady. You just be a good girl. Sit down in that booth and wait here for Doc Roan."

"The washroom?" she said faintly.

She turned and left them standing with mouths open. She fled straight down the aisle again to the door marked *Ladies*. She closed the door and snapped the bolt. The police were coming—for her. Inevitably, through her, to trap Ian. She could think only of Ian. No matter how they'd quarreled or what had happened, she loved Ian. It was suddenly as simple as that. He was being sought for murder, but until she talked with him, she must believe in him utterly. As simple as that. Nothing must be left to chance. Every move she made must be to help Ian.

Driver's license, insurance cards, all identifying items in her purse must be at once destroyed. "Tear them up! Yes, get rid of

them quickly!" Nothing must be found on her to tie her in with Ian. Then they couldn't hold her. Then she could get back to town to find and help Ian. Everything for Ian. Everything must go from her purse.

The bag? Good heavens, what *had* she packed in the bag? Underthings, stockings, two-three dresses. Toiletries, jars of creams—handkerchiefs. Oh, that must be all. But *was* it? She tried to think, but her mind now was pinwheeling the whole evening and the little things went skimming by too fast. God alone knew what she'd put in the bag.

A siren began wailing as she stooped to see. It was coming round a curve now, coming nearer. Doc Roan, the Sheriff, or a deputy. Oh, she'd known it, and she'd acted barely in time. Her fingers fumbled with the catch on the bag. Locked? Oh no. Please, please no. She had no key with her. She heard the squeal of brakes, so close that she jerked. The bag jumped open. The lid popped open and a purse popped out. Not *her* purse. This was a small calf billfold, and gold-stamped upon it was a name: *Babs Stratton*.

Her mind spun like a wheel of chance—and stopped. Compact, cigaret, and gloves. Body in the tub. *Babs Stratton*. Then she raised the bag's black lid, reached inside—her hand jerked back as though stung. Flew up to her lips. But the scream already had begun. She could only try to stop it.

She stopped it. It locked in her throat. Her throat suddenly had tight iron bands around it. She couldn't breathe or swallow. She just crouched, staring at the awful bloody thing jammed inside the bag.

Blood caked on a head, on long blonde hair. Blood caked on a face. A pretty face, a girl's face. Round and round within her mind were words she'd heard minutes past, on the radio.

"The body lay in the bathtub, partly dismembered—"

Hours seemed to pass. Time seemed to hang suspended. Once, long past, she and Ian had gone to a Chamber of Horrors. There they'd seen wax dummies posed to re-live modern crimes. All the crimes, of course, were murder. Everything was murder—killers still with guns or knives clasped in their bloody hands—bodies stuffed in caves, or wedged into a trunk. *Horrible*, she'd thought—

"Ian," she'd said faintly, "I can't stand it."

He had laughed.

"Ian, please take me outside," she'd said. She'd wondered how he could laugh. Then she'd swayed against him—and afterward they'd walked swiftly to the beach. Afterward she'd wanted to breathe in clean air, see clean sand, clean water.

Now she had a severed head in her bag. A human head; no wax dummy. This was

real blood, dried and caked and ugly. Would Doc Roan, anyone believe she hadn't known it was in the bag? Who would believe she hadn't tried thus, piece by piece, to dispose of the body? Why would *she* try to dispose of the body? To help Ian.

From the maze of horror came a sudden word, "Lady?"

She turned her head slowly. Her eyes began to widen. She remembered how close they had been. The police! Doc Roan! At the door now, rapping.

"Lady?" said the counterman's voice again, louder.

"Yes?"

"The doc's here to see you, lady."

She couldn't walk out and leave the bag. The counterman was smart and had proved it by phoning. He'd remember the bag. Then they'd find it. They'd have her and they'd convict Ian. She shook her head and blinked. She'd been staring straight at the window.

The window was open. It swung on hinges, inside. It was screened, but the latches were inside. One moment she was paralyzed with fright; the next frantic with movement. She stuck the billfold in her purse and closed the bag. She jumped to her feet and turned the faucet on the washbowl. Water swirled and made noise. The water drowned out the sound *she* made, removing the screen from the window.

"Hey there, lady?" Then someone with the counterman, a deep voice, began giving orders.

By this time she'd tossed the bag through the window. She got one leg over the sill.

"All right, lady, you asked for it! We're coming inside!"

The door cracked with the weight of a body. Simultaneously she jumped. Five feet down, to hard ground. She almost cried aloud as her ankle twisted. Agonizing, were the first few steps. She sobbed. But she didn't dare stop while the ankle held her up.

It held. She was running with the bag, running through a weedy yard into the blackness. Behind, they'd broken down the door. Behind, the place was a hive. Cars jerked to life with their white lights blazing. Men were calling to each other and running in all directions. She crouched in a culvert, put both hands to her face and tried to shut them out.

They ran past her. They shouted to each other that they had her; they'd seen something moving. Then she heard a new sound, a soft moaning. She heard a man's loud curse, and they veered off then toward the road.

She forced herself to rise and stood swaying. Should she hide the bag now? It bore her initials. Then should she hide the head? The dark looked so secure . . . but with daylight dogs might come, and surely buzzards. She started straight across the fields, the

black bag in her hand. Decision had to wait until she'd reached her sister's.

"Yes, Sue, I'm going to stay with you tonight. I've brought along my bag. And by the way, dear, please throw the head in the furnace."

The furnace! She might do it. There were hours still till dawn. So later on tonight she might steal down the stairs. But once the head was burned, would Justice become tangled? After all, she wanted Justice. Something was all wrong. Ian was not guilty of this monstrous crime, so there must be Justice.

She walked stiffly down a slope, then up an inky street. She saw the house, Sue's house—it was inky. Almost one o'clock now? Sue would be in bed. She cut across the lawn.

A noise? Someone, something nearby moving? Her chest was filled with instant panic. But seconds passed, and listening she heard nothing. Then she pressed the button and chimes toned inside softly.

"Sally?"

It came from the other side of the driveway—a whisper. She spun around—a figure was emerging, tall and lean, coming toward her from the blackness.

"Sally!"

She recognized the voice. It belonged to Rex Jergens, the man about whom Ian was so jealous, the man who lived just across the hall.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Sticky Is the Web

THEY'D LIVED for months that close and had become casual friends. "Mr. Jergens," she would say, at first, "would you care to drop in for the evening? Yes, I'm having a few friends . . . So he had met Sue, her sister. She had known from the beginning—as any woman would, intuitively—that he liked her.

He lived alone. His practice, law, she understood was good. She would introduce him to a girl, and he was always charming, but reserved. He never quite let go. He had a quiet drowsy voice as though his mind was filled with words often left unspoken. But no touch of the hands! No understanding glances, no dates in the park. Because—well, because she'd loved and married Ian. However deep within her heart she'd liked Rex Jergens, she'd been faithful to Ian.

Now, Jergens said, "Sally, don't cry out! Come here. A car might pass and see you."

"Your sister isn't home, Sally. I phoned. Then I drove out here."

He reached for her arm and tugged her off the step. "Sally, you're trembling! You've heard?"

"It isn't true! It can't be true, Rex."

He hesitated, answered, "I'm afraid it is."

"Not Ian!"

"Apparently he's disappeared."

"Not Ian!"

"Look, Sally. Please—not here. We may not have the time." As if to prove his words, a car turned the corner, with a red eye gleaming on its fender.

"This way, Sally, fast!"

They gained a screen of bushes as the cruiser swung in the driveway. They saw two men run to the house. They pounded on the door and stood there conversing.

"She tried to phone someone at this address. That's for sure." It was the same deep voice she'd heard in the restaurant.

"What do you think, Doc?"

"I think we've got a hot clue to that murder."

Jergens touched her arm and reached for the bag. There was nothing she could do but let him have it. He led the way through a yard. They crossed to where his car was parked in shadows on the next street on a hill. He rolled it without lights a quarter mile before cutting in the motor. Then he leaned back with a deep sigh.

"And I could be in bed," he said. He began to click his tongue. He didn't grin. Then as though he'd read her mind, he said, "I don't know why I stick my chin out, Sally. Maybe it's because you've been so kind." He was still for a moment. "And because I've been lonely."

Rex Jergens, successful lawyer, handsome bachelor—lonely?

"Or maybe it's because—but nevermind the reason. I can't believe that either of you would get mixed up with murder."

"Rex," she interrupted anxiously, "I've got to know what really happened."

He leaned on the wheel and looked straight ahead. "I spent the evening at home reading. I was tired and apparently I dozed. Then Calhoun woke me by banging on my door. Mrs. Goddard had called him, he said. She'd heard a scream sometime earlier and the thought of it had bothered her. You know how it is. Calhoun, of course, remembered that you'd quarreled with Ian."

"He knew that?" She'd gasped.

"Calhoun? Is there anything he doesn't know that goes on in the building? Anyway, no one answered at your apartment, so he opened the door with his key—"

He paused. Did he dangle this as bait? Was she supposed to say now, "Yes, Rex, I know. He found it in the bathtub, *with no head.*" She stopped breathing. How did she know she could trust Rex Jergens?

"The girl was a blonde, Sally," he was saying slowly. "Calhoun remembered her

clothes and identified her. That is, he'd seen her come in. He'd been outside, sweeping the sidewalk. She'd looked at the mail slots and then punched a button. Apparently she was expected. She went right on in, he said. He set the time between eight and nine. Then he told the police he'd overheard Ian say—"

*I'll date the first blonde I meet.* She knew. Still Rex Jergens spoke, but now she didn't hear him. Seven words seared her mind.

"Sally, moaning won't help you."

"Rex. I know, I know."

"I can help you, I think. As your lawyer. Legally."

She looked at him. "Legally?"

"Don't you realize the spot you're in?"

He seemed surprised. "You say you heard the newscast on the radio. Your flight was natural because of your concern about Ian. Certainly the police want to find him. They're convinced he brought the girl in. But it's the next part that's hard."

"The—the next part?"

"They've set the time of the murder for about nine. Understand, *they* say Ian had a date, and the evidence so far would appear to prove it. They say either he'd known the girl before; in which case it's anyone's guess as to the motive. Or else he met the girl tonight, and if that's true, why would he want to kill her? So it's the next part, Sally, that's tough. Where were *you* at nine tonight?"

She said faintly, "I?"

"Yes, Sally, you. Because if we accept the case at it stands now, and if you returned and found the girl there, with or waiting for Ian, then you certainly *could* be considered as having had a motive for murder."

She sat silent. The car spun around; it couldn't be her mind that was reeling like this. All she'd done was buy a hat. All she'd done was let her temper and her nerves and her worry over Ian get the better of her. They simply couldn't think she'd commit a murder! Kill a girl she hadn't even met?

But then who knew they'd never met?

She became aware, abruptly, that Rex Jergens was looking at her. "What's the matter, Sally, can't you tell a straight story?"

"It—it isn't that at all! It's—It's just that you don't understand, Rex!"

"Why don't I? What haven't you told me?"

"I—I only went out to a movie."

"At what time?"

"About eight. Mrs. Goddard saw me leaving."

"Then what?"

"Then I came back. Ten, I think."

"Can you prove it?"

"Rex, I don't know! I simply went upstairs as usual."

"Didn't see anyone?"

She just sat there.

"For God's sake, Sally, we can't build a case like this."

She just sat there. Then she said, "But Rex, it's true! I went in. I—I saw the gloves, the compact."

"Where?"

"On the nightstand. And I—I jumped to conclusions. Rex, why wouldn't I? What was I to do? I'd packed my bag—" She had to stop to cover her confusion. "I picked up my bag and ran—"

"Wait." She'd heard him suck his breath in. "What about the bag?"

"N-nothing."

"I'm here to help you, aren't I?"

Yes, Rex."

"Then what about the bag?"

"It was something else!" she said in desperation.

"What else?"

"On the nightstand. A—a billfold."

"You picked that up, too?"

"Yes, I—I wanted to know if—if he'd been with a girl, and who the girl was."

And you found her name in the billfold?" He sat scowling at the night, both hands on the wheel. "Let's start over. Let's bypass the billfold and her name for a moment. Let's say it wasn't Ian. All right. How can we get around the fact your door was locked? You say it was. Then how did she get into your apartment?"

"She knew someone else in the building!"

They were back in town. The streets were still and sleepy black—listening. "All right, Sally. Who?"

"Someone who had a key to our apartment!"

"Calhoun?" He slammed on the brakes. "All right. Let's run it down, while we've got the time. Let's have a look at that billfold."

It had a scent, not leather, but faint perfume. In gold across one was corner stippled, *Babs Stratton*.

The first blonde that he'd met?

There was twenty dollars in it. One ten and two fives. Men, of course, always carried cards. Nothing like that was here though. She had bought a dress. The price, the bill, was fifty—charged. She was paying each month on a loan—paying only the interest.

The address didn't look like twenty dollars, but more like twenty cents. There was a shop on the corner beside a garage. There was a wire fence around a cindered yard full of rusty metal, junk. The trees, against a waning moon, looked scrawny. The house had a porch of dark red brick that seemed surprised when they ignored it. Jergens had a pocket flash and found the bell. Inside, it rang shrilly.

Yellow light answered almost at once and bathed a wide green hall. Then a fat woman

in a faded yellow wrapper hobbled down the stairs. They could see her; she was busy brushing sleep from her baggy eyes and gray hair from her face. The door opened only a crack.

"What is it?"

"We're looking for a Miss Stratton," Jergens said. "Babs Stratton."

"She's not in."

The door had started to close. Jergens' foot stopped it. "I'm sorry, Madame, but I must have information, I must question you about Miss Stratton."

"Why me?" the woman grumbled. "She'll be along, toward morning. She's always home by morning. Why don't you wait in your car?"

"Look here," Jergens said. "You don't understand. It seems that Miss Stratton met with an accident."

"Well?"

"Look here," Jergens repeated, "just who is Miss Stratton? What does she do?"

"Humph. Show business, she says. She's been out of work. She's been picking up a few jobs as a model."

"Do you know her agency?"

The woman sniffed, turned and pointed. "There—my phone. If you ask me, that's the way she works. A lot of men seem to have her number."

"Oh? Did she have a call tonight?"

"Yes, she had a call tonight."

"One call?" Jergens asked. "Do you recall the time?"

"What's this going to be?" the woman asked suddenly, suspiciously. "Police?"

"Yes, it's going to be nasty."

"What kind of an accident? Say—she ain't dead?"

Jergens said, "Let's stick to the phone."

"The phone?" The woman blinked. "Oh, the call she got. I'd just had my supper. I ate early. That would make it around six, I guess. She came running—she always beats me to the phone. And it was her call, because she winked—"

"Did she mention a name?"

"Sure she mentioned a name. All this time and that's all you want? She said, 'Yes,'—five or six times, I guess. She laughed and said, 'Of course I'm interested!' Her eyes were laughing at me all the time, she was all excited."

"The name?"

"Why she said, 'Yes, of course I'll be there, Mr. Fail—'"

"Oh!"

Jergens hand gripped Sally by the arm. He held her, and the strength of him was good. He was hurting her arm, but this pain was good, not like the twisting knives inside.

Leering, the fat woman said, "What's the

matter? Did I say the wrong thing, dearie?"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Black Widow

**B**UT IT couldn't end like this! She'd trembled as from blows, but now, back with Jergens in the car, her mind began to stiffen and search for secret pathways—some-way, anyway to explain this. *Mister Fail*. If Babs Stratton had known Ian, then why had she been so formal?

"Sally," Jergens warned, "you're clutching at a straw."

All right. But if this girl had known Ian *well*—wouldn't she have called him "dear" or "Ian"? So maybe there *was* some mistake? The fat woman could be wrong, couldn't she? Suppose Babs Stratton really had said, "Yes, of course I'll be there—without fail—?"

She'd babbled all this in the car. Again she'd clutched the black bag in her hands; her teeth chattered. Jergens sat there staring and said, "No, Sally. You're only pounding with bare hands at stone."

Yes, but words could be twisted so easily! Consider his own business, law; fortunes had been lost—and lives—through so small an error as a misplaced comma. And even if Babs *did* say, "Mister Fail", how could they sit here now and know with absolute certainty what his motive was for calling her? Couldn't it have been simply business?

"Sally," Jergens said, "you're dancing all around the facts. Because the fact does remain, that following this phone call, she walked to your apartment and to death. The fact further remains that Ian is missing. And with every moment you and he remain hidden, the case against you both becomes blacker and bigger."

Then—she closed her eyes, her voice was faint, then she would go in. If there was nothing else to do, she had to help Ian. He was everything. She would stake her life on him—she loved him, she had faith.

Jergens had had started the motor. "Save him by 'confessing', Sally? No. I won't let you. All I want to do—"

"Bring the bag back. Make certain she'd be caught with it? Was this, from the first, the real reason he had tried to find her?" She wondered.

"All I want," he was saying, "is to act as your attorney, and then make the best deal for you. I want time. This sort of thing won't save you. I'm convinced I can. I believe in you, and I believe, given time, that I can prove you were at the movie tonight. That's problem number one. Admittedly, we have two. For your sake, if not mine, we must

also save Ian. But Sally, we can't construct a case for Ian until we or the police find him. Until we hear *his* story."

She sat very still. She'd shoved the black bag on the rack behind the seat. She could feel it with her head now, pressing against her neck. There was no further hope. She'd failed to hide the head, and now it must betray her. "This is Mrs. Fail," he'd say, Rex Jergens, when he turned her in. Maybe he'd be laughing. Maybe, when the bag was opened, he'd really be surprised. But she'd never know. *He* could be the killer—but once they saw the head, the police would never try to prove that.

She was numb with fear, shock, and worry. She was glad, almost glad, it would soon be over. She would be termed guilty and Ian would be saved; that was all that mattered. She hugged this thought to her and just sat there, eyes closed, while the car rolled home.

"Stay hidden in the car," he said. "Wait until I've learned what's happened."

"And," he said, a final, hopeful whisper, "I'll do everything I can. Don't worry."

She watched him walk away to the street. He disappeared around the corner of the building. Why did people always tell one not to worry? Her teeth were chattering again, now that she was alone with the last free moment, perhaps, in her life. The last chance for decision.

What decision?

Above her, window after window was lighted. Apparently no one in the building slept. Apparently Homicide was still on the job. Looking up, she saw a silhouette, Mrs. Goddard at her window.

Almost with that moment someone came around the front of the building—Calhoun . . . pausing to look quickly up and down the street, as though puzzled, nervous. "Nosey, Mr. Calhoun? Suspicious, Mr. Calhoun?" She bit her lip and tugged another word then from her mind—"Guilty?"

Calhoun returned to the building and apparently went in. Mrs. Goddard drew back a little from her window.

She was ready to slip out of the car. Already she had one hand on the latch—it froze there. A soft voice from below had whispered, "Sally!"

It was Ian.

One small whispered word—"Sally". Now everything was sane.

"Don't open the door!"

She'd almost cried out his name. She pulled her hand from the latch and put it to her trembling lips.

"Roll down the window. And keep yourself hidden, Sally. That woman's up there at her window."

She breathed his name, reached out for his

fingers and found them. Her heart pounded with his touch.

"Darling, I've been frantic!"

"You've been frantic!"

"Ian, what will we do?"

"Damn that woman!"

Mrs. Goddard?" Jergens would be back soon. They had to get away before he came.

"Ian, they're searching for us!"

"My God, Sally, how did this happen?"

"You don't think I—?"

"You?" He swore. Then he went on swiftly, It's fantastic. I came home at a little before eleven. All I'd done was to trot around the bars. I came in and called to you. I got scared you'd really gone, hon. I looked in every room, and finally, in the bathroom—"

She could visualize what he had seen. She remembered what she'd seen that day at the beach, in the Chamber of Horrors. Yes, she could understand his anguish.

"At first I thought it was you, Sally." His hand shook in hers, and she gripped it harder. "I didn't know then what to do. I ran out down the back way. All I could think of was you, that you'd be coming back, unprepared, to see what I'd seen. I waited a while there for you. Then the cops came and I lost my chance. I couldn't get my car. I had to have the car; when you didn't show I knew you'd be with Sue. I was scared to take a cab and leave a trail out there to you."

She broke in then. Words poured from her lips, all her fears and suspicions. She told him everything she'd done; and time, she knew, had begun to race. Jergens would complete his "deal", and be back soon.

Her teeth chattered as she finished, "Ian, it's still here! The head. In my bag here, Ian."

"You didn't mention it to Rex?"

"No, Ian!"

"Where does he fit in?"

"Ian, don't! Don't start that again! He was only trying to help. At least that's what he said."

"Does he suspect? The head, Sally? You didn't—"

"Ian!"

"I know, hon. I had to be sure."

"Ian, suppose—suppose tonight he invited the Stratton girl to our apartment. I mean posing as you, to get rid of her, to kill her?"

"I've been doing plenty of supposing," he said grimly.

"Only he didn't have a key to the apartment."

"Nonsense. He's had repeated opportunities to pick up our key and get an impression. It could be Rex, I guess. But we can't clinch this thing like this. We've got to be sure."

"As far as that goes," Ian whispered, "it could be Mrs. Goddard."

"Mrs. Goddard!"

"Why not? Our window was open. She could have overheard our quarrel. What do we know about her? You might have hit it, Sally, at that, the vital clue. Just a comma instead of a period."

"A comma?"

"Look, Sally. If she hated this girl and wanted to kill her, she could have disguised her voice and then called Babs Stratton, posing as my secretary. Job, maybe, an intriguing offer. 'You'll come right over, Miss Stratton?' Well, what would the girl answer? 'Of course I'll be there.' *Period*. 'Mr. Fail?' Get it, Sally? The fat woman could have missed the period *inbetween*, then the question to make sure of the name."

"But Mrs. Goddard had no key either, Ian! She's never been in our apartment."

"She wouldn't need a key. Look up there at the window and the ledge. She could walk the ledge to our window, and once inside our suite she could have opened the door. You know, Sally, the snap lock. Then she's a big woman. She could have brought the body in through the hall and escaped again through the window."

Yes, it could be Mrs. Goddard. Or it could be Jergens. Or it could be Calhoun. Suddenly, above, Mrs. Goddard's window was empty. Here, suddenly, was the moment for which they had waited. Her chance to get out. She got the door half open and had one foot almost to the ground as a light flashed in the rear.

A tall figure was approaching. Ian dropped flat down, but she was pinned there, half in, half out of the car. The light began to play across the parking lot, this way, that way, searching. So it wasn't Jergens. It was a policeman, someone posted in the rear. Someone, perhaps, who had heard their whispers.

She drew in a deep breath, held it as the flashray found the windshield. She was lying straight back across the seat. "Please," she thought, "go on!" It did not go on. It was becoming brighter.

Calhoun reappeared just then. Instantly the light snapped around to him. Mr. Light walked on to Calhoun, stood with him, conversing.

"Sally!" Softly Ian edged the car door open. Gently he tugged at her leg. She slipped out. She gave him the bag. They stole on tiptoe toward the rear.

"But we can't get away in the car, Ian."

"We're not going to run, hon. I've got my key to the back door, and now's our chance to get in."

"To get in!"

He said, "We'll never win by running."

They came to the door over which a dim light burned. He got the key in the lock and

closed the door behind her and took her arm.

"Easy, Sally."

"I'm all right. We made it!"

"Easy, hon. I've got a plan. We're going to use the head—not hide it."

"But the police, upstairs!"

"We're going *down*, to the basement."

They went down the short flight of stairs. Ian closed this door behind them.

"Bait, hon. That's the role you're going to play."

"Yes, Ian, but—but I don't see—?"

They'd come to the dark, damp laundry. He closed this door too, behind them; and now she could *feel* the flood of his excitement and hear his ragged breath. "No buts, Sally. The killer knows you've got the head. He knows what the verdict would be if—if you were found dead. That's our job, to get the right one to attack you down here."

"Ian—" she said. Her breath caught. "Ian, what are you doing?"

It happened that unexpectedly, that quickly. He turned her half around. Then something rough fell across her face down on her neck. A piece of washline, a noose that he jerked tight.

Three doors were closed behind her. Escape was closed behind her. She kicked the bag he'd set on the floor, and her foot struck it as she tried to whirl. There was a small clatter. The bag opened and frantic things spilled out. Jars of cream and odds and ends—a small frantic clatter.

"Ian—!"

Just a gasp. No power to it. Just a prayer, a final cry for mercy. Oh, this could not be! She tried to pull the noose loose, but his hands were iron. She tried to argue in her mind "Not Ian." She tried to reassure him of her love, her trust, but her mind had burst, and in it now was flame and smoke—confusion, sheer explosion. The killer of Babs Stratton . . . her Ian.

She heard his savage snarl above her. "You little fool," he said. She heard a crack as from a gun—a door that slammed somewhere far away. She heard a curse above her. Then her mind stopped reeling. Her mind became peculiarly calm. "Poor me, she thought. She cried it seemed, and sighed, for death itself was not so hard. The shock, her shame, the awful hurt at his betrayal; yes, this was her real agony. She closed her eyes, fighting to breathe . . . *It would be so good to breathe. . . .*

Her eyes opened, and she looked up to see— Mrs. Goddard. Calhoun. Jergens. A policeman. And curiously, they were not standing below her, as she'd expected; they did not look up to see her dangling from a rope. She was lying on the floor. The floor?

She was upstairs in her own room, in her own soft bed. She looked fearfully around.

"There now, Sally. You're all right," whispered Mrs. Goddard.

The policeman looked at her, and then walked off to the other room with Jergens. And she could hear them out there talking. She heard Jergens say:

"She'd worried me. The way she'd kept her eyes on that black bag, the way she hugged it. I began to wonder what was in it. So when I left her at the car I didn't go into the building. I simply walked on around it, to see what she would do—" He stopped.

She turned her face to the wall. Her eyes were dry now, but her heart was sobbing. And in the other room, the policeman said in his flat voice, "It was the same old story. Fail admitted he'd been seeing this girl, Babs Stratton. Obviously, he got in too deep and couldn't get rid of her. Obviously, he had no real affection for his wife; his interest was her money.

"His solution to the problem was to kill them both, and wind up with the money.

"Tonight was the night—when Mrs. Fail's sister wouldn't be at home. He arranged to meet Babs Stratton at the bar and got a break when Calhoun overheard his quarrel. Originally he'd counted on the open window and Mrs. Goddard to prove he'd done no more than pick up a 'blonde', with no motive whatever for killing her. All right. He knew he could quickly engineer a quarrel at home. He knew what his wife would do, the same as she'd done twice before, go to a movie and then come home. He knew when she found the body she'd run straight to her sister's.

"It went right on schedule. He put the head in the bag and it didn't really matter whether or not Mrs. Fail carried it away. The inference, that she'd found the girl, killed her and then tried to dispose of the body, was clear now. He'd say he'd gone out around nine for more drinks—something he could prove—and had come back later to find the body. Of course he didn't intend to come back. He beat it straight out to Fail's sister's, to wait for Sally and kill her.

"Well, *you* went out there, Mr. Jergens, and he had to lay low and come back."

"Try to sleep now, dear," said Mrs. Goddard to Sally.

Mrs. Goddard drew the draperies. Then she and Calhoun tip-toed out and Sally was alone—alone with the wall—alone with her mind. She heard a sound and her head turned. In the doorway stood Rex Jergens.

"Sally," he said. His eyes had always said a lot more than his lips, and she'd always known just how he felt—"Sally," he said, "I'll be waiting for you, in the morning."

# I'd Love You Dead!

By  
STEWART TOLAND



He saw the camera and two lovely white hands reaching out for it. . . .

*Mike never knew that the maddening scales and long trilling runs from Feela's concert grand were the lethal prelude to his own funeral march!*

**E**VEN in his bedroom Mike could hear it. With the door closed and his ears stoppered with both hands, he could still hear it. Scales. Slow scales, fast scales, octave jumps, higher and higher and faster until it sounded like a thousand mad rats running over the piano keys. Mad rats. No, it was he who was mad. Because he listened to music and heard words.

"Sixty thousand dollars, put it back! Sixty



thousand dollars, put it back or you'll go to prison. Prison. Prison!" They were hammers pounding in his brain, every note Feela played was a hammer striking fear into his heart.

Prison. He wanted to scream it out loud, he wanted to take it in the terrible strength of his hands and break it into a thousand bits. But he couldn't—not a word. Not something that hadn't happened yet. Though it would, it was waiting for him, as surely as tomorrow.

He looked about his room, as though he were a stranger, seeing things that could never be his. It was a hungry, longing look—red leather chairs, books, mahogany, silver, his cameras, pictures all over the walls, and the prizes they had won for him, his pipe rack with a dozen knobby briars, a blue oriental rug, blue drapes and open windows—he went over to one and put his hands out, wide, like he was trying to catch the sun. It wasn't that, Oh God, it wasn't as simple as that. It was freedom he wanted, and he was feeling bars, here where there were none, he could already feel the bars. He could smell the damp of stone walls, he could hear the hollow ring of his feet where there would be no oriental rug. There would be nothing but his life slipping empty away.

Prison.

The scales went on endlessly, like a waterfall or brittle laughter. And in a way that was what it was, Feela laughing at him. Because it was for her that he had stolen the sixty thousand, little by little, always thinking to put it back. And always needing more.

There had been her mink coat. That was for her tour last spring, mink, she would consider nothing less. Four thousand he had paid for it—wild, natural mink. It was beautiful and he had taken the money out of the cash drawer on a Friday and doctored the books, and no one knew.

It had been too easy. The mink coat, her new car, this apartment, seven thousand a year it cost, the servants were six hundred a month, the food and liquor fifteen hundred. There were shows she must see and theatres she must rent for her concerts, the publicity that had to be paid for—it was endless to count it all up. He was treasurer of Alston Oil and that sounded like a man ought to be able to get along on his salary, but he wasn't just a man. He was Feela's husband.

Feela Carenson, the beautiful, the famous concert pianist. Feela Carenson of the fabulous parties and the gorgeous clothes and the extravagant charities. Feela Carenson, whose husband would go to prison if he couldn't put sixty thousand in the oil company safes before the auditors came next month. Feela and Mike Carenson who perhaps had loved each other once. Feela loved money and he loved life.

And for hours now, he'd been thinking of death.

Only murder wasn't enough. He'd thought of that, too. He'd thought of killing her, and that wouldn't get him anything except funeral bills. Murder. He held it on his tongue and tasted it and it frightened him less than going to prison. Prison was so public a shame—murder a secret. No, he had never loved Feela, he couldn't have and be thinking of her like this. Feela dead, however, wasn't enough. It was her fingers that were insured, not her life. Ten little fingers worth one hundred thousand dollars.

The practicing went on, the same notes over and over, and it sounded almost like a victrola because it was so mechanical, so endless, so repetitious. But that was Feela, a glutton for punishment when it came to her music. Yet it wasn't the music she loved, he knew that. He had never seen her lost in the beauty of a song. It wasn't the music, it was the fame it brought, and that was why she had insured her fingers. Everywhere she went, people commented on her lovely hands and there was always that tag line of awe—"They're insured for one hundred thousand dollars."

In the middle of the night he had gotten up and read the policy again. Total disability. That's what it said, one hundred thousand dollars would be paid to Feela Carenson if she lost the use of her fingers. It would be her money, it wouldn't be his. That was where the murder came. Only the police would call it suicide—without her music she hadn't wanted to live—it would be so logical. A lovely, broken hearted lady, too many sleeping pills—and her husband would inherit a fortune. If he worked very fast he could do it in a month.

Of course he had thought of other ways first. Murder hadn't come easy since he didn't really want to kill. It was just the only way he could see. He could borrow from friends, but no one had money like that to give away and if he tried the bank, it would be whispered around and there'd be hell to pay. The auditors might be brought in before next month. He could sell everything he owned but that would bring precious little. The furniture wouldn't bring more than ten thousand. There was Feela's mink and her jewels but she couldn't let him sell those. She was a stubborn woman and she had never thought of anyone but herself. She wouldn't change now. She would hate his going to prison but she would be the first to tell him it was his own fault, he should have planned better.

That was what he was doing now. Planning.

Total disability. He thought of an automobile wreck but it might kill her outright. You

could never tell about wrecks. He thought of infection. He could give a corsage with the thorns doctored with some sort of disease but he would be mad to try and fool a doctor, especially an insurance doctor with a hundred thousand dollar policy in mind. The wringer of the washing machine, with most women that would be easiest of all, but not with Feela. She had never even seen one. A gun, people so often got what they wanted with guns. If Feela were an outdoor girl he could have his choice, guns, knives, fish hooks or traps.

A bear trap.

Mike Carenson stood perfectly still. He didn't hear the music, he didn't hear the traffic in the street below, he didn't even hear the beating of his heart.

He closed his eyes and saw a picture of a wood, dark leaved and lonely, with a bear trail cut through thick brush, a black bear's trail that would be so low a man and a woman going that way would have to crawl on their hands and knees. He could see them single file with the woman in front, and a bear trap lying hidden at her fingertips. He could hear it snap shut, quick, final. It sounded like a cash drawer closing with sixty thousand dollars in it—and a man's freedom.

He forgot about honor, he forgot about everything but the fact that Feela wouldn't take advice from anyone. In a way she would kill herself, because he would tell her not to go and that's all she would need: to be told she shouldn't.

Mike Carenson got his hat and his coat and locked the front door behind him. The elevator didn't come to the penthouse, he had to walk down half a flight where John who was all freckles and red hair held the elevator cab ready.

"I heard you coming, Mr. Carenson, so I didn't go down like I would have."

"Thanks, John, that was nice. If Mrs. Carenson asks tell her I've gone out for a drink. She was practicing and I didn't want to disturb her."

John smiled a very slow, very wise smile. "She sure practices a lot."

"How can you tell? The walls are sound proof."

"Sound proof, rat proof, burglar proof, a guy in an apartment house gets to know a lot of things." He grinned wider, "Maybe you kind of feel it in the air."

Yes, that was another reason why the woods would be better. Help couldn't come so quick in the woods, help and prying eyes.

The bar was crowded. Mike ordered martinis and looked around for Todd Meachem. Todd was why he'd come. He wrote a gossip column that was syndicated all over the U. S. People loved to be talked about in it.

"Hello, Todd, sit down and have a drink."

Todd was a little guy with a halo of gray hair. He was stiff and crinkled like some sort of patented breakfast food. He had sharp, nervous eyes, and was in every way opposite to Mike Carenson—Big Mike with the slow smile and the slow speech and the lazy way he kept his eyes half closed most of the time he was with you.

"I thought maybe you'd like to know I'm heading for the woods."

"Hunting?" Todd was interested. "Pardon me, but I thought you were more the swivel chair type."

"I'll carry one with me if it will make you happy." Mike picked up the second Martini. "Last year I won the National amateur camera contest, you may remember."

"Sure I remember, your stuff caused a fuss."

"Well, I've been trying to figure what I would submit for the show this year. I want it different and good. I've decided on a hunting expedition, the works: camp fire, smoke, canoeing, guns, wild life—big stuff, deer and elk and bear. What do you think of the idea, to really catch the feel of the woods, the majesty, the loneliness of our last frontier?"

"It sounds good enough to tempt even me."

"You're invited."

"No thanks, too little gossip. Todd Meachem stays where things happen. Is your wife going?"

"Feela in the woods cooking dead fish over a camp fire?" Mike Carenson laughed, it really was funny, he could put his whole heart into laughter. "Feela sleeping on the ground and hiking miles? Don't be silly, Todd. I shan't ask her to go and if she invited herself I wouldn't take her. Feela is a lady and her place is on a piano bench."

Todd Meachem fairly twinkled. "Can I quote you on that? Can I say that there is one man left who knows where his wife belongs and keeps her there?"

"You can."

"I hope you know you're sticking your neck out."

"My neck?" No, it wasn't his neck. It was a trap that would move faster even than Feela's lightning fingers.

**MIKE CARENSEN** got to the sport shop a half hour before it closed. The clerk wasn't too happy about waiting on him at first but when he saw the size of the order—Mike began at matches and went on down to a zippered hammock. He bought guns and knives, cutting knives and skinning knives, a compass, an oil lamp, moose and duck horns, muskrat traps, beaver traps, bear traps, knee high boots three sizes too big and wool socks to fill them. He got red plaid shirts and a red

hat, frying pans, canned milk, coffee percolator, some sort of patent stuff to light fires with in rain or snow or sleet. He purchased a collapsible canoe, packs, liniment for his back, and so much stuff he didn't know what.

He bought everything the clerk suggested. There was safety in numbers. It was the clerk who suggested the trap. He would remember that later. It was he who set it upon the counter and showed how many fine cutting teeth it had, and how anything that once got in its way would never get out.

"Something like this would make a fine photograph, Mr. Carenson, taken just at the moment the animal gets caught. It'd be an action shot with drama that ought to win you the prize again this year!"

It sure would win him a prize.

And there was a bit of advice, too. "Mr. Carenson, I don't think you should go alone. I know a lot of men have done it but I don't think it's right." The clerk finished making out the sales slip and closed his book. "Things happen in the woods, no matter how careful you are, things can happen. You ought to have somebody along to help."

That was it. That was the one flaw in his plan. He hadn't thought of it before, he ought to have someone along. It mustn't be his word against Feela's. Of course there'd be his camera, he'd have the picture but it might be wise to have someone who could testify how good he had been to her and how he had tried to keep her from wandering away from camp at night.

Mike stopped. In the middle of Madison avenue at Forty-second street he stopped dead with the wonder of an idea. Dick Worter. That's who he'd ask. Dick Worter, his and Feela's best friend, but better than that, he was the one who had sold them the insurance policy. That was the supreme touch, the insurance company's own agent would be a witness when Feela lost the use of her hands.

Dick lived at a club but he wasn't in so Mike left a note. "Dear Dick—you're my best friend—" That was the way Mike Carenson began, writing so carefully, almost lovingly. And half way across town Feela Carenson was saying the same words so carefully, almost lovingly.

"Dear Dick, you're my best friend."

Dick Worter took her in his arms and kissed the words away. "I don't want to be your best friend. I want to be more—so much more."

Feela smiled up into his eyes. They were nice eyes, young and full of laughter. He was so very young, that was what had first attracted her. He was young and good looking and rich. A girl wouldn't have to beg and practically have hysterics to get a mink coat out of Dick Worter. His father had millions.

"Feela, you know I love you." He held her to him gently, as if she were something precious that might break. "I love you and I think you love me. Let's be honest about it." He frowned at the phonograph playing piano exercises over and over again. "At night I wake up and hear that machine, it haunts me! Do you wonder? Every minute of the time when I am with you it's playing!"

"But darling, that's what makes it so safe! That's why I recorded those horrible scales. Mike knows I hate to be disturbed while I'm practicing." She laughed, brittle and clear as breaking glass. "Darling, we don't have to worry, we'll never be found out! So long as Mike can hear those records playing we can be in here together alone."

"No, let's not anymore." Dick kissed her hands. "I was willing for a while, I was willing to do anything to get you. I was quite insane. But deceit doesn't become you, my dear, and it doesn't become me. It isn't any way to start a life. You're my friend and Mike's my friend and he's your husband. We ought to share this secret with him."

"Tell Mike?" It was less than a whisper.

"He'll understand. People can't help falling in love or out of love. Let's share it with him. You can stand us up side by side and choose between us, I think Mike would be a good enough sport for that."

"No!"

"Yes, Feela, that's the way it must be. I won't come again, darling, not to hide behind this." He stopped the phonograph.

Feela grabbed a record and stuck it in the machine, her hand trembled so she could hardly set the needle. "No, please, Dick, you're frightening me! Mike might be out there, he might come in."

Dick listened to the music, sad, sweet music. "Don't you see, Feela, that's what I mean, love should be a proud, beautiful thing—not something to be ashamed of. I'm going, Feela, and when you can choose between me and Mike, if you ever want to, then I'll come back."

Feela couldn't talk, she could hardly breathe. This was a bridge she thought she would never have to cross. She wanted them both. And now she had to choose. "But Dick," it was a whisper, a straw thrown into the wind. "I don't believe in divorce!" And so she thought of death. Mike's death.

**J**OHNSON, the elevator boy, was jumpy and uneasy. Mike noticed it right away. "Did you tell Mrs. Carenson I went out?"

"No, sir, she must still be practicing." He tried hard to remember if that Worter guy had come down. "She didn't ring for me and I didn't go to tell her. She doesn't like to be disturbed when she's practicing."

Mike climbed the half flight and put the key in the door. There wasn't a sound in the apartment. He crossed through the foyer to the music room and lifted his hand to knock and he thought he heard Feela speak. "No!" That's what he thought she said, that and something about being frightened. But he must have been mistaken because the music began.

Next morning Feela was furious. She upset her bed tray and rang for her maid. She stomped her pretty little foot and then she hit Mike with the paper, threw it clear across the room as he came in the door.

"So, you know where a woman belongs! You're one man who knows how to keep his wife in her place!"

"Now, now," it was soft, like soothing syrup. "What's all this?"

"You read what Todd Meachem says about me!"

"Tell me, pet, my eyes are tired."

"He says you keep me on a piano bench because that's all I'm fit for. He says you're going on a hunting trip."

"I am."

"He says you're not going to invite me."

"I'm not."

"He says you won't let me go if I invite myself."

"I won't."

"You will."

"I won't."

"You will!"

"Listen, pet," he was very patient. "Hunting is hard, tiring work, it's not for women. Dick and I will be gone three weeks."

"Dick?" It was a screech. "Dick who?"

"Dick Worter, of course. I saw him last night at his club. He jumped at the chance to go and said he wanted to get out of town."

Feela picked a piece of buttered toast. "When are you going?"

"We're leaving Grand Central tomorrow at four."

A pretty white finger dialed a number on the pretty pink phone by her bed. Trust Feela to know all the right numbers. "Todd? Todd Meachem? This is Feela Carensen. I thought maybe you'd like to know that Mike is leaving Grand Central at four tomorrow, and I'll be going along."

Feela hung up the receiver and Mike bowed to her. "Believe me, my dear, I couldn't bear to go without you."

Dick read Meachem's column the morning after and phoned Feela right away. "Is it true, are you going?"

"Yes, Dick, it will be wonderful!"

"No, I won't go if you do. I said there wouldn't be any more sneaking."

"Listen, dear, listen! You've got to give me my chance. I want to see you two to-

gether. I want to stand you side by side like you said I should. Before we come back, I promise you, my decision will be made openly and finally."

"You'll tell Mike?"

"Yes, Mike will know."

\* \* \*

The weather was beautiful, crisp, and cool, a country just as God made it. High, deep woods with leaves ankle deep, and a lake like an iridescent jewel, pink with sunrise, gold with noon, violet and lavender with dusk, and black and white with night—black close to the shore where night's mystery held, silver white where the moon danced on it, the moon and the stars, and this one little dip of red by the campfire.

Two men were on one side and a woman on the other, and no one saying much of anything. They had been there almost three weeks now and Mike had filled two boxes with exposed film. He thought he had some wonderful shots but he was keeping on as long as the film lasted. Six cameras he had brought and they were set up all around the wood, each with a flash bulb, each with a fine string trigger to set it off if any animal passed that way. He had spent all day getting new angles, he and Dick together.

"What'd you do, Feela, while we were gone?"

"I walked into town."

"In town? Why that's four miles from here!"

"Of course it is but I was out of nail polish." She studied her fingers. "Do you know they didn't have any! What a hick place, I could have bought guns or poisons or dynamite, but not nail polish."

Mike laughed tight, hard laughter. "I hope you didn't buy anything."

"No, but I invited someone out."

"Who?"

"The sheriff."

"What in Sam Hill for?"

"He looked nice and he said he'd been meaning to come." No, that wasn't the reason. She whispered it over to herself just to make sure. People who are going to make trouble don't advertise it, he'd think of that later, he'd remember that she had invited him.

Mike stirred the sticks in the fire and started a little volcano erupting red sparks.

"Well, if the sheriff's coming I'd better get my evening's walk in early, no telling how long he'll stay. Don't you come, Feela, it's dangerous walking in the woods at night, besides you've walked enough to-day."

"I'll come if I want to." She smiled at Dick.

"We've been here almost three weeks and there's been something I've been meaning to talk over with Mike."

Very slowly he began to smile.

"Wait for me, Dick. I mean you stay here and wait for the sheriff and tell him we'll be right back." Feela ran away from the fire.

It was lovely by the lake. They walked far out on a point of land where Feela hadn't been before. The moon was very bright but there were clouds piling up in front of her, all day they had been gathering and now they were boiling right over her face. Suddenly the night was black, terribly black.

"It's going to rain." Mike took her hand, "Let's hurry for camp."

They ran, they bumped into trees and into thickets and finally they came to one place where the thorns were impenetrable. Mike swore and fell, and his voice was surprised, as though he hadn't known where he was.

"Why, look, there aren't any brambles down here low! It's like a sort of tunnel. You stay behind and I'll go ahead, but watch out."

"Let me go ahead."

"No, it's the man's place to protect, I can feel my was as well as you."

"Move over, let me squeeze around."

She squeezed and Mike whispered a prayer to himself. "She's killing herself, it's all right, it isn't your doing."

And there was a voice in the wood calling high and shrill like a lonely owl. "Mike, Feela, the sheriff says it's going to rain. Are you lost, do you need a light?"

Mike answered it. "We're coming! We've got in a bramble patch but we'll be there."

Mike went slow. He wanted it to be so plain that he wasn't within reach of her, he wanted his eyes closed and the scratches to show. He raked a thorn across his cheeks and his forehead and almost cried out with the unbelievably sharp pain. He found the four little stones sitting in a row he had left to guide him and tell him they were almost there, he scattered them and closed his eyes.

And suddenly there was this blinding flash, he could see it even through his closed eyelids, and he heard a woman's scream. It seemed to go on and on and on. And he couldn't care very much about it because of the terrible pain in his chest.

A thorn shouldn't hurt so. And besides, thorns were little, and he could feel this sticking through his fine plaid shirt. Eighteen fifty the shirt had cost, and now there was a hole in it. His hands were cold, he had never felt them so cold. That thing in his chest felt like a knife, it felt like his knife, the skinning knife with the bone handle. But that was on his hip, he had felt it brush against Feela when she had squeezed past.

Feela.

The pain was duller now, and the ringing in his ears louder, yet he could hear those soft, sobbing words:

"I've got to find it. I've got to find that damn camera before the sheriff comes. How could I know there was a camera set here to take whatever came by? How could I know it would take me with the knife in my hand! Out here where it was so black, how could I know there would be an eye to see me kill."

Words. They were like a prayer, yet not a prayer.

"How would I know there would be an eye to see me kill?" Mike thought that over, it took a long time. He heard a crashing sound in the woods and he saw lights shooting across the sky. He saw the string that had been the trigger to set off the flash and take the picture. He had stretched it across the trail just an inch in front of the trap. He had thought he had timed it so well, but he hadn't known she would turn. Maybe her heel tripped the trigger, or her sleeve. It didn't matter. It hadn't been her fingers, not even one.

He saw the camera and two lovely hands reaching for it, two hands and ten fingers, and a man's hand grabbing down into the circle of light for the camera, and getting there first. He saw the trap that had closed on empty air.

Mike listened to the screaming. It was Feela screaming all over again. "Give me that camera! You have no right, it's my camera!"

"Listen, lady, I don't know what this is all about but I see a man with a knife in him, and a while back I saw a flash, and I can put two and two together as well as the next one. I got an idea about why you want it so bad and I want to see what kind of film is in this camera, maybe it'll show you with a knife in your hand."

"No! He fell. Mike did it himself, he was cutting away the brush with his knife and he fell."

Mike tried listening to all the words but they were so fast.

The flashlights made a pretty glow. The trees seemed so green, the rain that had begun looked like diamonds falling out of the sky. And the girl, that little slip of a screaming girl was such a swell target.

But the gun was so heavy, it was all he could do to drag it out of the holster and across the ground, and then to tip it up, just so much, not too much.

It made a frightful sound, like the end of the world. It made so much noise he couldn't hear anything more or feel anything more—nothing except the hot salt taste on his lips. It wasn't nice. It was as though he had been drinking of something bitter.

And he had. He had drunk deep of murder. And it had come to him too late that murder is a game at which two can play. He hadn't thought of that.

And neither had she.

# THE DEVIL'S HIDEHOLE

By  
TED STRATTON

*When Bumpy Boyd saw that red welt of blisters and the charred black flesh on the Duke's bare feet, he laid plans to meet the unknown killer for a grim reunion in terror!*

AT FIVE minutes past six A. M., the eastern sky was as rosy as an old maid kissed at a corn-husking bee. John Harrison Boyd, known to his Foxhill Township cracker-box cronies as "Bump," parked his Model-T coupe off the lane by the swift flowing Mine Brook.

He reached into the coupe and located a battered brown felt hat that he cocked on his head at a jaunty angle. He wore the marks of the honorable trade that he'd followed for twenty years. A paint-spattered, long-sleeved shirt that had once been blue and a pair of stained, painter's overalls.

He shoved a worm-bait box into one pocket, strapped on a blood-stained wicker creel, and assembled a two-piece bamboo rod that he'd received as a present on his fourteenth birthday.

"A great day," he said aloud. "The first day of fall trout fishing and speckled dandies a-waiting in the Mine Brook."

Shivering, he swung along the worn path by the stream. He baited the hook with a fat worm, and cast where a riffle slid easily into a quiet pool and lost itself.

Almost instantly a hungry trout struck. The line zipped out. The bamboo pole went double as he braked the line. He played the trout carefully, his blue eyes afire with zest, his cold body gradually warmed by the contest.



Yellowish fingers of light dartered into the far corners of the cabin.

He worked the fish into shallow water, flipped it on the grassy bank.

"A big brown beauty," he exulted. "Fried trout, a meal for a king!"

He worked downstream slowly, choosing the likeliest spots with a practiced eye that evaluated playing shadow, ripple, and current. He hooked three trout in the next hundred yards.

Yes, he thought, a great day. Great air, great sport, great—he almost tripped over the stout shingler's line anchored across the path. The line jerked at intervals. His eyes clouded.

He thought, "Who'd put out a set-line for trout?"

When he pulled in the set-line, he saw five hooks, three filled with fine, wriggling trout. They had been hooked deeply and reluctantly he tossed the set-line back into the pool.

"Like to catch the one who fishes that way," he growled. "Illegal and downright lazy! Wait'll I see the game warden."

"Don't like nobody to beat the law," he told himself.

He fished on downstream, but his luck had deserted him. A side path climbed a grade through tangled alder. Up there, the roof of a cabin was shielded by enormous beech trees that towered alongside a red shale cliff.

"Bet the Duke set that line," he decided. "Maybe I'd better go up there and speak my mind to him."

Something cracked sharply up there, a sound like wood thumping on wood. "Must be the Duke is breaking up housekeeping."

He listened intently. That's how he heard a single piteous whine like—like a dog in pain. He set down rod, creel and baitbox and started to climb the brief grade.

The Duke lived way out here alone. He liked to brag in town about how he'd once been a high-mighty man. Fact, everybody knew the Duke lived off a Spanish War pension and didn't work none. Some folks said he lived on canned dog food.

But the noise, like a whine. "The Duke don't have no dog," he said, and stepped onto the level ground behind the cabin. The cabin wasn't much. Worn clapboards, a tin-patched roof, the back window plastered shut with a sign that advertised FINGERLEIN'S ALE. Twenty years accumulation of tin cans, broken boxes, and bottles littered the backyard.

Again the piteous moan. The hair on the back of Boyd's neck prickled. That sound was human, by Godfrey! He started to run, and in his haste, kicked a tin can that clattered against a rock.

At the front, he called, "Duke! You in there?"

The solid front door was closed. To the left was a single window with three broken panes stuffed with newspapers. A burlap bag inside

the window blocked off a view of the interior. Maybe the Duke had taken sick. Or broken a leg.

"Duke!" he called again, but nobody answered the shout.

Hopping onto the porch, he turned the knob and pushed inside. Stifling hot and dark. He blinked to clear his vision and—something came down hard on the top of his head. His knees sagged. He pitched to the floor. His glasses came off, slithered away into the darkness.

Instinctively, he rolled to escape the attacker. His shoulder struck a pile of cordwood. As the figure towered over him, Boyd hurled a length of wood. It hit the man in the stomach. "Whoosh!" the man exploded. Boyd hurled another chunk, then another. That routed the attacker who fled from the cabin and slammed the door.

Boyd scrambled to his feet. He tussled the door open, stepped cautiously onto the porch. There in the brush on the slope, in among the jumble of vines, bushes, and trees, a big man was running! Boyd couldn't make out who the man was because his glasses had been lost on the cabin floor.

"Dang ye!" he shouted, lapsing into country vernacular. "Stop!"

The big man thrashed on, disappeared under the trees. "I'll run ye in!" Boyd shouted angrily.

He could do that. He was the law in Foxhill Township. Of course, he hadn't wanted to be constable, but Myrtle, his wife, had circulated the petition a year ago that put his name on the ballot. Boyd liked to tell folks: "I won hands down. Warn't nobody opposing me!"

Boyd set out in pursuit. Only two-three fellows who could have hit him, he reasoned. Art Trimmer, that newcomer downstream. Maybe Charley Craber who lived near the lane where Boyd had parked his car. Or a townsman.

Climbing, he passed the three-foot wide cave that old timers used to call the Devil's Hidehole until Foxhill Township's men became less superstitious. Topping the cliff, he paused at an open spot. He could hear no one. Small wonder! He'd taken too long to mount the cliff. Which way had his attacker gone?

Far below, Mine Brook hid inside a ragged fringe of willows. Fields stretched away to a group of farm buildings—Art Trimmer's uncle's place that Art had inherited. Further up, a hillside meadow. Ahead, an apple orchard with smaller peach trees between the apple rows. Something moved in there!

"Halt, darn ye!" Boyd roared.

A blob against the dense foliage. Only a blur to Boyd's eyes. The figure moved into the orchard, disappeared.

"Art Trimmer?" he thought.

But what would Art Trimmer be doing in the Duke's lonely cabin so early? Then Boyd remembered the moans. That sent him scurrying down the slope. Something queer about all this. His nostrils quivered in and out like a hound dog on a hot scent.

The cabin door was open. He peered into the inside darkness. "Lightning don't hit the same head twice," he reassured himself, but he struck a store match and let the flickering light precede him.

First, he located his glasses. Then he saw a battered stove to one side, the top littered with blackened pots and an oil lamp. He touched the globe. Warm to his fingers. The wick was turned up full.

He lit the lamp with another match. Yellowish fingers of light darted into the far corners of the cabin. Someone lay on the bed behind the door. He could smell that someone.

An elderly man with long gray hair in shoulder-length ringlets that suggested an old plainsman in a bygone age. The man's eyes were closed. He seemed to be barely breathing. He wore no shirt, just pants. No socks. No shoes. Bare feet. Bare.

"Good Godfrey!" Boyd swore and stepped to the bed.

Someone had been at the Duke. The soles of his feet were masses of blisters. Charred match sticks littered the floor under the feet. The place reeked with the odor of burned flesh.

"Duke, you can hear me?"

The old man breathed shallowly as if the torment he had suffered had been too much for his strength. "Who did this?" Boyd pleaded. "It's me, Bump Boyd! Who did it? Tell me!"

"I'll catch the skunk what did it," Boyd promised. Rage filled his thin body. "Just tell me who, Duke."

No answer. Boyd found some grease in a pot and rubbed some on the burned feet. He fetched cold water from the spring, bathed the man's face and dipped the slender wrists in water. The Duke did not rouse.

"Far gone," Boyd decided. "Can't help him none. Can't carry him. Got to go fetch help from the village."

ONE OF the men who had crowded into the cabin had ripped the burlap sack off the front window and knocked out the tin sign that proclaimed FINGERLEIN'S ALE. The stark light exposed the pitiable meagerness of the single room.

An ancient, single-shot rifle on pegs over the bed. A cowboy's ten gallon hat. On a shelf with a battered alarm clock lay a .45 with the hammer broken. Odds and ends of clothing with the green sheen of age. Stacks of newspapers and magazines. Broken furni-

ture, a few cracked dishes, a couple of mail-order catalogues, and one from a novelty house in New York City.

Doc Hall straightened from his bent position over the bed. "Dead," he said simply. "Bump, who did this awful thing?"

"Reckon," Bump Boyd said slowly, "a hint ain't no good in court."

"Hanging's too good for the skunk!" Bill Wales, the town carpenter, growled.

Nick the barber, exploded, "I feex heem with my razor!"

Pete Larking nodded and Jim Teets said, "The Duke won't harm a fly. Who do you think done it, Bump?"

"Can't say until I'm sure. My job as constable is to get the facts for the county prosecutor. Doc, how'd he die?"

"He was an old man," Doc Hall said. "He'd been worked on about an hour before you got here, Bump. Yes, I'd say his heart couldn't stand the torture."

"Murdered!" they chorused, and looked at Bump Boyd.

"Those blisters are up half an inch," Doc Hall continued. "That's bad, Bump. What do you think the killer was after?"

Nick sputtered, "It was-a the money."

"Only eighteen-fifty he got," Jim Teets said, "from that pension. That's not enough to tempt a man to murder."

"Yesterday in the shop," Nick explained, "the Duke he's gotta the package." His expressive hands indicated the size. Six inches long, three inches wide, an inch thick. "Thousands a-dollars in this, the Duke says! He rip-a the paper just a leetla, leetla bit! Lotsa money in that-a package. I see it!"

"Where'd he get the package?" Bump Boyd asked.

"She-sa come in the six oclock mail."

"Maybe the Duke had a gold mine out West," Bill Wales said. "He was there before coming to the Township. That's why he wore the cowboy hat and curled his hair."

"Who saw the package of money?" Bump asked.

"Lot-sa people," Nick said. "Some play-a the pool, some just-a sit, some get-a the haircut and shave. Charley Craber, Joe Smith, my brother, two-three high school keeds—"

Nick's liquid eyes lighted up. "Bump, that Trimmer fella!"

"He was in your shop and heard the Duke?"

"Sure."

Jim Teets growled, "He's been in town near a year and we don't know him yet. He could a-done it because his farm is over the hill."

"Let's go get him!" Larking shouted.

Boyd stepped to the door, turned. He pushed a long forefinger against Jim Teets' chest. "I'm constable here."



"You're wasting time," Jim roared. "We'll knock the truth out of him for you!"

"I ever tell you how to run your business?" Boyd asked.

"I know my business!"

"And I know mine. You fellows keep away from the Trimmer place."

"Bump's right," Doc Hall chimed in. "If he can prove it was Art Trimmer, the county will do the rest. Wait, I say."

"Bump better get a-moving," Bill Wales snapped.

"Am a-moving," Boyd said. "I figure the killer did know about that package of money. He cornered the Duke and went to work with the matches to make the Duke tell where the money—"

"The Duke couldn't talk," Doc interrupted.

"He always talked," Jim said. "Why, the Duke, 'ud brag-talk the ears off a brass monkey!"

"I said couldn't talk," Doc repeated. He walked to the dirty, tumbled bed and lifted the old man's beard. "See that lump on his Adam's apple? Black and blue. The killer hit Duke there when he first came in. The larynx was smashed with that blow and the Duke couldn't talk."

The words burned into Boyd's mind. Smashed larynx. The Duke trying to talk and just moaning. The Duke couldn't talk—to save his life.

"The killer," Boyd said slowly, fighting down his anger, "didn't find the money or he'd have been gone before I came along. Jim, you and Nick search the cabin. The rest of us 'ul take the outside. Now let's get going. We gotta find that money."

**T**HE MIDDAY fire whistle had ordered the town to lunch when Boyd parked the Model-T coupe alongside the bungalow. The rear door banged open. A big woman strode across the backyard. "That you, J. Harrison?" she called out.

"If it ain't, woman, you sure lost your eye sight," Boyd said, and climbed out over the car door.

"Did you find the killer? Is he in the county jail? Did you locate the money? How much did the Duke have? Did you—"

"Sweet land-a-Goshen," Boyd sputtered, "you think I know all that already?" He shoved past Myrtle Boyd and entered the bungalow.

She was a big woman, maybe twice the size of Boyd with a little left over here and there. She had blonde hair and rosy cheeks. Boyd sat at the table, Myrtle across from him. "Hungry?" she asked.

The kitchen was as spotlessly clean as a little girl on her way to Sunday School.

"After what I seen, I don't figure so."

"Tell me."

"You heard the gossip. Some'un was after the Duke's money package. I stopped at the postoffice to chin with Bert."

"To find out about the package?"

"Yeah. Bert don't miss no tricks. He says the writing on the outside was in the Duke's handwriting. The cancelled stamps proved the package was mailed over to Lamington."

"Lamington! That's two-three miles beyond the Duke's cabin. You mean the Duke mailed the money package to himself, J. Harrison?"

"That's the size of the shoe. That package of money was just to back up the Duke's big talk."

Curiosity ate at Myrtle's heart. "Did you find the money?"

"When the men come back to town with the body, I sat down and figured things out. Got to thinking about something the Duke told me about a fellow he knew in the West and how this fellow hid his gold dust. The Duke always thought that was a cute idea."

"Quick, quick! You found it?"

"In a coffee can sealed with wax in the the bottom of his spring."

"Well! How much money was in the package?"

"Depends on how you look at it. Ten thousand—"

"Ten thousand dollars!" Myrtle exploded. "Where'd that poor man get all that cash?"

"The fact is he had it and the killer was after it bad. Fetch me a pencil and some wrapping paper. I gotta catch that killer before tomorrow or the men 'ul get out of hand and jump Art Trimmer."

When Myrtle brought the articles, Boyd scrawled something in thin, spidery characters. "Looks just like the Duke's writing," he said.

"What's it for?"

Boyd smiled. "Bait, Myrtle. It's a clue to where Duke hid the money the killer didn't find. I'm taking it to fish in some—uh, dark and troubled waters."

"You know who killed the Duke?"

"One of two men. First, Art Trimmer. We don't know much about him because he keeps to himself. His place is next to the Duke's and it must have been Art who was in his orchard this morning. Second, Charley Craber who lives off the lane where I parked my coupe. He was out near the Duke's too. I remembered that when I went back along the Mine Brook to my car that set-line was gone from the bank. Charley Craber's work, I knew. He's downright lazy and would fish that way. So I got to show each one of them this note and hint it was what the Duke had written down."

"Wait," Myrtle ordered. "You off on con-stable business?"

"Now don't you go getting ideas, woman! I'm just—"

She collared him. "March right into the bedroom," she said, and he went along with her. She opened a closet and returned with her arms full of clothing.

"I won't wear that foolish rig!" Boyd protested.

"You'll wear it, J. Harrison. You're the law in Foxhill Township and you've got to look the part. Now, you shed those dirty overalls."

He had learned long ago not to dispute her. Like that time when she had made up her mind that he would be the town constable. He shucked off the overalls.

"I bought this outfit for you to wear on constable business," Myrtle was saying, "and you're going to wear it now!"

Boyd put on the dark blue trousers, the blue uniform coat with gold-colored buttons down the front. Then a peaked blue hat, a cartridge belt with a holstered .38, and slipped a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs into his hip pocket.

Myrtle fetched something wrapped in tissue paper. It was a policeman's blackjack with a leather thong.

"I got this from the mail-order place," she explained proudly. "All policemen carry one. They come in mighty handy, thet catalogue said.

"Gosh-a-mighty, I don't want no more junk to carry around!"

She put the blackjack in his hip pocket. Curiosity still gnawed holes in her heart. "What do the words mean that you wrote on that brown paper, J. Harrison?"

He saw the words in his mind. "THE DUKE SAYS IN SIX STEPS. WORTH A MAN'S TIME TO FIND. HIDEHOLE."

"Those words," he said cryptically, "proves that me and some others was born and raised in Foxhill Township, but you and some others was raised in different places."

**S**OMEONE had dusted off the stars and hung them out for a night's airing. A sickle moon glowed low down on the horizon. From where he waited in the thick shadow of a giant beech, Bump Boyd could see that the moon had stuck fast on the bare branch of a lightning-shattered maple.

So soon as the dusk had deepened over the Township, he'd set out. Through purple-shadowed woods, across a low raffle of the Mine Brook, then up the slope.

Far off in the quiet night, he heard the chuff-chuff of a Lackawanna locomotive leaving the Foxhill station. Thirty-two-minutes past eight o'clock as if the hands on a clock had pointed out the time.

Would the killer come? When?

Killers, Bump Boyd had reasoned, killed for

profit. This killer would still want that package of the Duke's money. The killer wouldn't know that Boyd had already found the package.

A screech owl let loose with its high, murmurous song. Boyd shivered and remembered what country folks said. "Screech owls sing in your doorway and some'un is about to die! Someone to die!"

"I ain't scared," he told himself.

A pair of whippoorwills began to answer one another. "A-mourning for dead folks," country people always said about the complaining whippoorwills. "A-mourning for the dead!"

"Stop it, ye coward!" Boyd chided himself. "Face it. You got to wait and see if the killer comes."

The minutes ticked on. They disappeared where all the little minutes go that build an hour and then another. Long ago the sickle moon had fled from the snag on the maple.

The tree frog forgot to peep. The screech owl joined the whippoorwills in silence. It got so quiet in the dark woods that Boyd strained his ears. Just a whisper of sound up the slope at first. The whisper grew into the slap-slap of big feet. Now the swish of bushes, the stir of disturbed dead leaves. Something big shoved downhill.

"The killer," Boyd thought, and his heart began to pound.

Then the noises stopped. A match flickered in the lonesomeness. Something glowed more steadily and light danced. "Lit a candle," Boyd thought. His right hand clawed at the holstered .38.

The light disappeared. "Going in," he muttered, and moved away from the beech tree like a fox stalking a pheasant. He moved slowly, sliding each foot forward so the branches wouldn't snap back and make noises to warn the killer. Slowly forward—there!

A three-foot wide hole into the side of the red shale cliff. The Devil's Hidehole. Once he'd gone in there when he'd been a kid. A kid on a dare and he remembered now the feeling of coolness, dampness, darkness and— and scariness of the place.

Light inside the tunnel. Something big and black shielding the candle light. The killer.

He poised alongside the entrance. He had the .38 in his hand. He'd say: "Put 'em up!" Fierce, stern, authoritative.

Noises inside the tunnel. Light coming toward the front. Suddenly Boyd remembered. "I—I forgot to load the gun!" he thought frenziedly.

There was no time now to load. The killer was almost out of the Hidehole. The gun fell from his suddenly nerveless fingers. He turned to run, but his legs were like sticks of wood.

That killer. A big man. A dangerous man. A man who had killed once and who would kill again. There was an added reason now why the killer would kill again. Boyd had left the coffee tin with the money inside the Hidehole, the bait to draw the killer here.

"Oh, Myrtle," he groaned inwardly. "What'll I do? What'll—"

Wavering light jumped from the Hidehole. The sound of a man crawling over the loose shale rock. A candle came out first. A man's big, dirty fingers gripping the candle. A thick wrist that grew into a dirty cuff of a shirt.

Thick, rumped black hair on a man's head. Then Bunce remembered. There was no time to think or plan. Just time to reach around behind himself, lift his hand above his head, and bring it down. *Crack.*

The candle spilled to the ground, flickered and went out. The man pitched forward, half of his body still inside the Hidehole. Boyd struck a match, lit the candle, and planted it on the ground. He was trembling all over.

Then he looked at the object in his hand. The new blackjack that Myrtle had bought for him. "Saved my life, that blackjack did," he thought. "Myrtle, you certainly took care of me!"

He pulled out the handcuffs and snicked them on the killer's hands. He sat down to wait. "Take your time a-coming to," he said. "You ain't a-going no place 'cept to the electric chair down at Trenton. How'd you like that new blackjack, mister?"

The killer didn't answer.

**M**YRTLE BOYD stumbled into the neat kitchen at six o'clock the next morning. Boyd sat at the table. He'd been eating eggs and swilling black coffee. His eyelids were red-rimmed, but the blue eyes were bright and humorous. "Morning," he said. "Left the coupe down the street so's not to wake you."

"Oh, J. Harrison, you're safe! I—I didn't sleep a wink when you didn't come home all night!"

"Sleep! Say, you could sleep on a picket fence, woman."

"Who was the killer?"

He told her casually, almost indifferently, drawing the full drama from the facts. "Oh, one of them two men. Had to test 'em first with that message on the paper. If Art Trimmer had been hanging around the Duke's, he'd know about that Hidehole. If Charley Craber had killed the Duke, he'd know right off the money was hid in the Hidehole. Heck, Charley and I went to the Crossroads school together. Yep, had the same teachers and look where Charley ended up!"

"Where did he end up?"

"Waring County jail. Fetched him there

last night. Say, Myrtle, it was him dared me to go into that Hidehole when we was kids. And I went in it, too!"

"Charley Craber killed that poor old man?"

"He sang to the sheriff prettier than a brown thrasher perched on an elm tree. He'd been at the Duke in the cabin early to get the money. Don't figure to kill him, he said. Then he heard me a-coming and tried to lay me out. Said he didn't figure to kill me, either. Then he run off up the hill so I'd think it was Art Trimmer what had been in the cabin. Circled back, picked up the set-line, and took the trout home. Yesterday afternoon I called at his place and Charley was frying the trout. They tasted real good, Myrtle."

Min stared at the little man. "You ate trout with that killer?"

"Did I know he was the killer then?" Boyd countered mildly. "I showed him the note I'd written to bait him to that cave behind the Duke's and sure enough, he went up there for the money."

"But you risked his getting that ten thousand! Suppose you couldn't have handled him? Suppose—"

"Nothing wrong with that. The ten thousand dollars was stage money."

It was too much for her. She plopped down so hard on the kitchen chair that the floor quivered. "Stage money! I never heard the like of that!"

"Stage money," Boyd repeated. "If Charley Craber had had any sense, he'd done what I did. I searched the cabin and come across that novelty catalogue from a place in New York City. The Duke had marked the page where it advertised stage money and sent away for some."

"Buying stage money just to impress folks!" Myrtle shook her head. "Why, it doesn't make sense! One man sending away for stage money to fool other people with, another man killed for—for fool stage money!"

Boyd shoved away from the table, crossed to the back door. "No murder makes sense," he said quietly. Then he yawned. "Guess I'll have another try at them trout in the Mine Brook, woman. Yes, and with a pole, not a set-line."

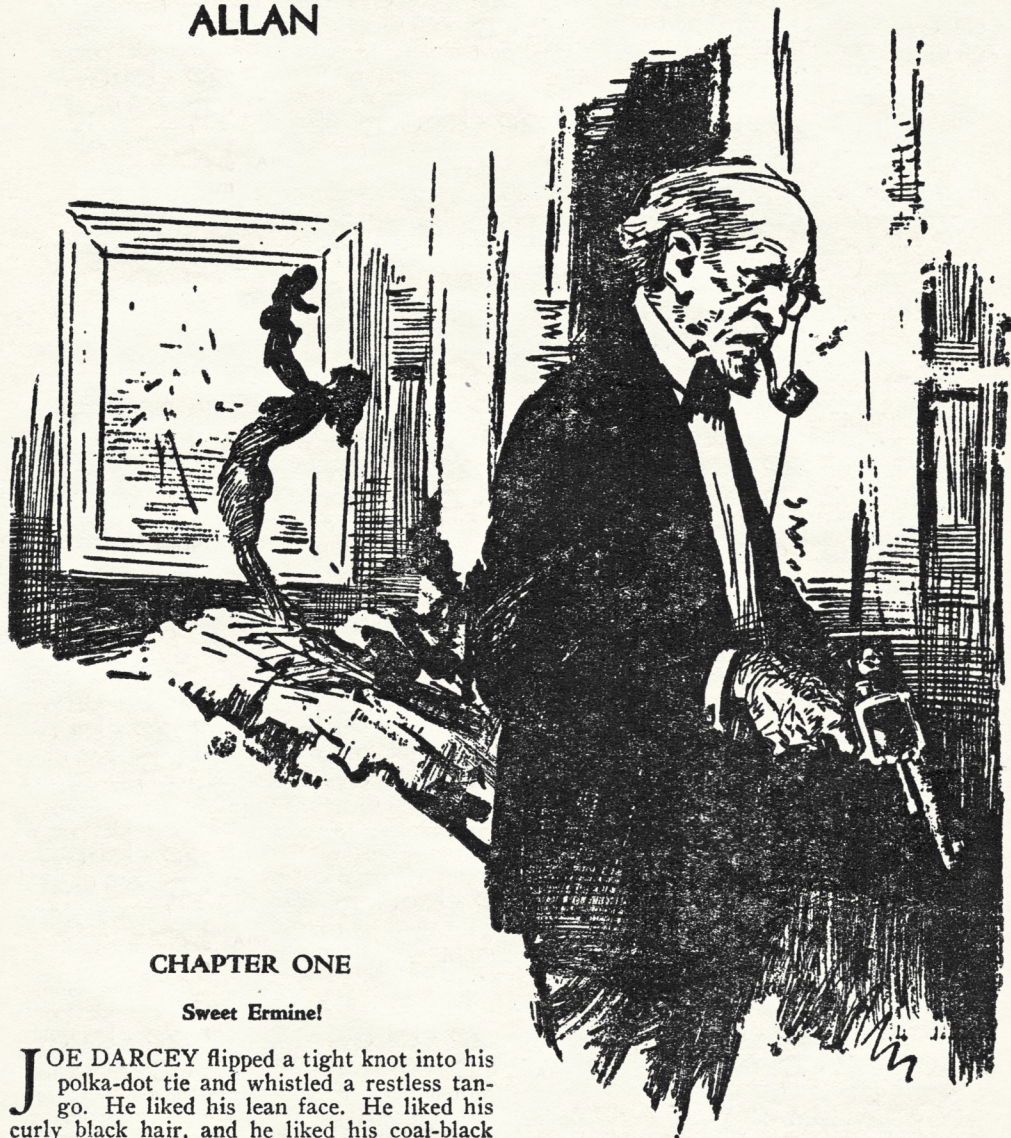
The kitchen door closed after him as he hurried out.

Automatically, Myrtle ran to the kitchen hooks for her sunbonnet. Then she stopped. "I—I can't go out like this! Why—why, I only got my nightgown on!"

She fled into the bedroom. Yes, there was gossip to spread. J. Harrison had caught a killer. He was the smartest man in Foxhill Township. She sighed. Yes, and in that uniform, the handsomest man!

# ALIAS MR. SATAN

By  
FRANCIS K.  
ALLAN



## CHAPTER ONE

*Sweet Ermine!*

**J**OE DARCEY flipped a tight knot into his polka-dot tie and whistled a restless tango. He liked his lean face. He liked his curly black hair, and he liked his coal-black eyes. He didn't like flabby things, Joe didn't. He liked things cool and hard. Except women.

He moved with a prowling grace, his shoulders slightly forward, his chin lifted in

"Hush, both of you!"

## Compelling Novel of a Man Who Lived in Hell

*Somewhere between the blue drapes of that plush-and-chrome penthouse and the swirling smoke of the Burning Turtle, lurked a limbo of madness where dwelt the lost soul of Joe Darcey. . . . Who he was, or where he came from, only one man who'd been cast back from the jaws of hell could tell!*



*"I believe you," she whispered. "I am a fool, but I almost believe. . . ."*

a listening tilt. Yeah, this was sweet ermine. French windows you could drive a truck through. Rugs you could lose your feet in. East Side. Class, see?

Ten o'clock. Lorna was somewhere in a cab now. Joe liked to have things located in his mind. He took a drink of brandy and whistled a lazy waltz. He looked at the bed. Big as a pool table. Blue drapes at the windows. Sweet ermine, yeah. Showed what a guy could do . . .

He stood there smiling to himself, and he started thinking of Lorna again. Hair like gold. Baby blue eyes, and just the right shade

of dumb. Not like Carolyn. Carolyn . . . Well, the Hell with Carolyn. Not for Joe Darcey. Not for a hundred grand a year would he—

The chimes rang. This would be Lorna. He crossed the sunken living room and opened the ivory door. But it wasn't Lorna.

"Hello, Joe," the man said drearly. He was thin and gray-haired. His cheeks were lean. In the liquor ads, he would have been pegged as a painter. A sculptor. He closed the door behind him.

"I wasn't expecting you, Garzan. Hunting a drink?"

"Just wanting a look at your new place. Do you mind?"

"Take it in. Touch it. Feel it. Sweet ermine." Joe laughed.

Rick Garzan did not laugh. He walked slowly through the room, and then he walked back. Joe was looking out the window.

"Like it?" he asked.

"Did you ever look in your dirty heart, Joe?" Garzan asked.

"Heart?" Joe laughed. "No blondes down there. Why look?" He did not turn around.

"You know, Joe," Garzan continued, "there are rules for everything on earth. Even for rats. And rats have a stopping place. You don't. You're not a rat. You're not a man. Maybe I could call you a disease. A deformity. A freak." He spoke with a deadly softness.

"You make it sound like prayer week," Joe said lazily.

"No. I make it sound like good-by. Good-by, Joe."

Joe frowned and started to turn. The shadow sliced down the wall. Joe tried to duck. The gun-butt crashed upon his forehead and hammered him to his knees. Another blow opened his head. He tried to scream. Warm liquid poured over his eyes. He babbled and the blows became a dim drumming against a far-away skull. A sensation drifted over him.

He was sinking through a fog of crimson. A scotch and soda was drifting along beside him. A vast fat turtle was burning brightly with flame, and a girl with dark frightened eyes was whispering, "Burn it, burn it, burn it!"

"Burn it up!"

It was very quiet, and the sunlight cast bars of liquid gold through the blinds. A door opened and closed. Soft footsteps approached and a woman in white looked down.

"Can you hear me this afternoon, Mr. Darcey?"

"Hear? . . . Yes. I can hear you."

"Look at my watch. Tell me what time it is." She held it out.

"It's four-twenty, of course. Why?"

"I think your operation is a success."

"I want to get up. What is this place?" He pushed back the covers.

"You are at home. Wait. Let me help you, Mr. Darcey. If—"

He looked at her uncertainly. "You're confused. My name is Sanders. Eric Sanders, don't you know?"

"Oh." An expression of disappointment crossed the woman's plain face. "Of course," she agreed patiently. "It will come back, a little at a time. Suppose we all call you Mr. Darcey?"

"But I don't see why. My name *isn't* Darcey." He stood up and looked around the immense blue room. Through the windows he could see the East River and the crowded Brooklyn waterfront. This was a beautiful room, he thought. More beautiful than any he had ever seen. Then he saw his reflection in the mirror—saw the white gauze around his black hair. He reached up to touch it curiously.

"Was I hurt?" His voice was mild, almost shy.

"Yes. Do not press on the bandage. The incision hasn't healed completely. Another few days and—"

"But I don't remember. I don't . . ." He stopped and frowned intently. "A turtle, all red and fiery. I remember the turtle," he whispered.

"You were badly hurt two months ago, Mr. Darcey," the nurse said quietly. She seemed about to explain, then tightened her lips firmly. "Dr. Costain operated last week. It should be only a matter of time, now." She hesitated at the door. "Mr. Phillip Lost called that he was coming by. Do you want to see him?"

"Who is Phillip Lost?"

"He is . . ." and the nurse set her long jaw grimly. "A friend of yours, Mr. Darcey." Her voice was suddenly bleak. She closed the door behind her.

"Phillip Lost . . ." Eric Sanders rubbed his forehead slowly. But he couldn't remember any Phillip Lost. He couldn't remember this place. It couldn't be his. And the woman insisted on calling him Darcey. Who was pulling his leg?

There was some fantastic mistake, of course. Ridiculous. He knew perfectly well who he was. Eric Clifton Sanders. He taught history at Westgate College in Dallas, Texas. But no . . . No, he remembered. He had resigned eight months ago. October the Twenty-first, 1944. He remembered the date exactly. He had resigned and gone to Mexico City to write a book. And then he'd come to New York to try to sell . . . But he had been sick in Mexico City. Yes, he remembered that. And the fat man with the silken skin. He was part of the fever and sickness.

Carlos had been his name. But why think of him?

Eric's shoulders began to tremble. He felt suddenly hot and breathless, as if an old nightmare were flooding down upon him. Carlos and the fever. Hot twisting colors and fat fingers. A sad voice haunting him at evenings. And something diseased, grotesque. Like an animal prowling from a dank cave in his brain was the shape of a man, and the soul of a monster. *His monster! His—Eric Sanders'*. Back in the fever with Carlos, he had made a monster in his brain. And that monster—

"Joseph Darcey!" Eric cried out sharply. "That was the name I gave the monster in my book! And now—" Perspiration crawled down his cheeks. His dark eyes fled around the walls. A sickening self-terror swept out of the past as he remembered those deformed days with Carlos. The nightmare of running, always running in his dreams. But never moving, because Carlos' silken fat fingers held him in their grasp.

And now these people said he *was* the monster he had created in the fever with Carlos . . .

The room seemed to close down and crush him. He rushed out into the broad living room. The golden sunlight was a mirage, a mockery, at the windows. Such a beautiful place, he thought, but it was only a nightmare-dream. Carlos would reappear.

Suddenly he saw the newspaper on the couch. He thought of the war. He looked at the headlines. He looked again. Here it did not mention the war. Instead it told of *peace* conferences. MacArthur was in Japan, it said. It meant . . . meant the war must be over and—

November the First, 1946, Eric read. For a full minute his brain ceased to function. Two years. *Two years* . . .

Two years since he had gone to Mexico. Nearly sixteen months since he had come to New York. Sixteen months—*lost!*

Slowly he sank down and closed his eyes. A sound touched his ears. He looked up to find a squat, brown-faced man watching him from a doorway. "Everything okay, boss?" the man asked.

"Who—" Eric stopped. He was afraid to speak. He was afraid to ask or think. He was afraid to know.

"Glad to see you getting around again," the man said.

"Yes," Eric whispered. He stared back at the newspaper. Soft chimes spilled through the silence. The brown-faced man walked toward an ivory door.

"Guess this'll be Lost." Before he opened the door, he worked a shiny automatic from his pocket and stood at one side. "Who is it?"

"Let me in, Freddie," a voice said wearily. Freddie unlocked the door and a tiny hunch-shouldered man stepped in. He looked like an over-cooked gnome—tiny mouth and hands, a bald furrowed head, thick glasses that magnified his slate-gray eyes. He stopped and blinked at Eric. "Well. Well, this is much better," he snapped. "How do you feel, Joe?"

"I feel . . . strange." Eric watched him unbutton his dirty overcoat and massage his bony fingers. "You are Phillip Lost?" he said slowly.

"Naturally. Should I have changed my name? If . . ." He paused and the eyes seemed to rise like fish from a filmy pool. He stared at Eric, then at Freddie. "Humpt," he murmured. "I need to talk to you alone." He motioned toward the bedroom. Eric followed him dazedly. Lost closed the door and peered intently at him again. "Humpt," he repeated. "This is precisely what they feared. You've got to get a grip on yourself."

He began pacing the room in short angry strides, clapping and unclapping his hands behind him, frowning first at Eric, then at the rug. "When can you meet the boys? How soon?"

"I don't know," Eric said faintly.

"You don't know? Then who does?" Lost demanded angrily. He popped a cough drop in his mouth. "Wake up! Don't stand there like a gaping idiot. Certain people are already afraid the beating yellowed you. Now, listen to me." His fish-eyes came swimming up again. "There is a great deal to be done to complete *his* plans. A lot of it has been delayed while you were sick. And authority evaporates if nothing is happening. You understand that. There must be a meeting. As soon as possible. Tomorrow. I'll make the arrangements. It will be at the Caravan. I'll call you tomorrow afternoon and tell you the exact time."

He began pacing the floor again, pushing cough drops in his mouth and breathing heavily. Eric watched him fixedly.

"Who gave you that beating?" Lost asked abruptly.

"Beating? . . . Oh, I don't know."

"You don't know?" Lost peered at him bleakly. "Well, a damned good thing that Lorna walked in and scared the man away. And don't think he won't try again. Someone took a shot at you in the hospital. I'll be glad when we get this entire affair settled and can take a cool-off period." He frowned and looked at his watch. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"But—I— Can't you tell me what's been happening while I was sick?" Eric asked.

"Just the routine liquidation. Checking. I flew down to Mexico myself last week. The set-up is ready. Cristo had to be put away."

He suffered a severe attack of conversation in the wrong places. That's all." He paused at the door. "Be sure and call the Number tonight."

"The Number?"

Lost's jaw sagged. He walked across the room and stared up into Eric's face. "The Number. I said call him. Tonight. Do it." There was a stale hard sound in Lost's voice. He turned and stalked out.

Eric closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. Liquidation . . . Cristo had to be put away . . . Severe attack of conversation . . .

Eric sat down again. He told himself that he *must* remember. He must be orderly. Logical. Sixteen months were missing. But those months had been lived somehow, in some grotesque fashion. How?

They had been lived as Joe Darcey. Joe Darcey—the monster of evil that he, Eric, had created and put in a book. They had been lived between these walls, among people like Lost. Somewhere there must be evidence that would tell him what he had done.

And someone had tried to kill him. Shot at him in the hospital. So he must be careful. But of whom?

He stood up and walked around the room, opening drawers, the closet. The clothes—his or Darcey's—were very expensive. There was a Luger in the closet and an automatic thirty-eight in the dresser.

In all his life, Eric had never fired a gun.

He went into the living room. He touched the chairs, the coffee table. He tapped the panelled walls, and Freddie's brown face appeared.

"Wanting me, boss?"

"No, I was only looking around. Seems rather strange, you know. Like discovering everything all over."

"Yeah. I guess that's the way." Freddie started to withdraw.

"Oh, I— Maybe there's been some mail for me?" Eric suggested.

"In the top drawer of the desk. Maybe three letters. I remember seeing the nurse put 'em there."

Eric nodded. He waited until Freddie was gone, then opened the drawer. There were three letters addressed to Joe Darcey, Penthouse B, Baldwin Towers. One was a bill for scotch whiskey from the Eastern Associates Importing Company. The second was on perfumed pink stationery. It said:

Sorry a million times, darling, and hurry up and get up.

It was signed, Lorna. Lorna . . . Eric frowned. Lost had said something about Lorna. Oh, yes . . . She had frightened away the man who had tried to kill him . . . Joe.

Eric lit a cigarette from a dried out pack in the drawer, then opened the third letter. It was written in a flowing hand. It was not very long. He read:

Joe,

I hate I-told-you-so's as much as you, I'm sure. But I cannot help but hope this will remind you of what I'd tried to tell you: There is nothing but tragedy and death for you in your way of living. I meant what I said when I left you: I can't be happy with you. I can't sleep when I am part of your evil. But I sometimes dream to myself that you are not what you are, but only a figure in a nightmare. You don't understand, I'm sure, and I can't explain it. I'll just say I'm sorry.

Carolyn

The name and address were engraved at the top of the page: Carolyn Darcey, Piedmont Arms, New York City.

"Carolyn Darcey," Eric whispered. He stared at the note. It blurred before his eyes. "When I left you . . . I can't be happy with you . . . Can't sleep when I am part of your evil . . ."

"Carolyn Darcey," he breathed again. His stomach seemed to crumble like dry clay. He was insane. Of course he was insane, he kept telling himself. "Freddie!" he shouted. Then he was frightened again. He didn't know what to say. The man waited, leaning his powerful body against the wall. Eric swallowed. "About . . . my wife . . ." he breathed. He stared into the stolid brown eyes, waiting . . . Nothing happened. "Has she . . . called?"

"It was just after the operation. Yeah. She telephoned the hospital and asked how— Say, you need a drink, maybe?"

"Yes. A drink. Get me a drink," he gasped.

HE DRANK the soup and ate the chop, and winter twilight turned to smoky purple at the windows. Brooklyn lit its fires across the river, and the nurse told him he should go to bed early. No need to do too much so quickly, she said.

"Yes," Eric said. He watched her remove the tray. He listened to the silence. He wondered where Freddie was. Carefully he rose and opened the closet. He put on a white shirt and blue suit. On the dresser was a silver box. There he found a billfold with eight hundred and sixty dollars. There was a ring of keys. His fingers trembled on the money. More than he had ever touched before . . . He found a coat and hat. He was perspiring as he edged open the door to the living room and peered in. He closed the door and tip-toed silently across the room. Without a sound he let himself out into an elevator foyer. At last he breathed a breath



of freedom and hurried down the stairs. His knees were trembling by the time he reached the small green lobby.

"The Piedmont Arms," he told the cab driver. Eric knew nothing about streets or places in New York. He tried to remember how long he had been here before . . . before it had happened.

The street sign said Madison Avenue. The Piedmont was an ancient building with marble and velvet panels along the massive corridor. An antique doorman dozed in the sheltered doorway.

"Mrs. Darcey? . . . Oh, no. Mrs. Darcey will not be in until after midnight, sir," he said. "Is there a message?"

"No," Eric said slowly. "I will have to see her myself. I— Do you know if she is still married?"

"I believe that Mrs. Darcey is getting a divorce," the doorman said frostily. "And not too soon, I would say. Mrs. Darcey is a lady."

"And Darcey is not a gentleman?"

"I have heard that he is not, sir. And whom shall I say called?"

"Mr. Sanders. Eric Sanders." He walked out. The cold wind hurled a newspaper along the street and drove tears into his eyes. The glow of a neon bar-sign made a fire in the night. His legs were shaking again. He felt weak and sucked of blood. He pushed the door open and stumbled in. It was a shadowy place. Like a cave, Eric thought dimly. A cave with shining ice. But those were the glasses, of course. And the mirror.

He leaned against the bar and gasped for breath. "Scotch and soda," he said weakly. At last his legs grew solid again. The dizziness left his temples. He drank slowly. In the mirror his skin was gray and his eyes were hot, black. There were two lines—thin ugly lines down his cheeks to his mouth—and they had not been there before. Before.

That word kept crawling up in his brain. *Before what?*

What had been the last step, the last hour of sanity when he had lived as Eric Sanders? He closed his eyes and tried to drive his brain backward. "Think slowly. Think logically. Think," he commanded.

I wrote the book in Mexico. In the fever and nightmare of Carlos. In that book I created the monster and named him Joseph Darcey. What was he like? What did he do in my book? If I could remember. If I knew where my book was. . . If. . .

But I escaped from Carlos. I *do* remember that. I came to New York to sell the book. I must have stayed in a hotel. But where? How long? And then what happened?

He clenched his fingers and ground his teeth together. He could almost . . . almost . . .

"Scotch and soda!" he cried aloud. "A burning turtle in the night! A girl with tears in her eyes!" He choked and stared around him wildly. "That was the jumping-off place! That was the last hour! *I know! I know!*"

A man with the solemn eyes of an owl gazed at him. "Yes, sure. Take it easy, my friend."

"No. You think I'm drunk. But I know! It's true!" Eric cried.

"Take it easy, pal," the bartender said solidly. "No loud stuff—"

"But you don't understand! *You* don't understand, either!" he cried at the little owl-eyed man. "This is—is the difference between being lost forever or—finding myself again. *You—*"

"Listen, maybe you better take a walk and—"

"No, no. For God's sake, listen to me!" Eric clutched his arms. This was the straw—the straw he *had* to save, he knew. "Listen, there was a turtle burning in the night. Can't you see what I mean?"

"A turtle burning in the night. Sure," the owl-eyed man murmured.

"She was crying. The girl was crying. I had done something wrong, don't you understand? And she kept saying over and over, 'Burn it, burn it, burn it! Do you hear me?'"

"Sure." The bartender nodded solemnly. "Burn the turtle, maybe?"

"No, I . . . I don't think so. I think it was something else. Something that made her cry, and she wanted it burned." Eric stared from one face to the other, hoping to find some answer. "You see," he said anxiously, "the scotch and soda was here—like this was a table. Like this was a booth. A booth. . ." He stopped and stared at his trembling fingers. "*It was a booth!*" he cried. "And the turtle was burning in the window like—like that beer-bottle sign with the neon light up there!" He pointed to the front window. "A burning turtle in the window."

"I guess you were in a bar called Turtle," the bartender said.

"IS THERE a bar named that?"

"Oh, Hell, I was only talking. Take it easy. Why don't you go home?"

"Wait, my friend," the little owl-eyed man said. "Let us not be hasty. There is something quite curious here. If— Pardon me a moment." He turned and limped to the telephone booths and opened a directory. When he came back, his huge eyes were glowing. "The Burning Turtle Bar and Grill. In Greenwich Village on East Ninth Street," he said softly.

"That's it! That's the jumping-off place!"

"My friend, permit me to introduce myself. Professor Luling. And you?"

"Eric Sanders. Please believe me, I am not insane. Not entirely."

"I will decide that for myself," Luling said calmly. "Tell me about the jumping off place." He motioned to the bartender and took another brandy.

"It was like this, I am very sure," Eric said in quiet desperation. "I came to New York to sell the book I had written. When I came to New York, I was Eric Sanders. I must have registered at a hotel. It would have been a cheap place; I had little money. And I think . . . I think it was near the place with the burning turtle. I don't know why. But anyway," Eric rushed on, "I went to the place with the burning turtle. I drank scotch-and-sodas. Perhaps I got drunk. You see, I had been . . . well, I had been living in a fever—a mental sickness. That had been in Mexico, before I came to New York. I wrote my book in the fever of nightmare. It must have been a foul book. If I could only remember it. . ."

"The turtle. The scotch-and-sodas," Professor Luling prompted.

"Yes. Perhaps I got drunk. Then a girl was sitting before me. I can close my eyes and almost see her, now. Her eyes were lovely, dark and shy. Her hair was black, and the waves just touched her shoulders. She was slender, and her fingers were beautiful. But something I did made her cry. She said, 'Burn it, burn it, burn it.'" Eric stopped and clenched the bar. His eyes grew bottomless and stark as he stared at the mirror. "I don't know. That is the end. . . Perhaps a . . . a pain. A moment of pain. A scream from somewhere. I— Oh, I can't remember." He shook his head miserably.

"Tell me," the misty little professor said, "when did this happen? When did you 'jump-off' as you call it?"

"About sixteen months ago. You see, I once taught history at a small college in Texas. I resigned in October of 1944 to write a book. I went to Mexico City. It took eight months to write the book, and then I came to New York. That would make it June, 1945. And I remember—it was June. I couldn't have been in New York more than a few days when it happened. Perhaps it was the very first night. I don't know." Eric looked at the owl eyes of Luling, then into the broad flushed face of the bartender. The bartender blinked and wet his lips carefully.

"And you don't know nothing about what's happened since then?" he asked.

"No. And yes," Eric answered. He wiped sweat from his face. "You see, I just waked up this afternoon. The nurse told me I'd been badly hurt, then there was an operation. Now I am in this strange and beautiful apartment

—a penthouse. Everybody calls me . . . a certain name. They think I am *that* person. But I'm not! That's the name of my monster. Something is twisted. They think I'm my monster, see?"

"I don't get it," the bartender breathed softly.

"Where does your monster come from, my friend?" Luling asked.

"From my book. From my brain. From the nightmare and fever of Mexico. It comes from Carlos. You two don't know Carlos." He stared at them swiftly. "I met him in Mexico. A big man. Soft as sick flesh. Evil and soul-less as a fat snake. A lonely voice, like music across stagnant water, and eyes like hot damp nets that hold you. He made me stay with him, and we talked in the twilight. We talked in the night. The book I had planned to write . . . it was forgotten. And instead, I wrote the tale of the monster. His monster and mine. It came from his brain, but it ate itself into mine."

"What is this monster like, my friend?" Luling whispered.

"Like. . ." Eric stared at his hands and shuddered. "It is what I have been. *It is the other me!*" he cried out brokenly.

The bartender wiped his mouth and flexed his fingers. The owl-eyes of Luling seemed to grow, to roam in a searching circle. "But the story and the character of this monster is written in your book?" he asked very carefully.

"Yes. In the book," Eric panted.

"And where is this book, this manuscript?"

"I don't know." Eric sagged against the bar. "I don't know."

"Listen, Luling, just between you and me—" the bartender started.

The misty professor moved a worn hand. "This man is ill, not crazy," he whispered. "Another brandy, Peter." He packed a huge curved pipe and tugged at his wisp of gray goatee. "You brought the manuscript with you to New York. Perhaps the first night, you went to the Burning Turtle. A girl cried. You think there may have been a scream, a pain. And you can remember nothing else?"

"Yes, yes. You understand," Eric cried gratefully. "Can't you help me, now?"

"I am wondering. I am retracing in my mind—"

"Look! The clock! It's midnight and she'll be home!" Eric exclaimed.

"*She?*" They stared at him.

"She. Carolyn. She is— Is the wife of my monster," he stammered. "But I—*me*—this part of me, I've never seen her."

"Ah!" the professor whispered. "You mean you were married in these lost months?"

"Yes. And I *must* see her." Eric pushed

money across the bar and turned toward the door.

"Wait, my friend," the professor called. "And believe me, I *am* your friend. You shall see. Let me go with you. I will not be in your way. I will not embarrass you. I will be there if you need me."

Eric looked at him. "I believe you. And I want you. I am afraid."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Never Go Back

**T**HE WIND was colder. The street was almost empty. A long sedan waited, dark and silent, at the entrance of the Piedmont Arms. Eric halted. He kept looking until the dim silhouette of one man became visible within the car.

"What is it, Eric Sanders?" the little professor asked.

"Something they told me. That someone tried to kill me in the hospital. And I think they tried to kill me before, too. And that car. I *am* afraid. I can't help it."

"So. . ." Luling said slowly. "Interesting, indeed. Listen. See that brownstone building with the light at the third floor? I live there alone. Here is the key. The third floor at the front. Go there and wait for me. I will bring this girl to you, I promise. And what is her name?"

"Carolyn. Carolyn Darcey," Eric said slowly. He watched Luling's face. Nothing happened; no twitch of surprise or recognition. It seemed incredible.

"I will bring her. She will come with a dewey old fool like myself, do not worry."

"Don't tell her. I mean, don't explain. I must see for myself what happens."

"I understand. Here is the key."

Eric climbed the wide stairway, pulling himself heavily by the railing. He could scarcely remain erect. Every muscle in his body seemed to quiver. He longed to slip down on the worn carpet and escape into endless sleep.

He opened the door and fell back against it, closing it again. He stared about him at the huge disordered room. Books were heaped and stacked upon a massive table. An oaken bowl was filled with pipes. An empty coffee cup and a bottle of brandy stood beside a portable typewriter. Shirts, ties, and socks were scattered over the floor and draped over backs of chairs. A violin lay on another table. The aroma of tobacco was a rich pungent incense in the silence. This was a good room, Eric thought. A room he would like to live in.

He sank down in a deep chair. A clock-works ticked contentedly under a glass bell, and a Siamese cat emerged from the soft

folds of the couch to gaze at him wickedly, yawn, and return to sleep.

He hunted a cigarette, and his fingers trembled. What would she say? What could *he* say? Would her hair be light or dark? Would she be lovely or ugly? A hundred questions plunged across his brain, and then footsteps grew out of the silence on the stairway.

Eric started to rise. The door opened. For a moment his eyes blurred on the fur coat. He saw dark hair, then he saw her face. Slender and lovely in surprise. Her lips parted. "Joe. . ."

"I will be doing-about in the kitchen," Luling murmured and vanished like a gray mouse. At last Eric broke the words from his throat.

"You. . . *You!* The one who cried that night. And you kept saying, 'burn it, burn it, burn it! *You are the one!*'"

Her dark brown eyes grew stony. "This was a mean trick, Joe. I'm going. I'd never have come if I'd—"

"No! Wait, for God's sake!" Eric started across the room. "Please wait! You don't understand." He grasped her wrist as she touched the doorknob. Across the space of a foot, her eyes were hating him and her beauty was white with fury.

"Don't ever touch me again," she whispered.

Eric loosened his fingers, but he stood against the door. "You must hate me terribly," he realized aloud. "And I don't even know why. You don't understand what I'm saying. Listen. Please, look at me, Carolyn. Believe me," he begged. "I remember you in only one scene, in only one hour long ago. It was the night in the Burning Turtle Bar, remember? And you were crying. Do you remember?"

"Do I remember!" She laughed ironically. "Let me go. Let me—"

"I am not Joe Darcey!" he cried desperately. "Believe that, if you can. My name is Eric Sanders."

Her eyes grew dark and still. "Are you insane?" she breathed.

"I am telling you the truth. Can't you see it in my face? Can't you see how frightened I am? *Can't you?*"

She looked at him, from one of his eyes to the other. Her white fingers slipped along her cheeks. Her throat moved as she swallowed. Brightness—the brightness of disbelief and impossibility—came into her eyes. She drew back. Her lips parted.

"Your eyes," she gasped. "Just like that first night. And like they never were again. I can't—What are you doing to me?" she choked.

"Begging for help," he said simply. "And telling the truth. I am not Joe Darcey. I am

Eric Sanders. I have been . . . lost for sixteen months. Today I found myself again."

"But we—I married you as Joe Darcey," she stammered. "I lived . . . with . . . Oh, God." She covered her eyes. Eric yearned to touch the dark brightness of her hair. He clenched his fingers and waited.

"It is like this—a long story, and this is the short of it. I am Eric Sanders. I taught history in a Texas college. In 1944 I resigned and went to Mexico City to write a book. In June of 1945 I brought the manuscript to New York to sell it. Soon after I got here—perhaps the first night—I went to the Burning Turtle. I met you. I don't remember how or what we said. Only your tears and the words, 'Burn it.' And that, Carolyn, I swear to God, is the last I can remember. I knew nothing until this afternoon when I waked in a strange fine place, and people were calling me Joe Darcey. And Darcey . . . he was the character, the man of evil in the book I wrote. But I am not Darcey. Not any more."

"Joe—Eric—Oh, I can't think. If—If this is another of your cruel—"

"It isn't, I swear. Tell me what happened that night."

"Give me a cigarette. I just can't think. That night . . ." She stared out the window. "I had come to New York a month before that night," she began distantly. "I wanted to study music, singing. I rented a room not far from the Burning Turtle. And *that* night. . . It was late. Almost midnight and I was going home. I was lonely. It looked so warm in there as I passed, and I was feeling discouraged. I went in. They wouldn't serve me alone at the bar, and you were sitting in a booth. You invited me to sit down. You were . . . looked nice. The way you smiled. And a little like you were lonely, too. We talked a long time. We drank a lot of scotch-and-sodas."

"Yes. The scotch-and-sodas. I remember," Eric said breathlessly.

"We were drunk. At least a little. And you began to tell me a story. It was the story of a man without a soul. A man of total evil. He loved to hate. Loved to destroy and injure and steal and lie and do everything that was mean and evil. And the way you told it—almost as if were real and living. It just seemed to . . . to burn in you. It frightened me strangely. And then you asked me, 'What would you do with a story or book like that?' And I said, 'Burn it, burn it, burn it.' And for some reason I began to cry."

"Yes? And then? Then what?" Eric scarcely breathed as he waited.

"I was so frightened. The way you had made it sound. I ran away. Out of the bar, I started across the street. You were calling,

following me. I didn't see the car. You saw it. You leaped and threw me toward the sidewalk just as . . . as it brushed past me. It hit you, instead. You were hurt." She looked at him miserably. "Your skull was fractured, and you had a concussion of the brain. You were in the hospital for seven weeks. And it was all my fault. I knew it. I had been idiotic, running like that. It was *my* fault. I went to the hospital every day. I . . . I paid what I could. I wanted to do everything for you. It was a month after you left the hospital. We were married." She stared at her hands and moved her fingers strangely. "Of course it was a fantastic thing. It was not love. It was gratitude. It was devotion and it was guilt for the trouble I'd made. It was my fault. I realized that, later. Too late."

"I see." Eric stared at his shoes. "And how did I come to be known as Joe Darcey?"

"But you told them that was your name, after you recovered consciousness. There wasn't any identification in your pockets. Maybe your billfold was lost. I remember an interne saying there wasn't any laundry identification on your clothes."

Eric remembered; he had bought a new suit just before he left Mexico. And his billfold. . . Of course, it could have been lost in the accident. Not a soul in New York had known him. He looked up at Carolyn, and at last he asked her the question of torment:

"I have done evil things—things that made people want to kill me, that made you hate the touch of me. But I can't remember. What did I do, Carolyn?"

"If you don't remember, I won't tell you, Joe—Eric. I—"

"No, no. I don't want that sort of kindness. What did I do?"

"Don't, Eric. Don't ask me to—" She saw his eyes, and the plea in them. She bit her lip and looked at the window. "I'll tell you only one thing—the last thing that finally made me leave you," she said finally. "We were living on Lexington Avenue. You don't remember? I had a dog—a little poodle named Vicky. You gave her to me for Christmas, last year. Only two months old. You let me . . . keep her just long enough to love her. Then one night . . ." Carolyn swallowed heavily. Eric felt perspiration crawl along his cheek.

"It was snowing that night. She was playing in my lap. I laughed. You picked her up. 'Laughter makes you soft,' you said. You opened the window and put . . . put Vicky out on the snowy ledge. It was the ninth floor. Then you closed the window and you left her there. When I tried to open the window, you held me. When I screamed, you laughed. And you stood there and watched until . . . until Vicky fell. You said . . ." Carolyn sobbed. "You said, 'Nothing soft is

good.' I left you that night for good."

Eric opened his mouth. Nothing came. A shame of rawest self-contempt burned his throat. Tears filled his eyes. "I didn't know. I don't remember," he muttered. They seemed the hollowest words in creation.

"Look at me," she whispered. He looked up. "I believe you," she scarcely whispered. "I am a fool but I almost believe—"

"Hush, both of you!" Luling breathed. He tip-toed quickly across the room and snapped out the lights. A drawer scraped open and shut. "Out. Into the hall," he rasped. "Someone came up the fire escape into the bedroom. I braced the door. It won't last. Quickly. Behind me."

As the door closed behind them, a prolonged low creaking sounded from the rear of the apartment. Luling hit a switch, throwing the hall and stairway into blackness.

"Now very quietly," he wheezed. "Give me your hand."

They passed the first floor, and Luling opened a metal door. The scent of oil and the glow of a furnace filled the blackness below. Eric followed Carolyn down steps, across a concrete floor, through another doorway, and suddenly into the biting cold of night. They were crossing a court, he realized. Then they were on a sidewalk. Now he could see Luling and Carolyn, and Luling held a pistol. For a weird moment Eric wanted to laugh. There was something fantastic and comical about the tiny man with his gray goatee, his pipe clenched in his mouth, his thick glasses glistening, and a heavy automatic in his hand. Then, quite suddenly, it wasn't funny at all.

It was dead and grotesque as a nightmare of death could be.

"You must go home," Luling said quickly to Carolyn. "If you—"

"No. No, I won't go home. If all this is true, I'm guilty too, can't you see? I ran in front of the cab that made this nightmare happen. Where are you going?"

Eric and Luling looked at each other in the darkness. "To the Burning Turtle," they said in unison.

"We will go back there together," she said to Eric. Luling looked at him and shrugged his tiny shoulders. "Perhaps it is best this way," he murmured. "Hurry."

"Do you know what is best to do?" Luling asked in the cab.

"Perhaps." Eric leaned forward. "I want you to drive up and down the streets that are near the Burning Turtle," he told the driver. "I want a look at the hotels."

Luling grunted gently. The cab moved up one street and down the next. Eric pressed his face against the window, lip-reading the names.

"That about gets 'em, Pal," the driver said finally.

Eric sighed. "To the Burning Turtle, then." He turned to Luling. "I don't remember any of them." The dewey little professor just grunted again. The cab stopped before a window that was lighted like fire. A neon sign, in the shape of an immense turtle, burned vividly. It was after three in the morning. One bartender and three customers were all that remained. The stools were stacked, the lights dimmed. Eric walked slowly toward the bar. The bartender mopped his way down the rail, chewing a fat stub of cigar.

"Just got under the wire," he said. "What will it—" He stopped talking. The cigar sagged.

"I was here sixteen months ago. I was wondering . . . just hoping that someone here might have found a package I lost. It was a manuscript. About three hundred pages typewritten, and in a cardboard box that—"

The bartender's arms were behind him and he was edging away. His cheeks had grown flabby and ash-colored. His eyes watered.

"Look, I—Darcey, I know—remember, yeah," he panted. "It was in the booth, I swear, and I—I gave it to the fat guy what came."

Eric did not move. He did not breathe. "*The fat guy?*"

"Yeah. Your pal, he said. Carlos. It was maybe three months after you was hurt." The bartender's lips were flecked with moisture. "The box was kicking around. Just kicking around, see, under the bar. He asked around and I said sure. I gave it to him. I—But I didn't know about you—I mean, I didn't know about you, see?" He choked.

"You mean, you didn't know what kind of a man Joe Darcey was?"

"Yeah, yeah," he panted. "I'm not lying. I'm not hunting trouble or anything like—You were just a name, then. Later I saw and heard—"

"It's all right," Eric said heavily. "Do you know where Carlos went?"

"No. I don't know a damn thing, I swear."

"I see." Eric turned slowly. Luling nodded and opened the door.

"Carlos. I remember. You spoke of him once," Carolyn said. "You laughed and called him 'The Number'. I couldn't find out why or—"

"I called him The Number?" Eric echoed sharply. His brain flashed back to recapture the words of Phillip Lost: 'Maybe you better get in touch with The Number tonight.' He looked at Carolyn intensely. "Is that all I ever told you about him? Nothing about where he was?"

She shook her head. Luling stopped a cruising cab. Eric sat in one corner, clenched

ing his fingers, his eyes tightly closed in thought.

"This much *must* be true," he said finally. Carlos followed me. He has been with me during the months I existed as Joe Darcey. He was the man, the brain that planted the idea of Joe Darcey in *my* brain in Mexico. I remember Darcey—the Darcey I wrote about; the Darcey that Carlos whispered in my ear. He was the symbol of evil. He was a man who had no soul. Evil was his career. And since that accident, since I have lived under the delusion that *I* was Darcey, God knows what ideas Carlos has planted in me. There is only one way. . . ."

"And that, Eric?" Luling asked.

"I must go back—back to that penthouse, back to the life of Darcey. I must follow the pattern and learn the truth. I must *know*. I . . . I would rather be dead than . . . than like this."

"I understand." The most gentle of smiles came over Luling's lips and he nodded. "But you must be careful. Very careful, everywhere and with everyone. And in the morning, before you do anything else, remember to call me. Remember that."

Eric promised. Carolyn turned toward him.

"But if— To go back—" She pressed her hands against her cheeks and closed her eyes. "I would never have dreamed this night would come," she whispered.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Pound for Dirty Pound

"**B**E VERY careful. . ." Luling's words echoed in Eric's memory.

He looked up and down the dark street. It was empty. He hurried across the green lobby of the Baldwin Towers and pressed the penthouse button of the automatic elevator. As he started to test the keys at his lock, the door was jerked open and Freddie glared out.

"Oh!" he exclaimed in relief. "Boss, you should give me such heart attacks. All night I'm walking the floor and asking myself."

"I'm all right, Freddie. I needed to see a couple of—" He stopped as a tall gray-haired man rose from the couch and stared at him with sad eyes. A smile—half-ironic, half-fatalistic—touched the man's lips and twisted the long scar in his handsome cheek.

"Hello, Joe," he said softly.

Eric blinked and remembered to smile as he nodded.

"Garzan wants to talk to you," Freddie began quickly. "He says he'll keep an eye open the rest of the night. So if it's okay with you, I better grab over to Brooklyn and see my old lady a while. Okay?"

"Sure," Eric said. Freddie grabbed his

coat and vanished. Garzan stood there with his dismal gray eyes brooding over Eric, and Eric hunted frantically for something to say. He wondered where *this* man fitted. Garzan spoke first.

"Wasn't that a little careless, Joe?"

"Careless? . . . Oh, you mean going out tonight. It had to be done."

"That *wasn't* what I meant." Garzan frowned at him, and Eric lit a cigarette. "Do you want a drink? There should be something around."

"The thing I can't understand is why you haven't talked about that beating," Garzan said deliberately. He swayed slightly on the balls of his feet, and his right hand stayed in his pocket.

"Why didn't you squawk?" Garzan demanded impatiently.

"Well, I—" Eric stared out the window. "Maybe I was due a beating," he threw out. "I'm tired. I don't want to talk about it. I'm going to bed. If you want a drink, get it yourself and—"

"No, Joe. It isn't that easy," Garzan interrupted. "I've made up my mind. I don't give a damn whether I can get away with it or not. I came to finish what I started."

Eric frowned, then shook his head slowly. He felt bone-dead weary, and he wished this man would stop talking riddles. "I don't care. Do whatever you want, Garzan. We'll discuss it tomorrow. Goodnight." He started toward the bedroom door. As he touched the knob, he glanced in the narrow mirror above the bookcase. He saw Garzan's hand leave his pocket with an automatic. He saw the automatic level on his spine..

He felt exactly as he had felt in childhood dreams—as if he were falling, forever falling and unable to cry out his fright. He felt his stomach twitch. He could see the bore of the gun. Then he heard his own words—mild and candid as a sleepy child's.

"Why, you are about to—"

Before he finished, a swift knock came at the door. The gun wavered and suddenly vanished from the mirror. Garzan crossed the room and opened the door.

"I've come back. I told you I never dreamed this would—" Carolyn's voice began. "Oh. Oh, hello, Rick."

Eric turned slowly around. Her face was flushed. The waves of her dark hair were wind-tumbled. She came toward him, smiling and holding out her hands. "Here I am, Eric—Joe," she said.

"But— You don't know—" Eric stammered. His eyes jerked to Garzan. The man's jaw was sagging. His eyes were stunned.

"Are you insane, Carolyn?" he demanded.

"I don't think so, Rick. Don't worry, please," she said gently.

"Worry! Don't worry!" he echoed wildly. He twisted his collar. "I— I— My God, where is the whiskey in this damned place?" He bolted through a swinging door.

Eric grasped Carolyn's shoulders. "Who is that man?" he whispered.

"Rick Garzan. The only decent friend you ever had. When you were Joe Darcey, I mean."

"Decent?" Erick mopped his chin. "Quick. Tell me about him."

"He owns a supper club called the Caravan. He was always kind to me. He used to try to apologize for things you did or didn't do. He would try to reason with you. You weren't very nice to him—Joe wasn't, I mean. He would be a good friend, if you'd give him a chance."

Eric wet his lips and turned slowly to stare into the shiny depths of the mirror. He could close his eyes and still see the gun pointing at his spine. He could remember Garzan's words, "The beating. . . I came to finish what I started. . ." And Eric knew quite certainly: *If Carolyn had not come, he would now be dead.*

Eric's eyes met Carolyn's. "Why did you come back?"

"Because— Because I had to. Because one night I was a fool. You saved my life and you were hurt. It isn't hard for me to understand the rest. My father was a doctor. I remember a man back home. He had suffered concussion of the brain in the first world war. Many years later he fell and hurt his head again. When he recovered, he realized he had been living a blank. He remembered who he was and where he really belonged. It's happened many times. And I believe you are telling the truth, Eric." She added his name slowly, with a curious shyness.

"But that means you came only because you feel a sort of guilt."

"Yes. Yes, but. . ." She looked at her fingers. "But not entirely."

"Look at me." He touched her chin. "I don't want you to feel guilty. I was living in Carlos' nightmare before I ever saw you. And I don't want you to feel kind, or humble, or grateful."

Her dark eyes shone softly. "Yes. I know." Her fingers were gentle on his cheeks. "I don't know what people . . . what rules would say. But I don't care. Does that tell you?" she whispered.

He opened his arms and she entered. He found her lips and they answered.

A glass crashed and broke on the floor. They turned. Rick Garzan was standing in the doorway, his long face twisted and white.

He choked. "Carolyn, you are a damned idiot!"

"No. You just don't understand, Rick."

"Understand? There is nothing but dirt and evil to under—"

"Wait," Eric said. He walked across the room. "See that mirror? Until I looked in it with my back toward you, I did not have the slightest idea why you were here. And you wondered why I hadn't talked about the beating. It was because I didn't know about the beating. It's a long story, but it's true. I'm awfully tired. Please stay here, and we can talk in the morning." He held out his hand.

Rick Garzan simply stared, his mouth open, his hands dangling at his sides.

"IT'S THE truth, Rick," Carolyn said. "Goodnight."

"Now I have seen it all, and I am getting drunk—starting now," Garzan exploded.

But Eric could not sleep. He stared into the darkness. He fought to drive his memory back down black corridors through lost rooms. What sins and crimes had he committed? How vast and wide was his net of evil? He writhed and perspired on the bed as his tortured mind built grotesque fantasies of blood. Then suddenly he stiffened and lay rigid. A thought—a possibility too horrible to endure seized him:

Suppose. . . Suppose he was hurt again. . . And he returned to the other life of Joe Darcey. . .

One blow. One fall. One accident. And in a city where a million things could happen. . .

Suddenly he clutched his head, as if invisible hands were poised to strike. His body began to shake. In terror he cried out loud.

"Don't. Don't hit me! Don't send me back there!"

"Eric? What is it?" Carolyn's fingers sought him in the darkness.

"Thinking! What if I went back? If something happened? If I got hurt again. I'd go back. I'd never know. I'd be lost forever!"

"Eric, don't! Never think such a thing!"

When the November dawn crawled through the windows, Eric tip-toed into the living room. The lamp was burning wanly against the gray morning. Rick Garzan's hat was on the coffee table.

Eric found him sitting at a shiny kitchen table, his head slumped on his chest, an empty scotch bottle in front of him. He opened his blood-shot eyes. His tongue moved thickly over his lips.

"Drunk. . . Drunk enough to kill you," he muttered. His fingers began to crawl across the table.

Eric saw the gun. A beautiful gun, he thought weirdly. Like a cobra, bright and glistening in summer rain. Hypnotically he

watched Garzan's uncertain fingers moving nearer, nearer.

"Garzan!" Eric cried out. He leaped, beating Garzan's fingers by an inch. The table tilted. Garzan's chair rocked as he reached out. The scotch bottle smashed, and Garzan pitched backward to the floor. He groaned and lay still.

Eric backed away, his throat pounding. He thrust the gun into his robe-pocket and stared about him. He dumped coffee into the silex and started the flame. He lifted Garzan and propped him against the wall in the chair. The coffee boiled up. Eric poured two cups, put them on the table, and pulled a chair close to Garzan's. He lifted Garzan's chin and slapped the limp face sharply.

"Wake up! Coffee, Garzan! Here. Coffee."

Garzan groaned. Eric lifted the cup. The brown liquid trickled over Garzan's chin, and he mumbled incoherently. "Want . . . kill Joe," Eric heard. He leaned forward intently.

"Why do you want to kill Joe, Garzan? Tell me why."

"Joan. . . Pretty Joan went away. . . Went where they go . . . when they know Joe. . . Always go when it's Joe."

"Where did she go, Garzan?"

"Don't know. . . Tried to listen. Think Lost knew . . . way he looked at me. Maybe knows I'm going to kill Joe. Don't know. . ." He sighed thickly and his head rolled.

"Garzan, do you know what Joe does? What's his business?"

"Don't . . . know. Tried to listen. Tried to . . . follow him that night he . . . took Joan. Went . . . went. . ."

"Where did he go, Garzan?" Eric almost shouted.

"Tux . . . uxedo. . . Tuxedo. Big building. . . Park Avenue. . ." The chair began to slide from the wall. Eric grasped Garzan before he fell, and the gray-haired man passed out in his arms. At that moment the chimes began to clamor at the front door. Eric swore softly. He eased Garzan to the floor, mopped his face, and hurried across the living room. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Lost. Let me in," came the bleak command. Eric unlocked. The bald-domed little gnome stalked in and looked around. "Well? How do you feel?" he asked.

"Perfect," Eric said.

"Freddie called me—said you went out last night."

"There were things I needed to do," Eric turned his back and lit a cigarette as he tried to frame words. "In fact, I have been having an interesting discussion with Garzan—after getting him pot-drunk."

"Garzan! He's been here! Did that idiot

Freddie—" Lost followed Eric's motion to the kitchen door and peered inside. "Are you insane?" he whispered. He stalked toward Eric. "You know my suspicions about Garzan. You know he tried to follow you that night. I kept him away from you at the hospital. If Carlo— If the Number finds out there's any hint of his identity in Garzan's mind, all of us can—Well, it's insane!" he rasped.

"I can take care of Garzan. Look at him now, for instance."

"I have my own ideas," Lost snapped. "That's why I intended to meet at his Caravan one more time. This time I'm going to know if he's eaves-dropping. You were very careless on that Joan Linden affair."

Eric's fingers mashed into his cigarette. "What has happened to her while I've been sick?" he wondered casually.

"That is neither my business nor yours," came the toneless answer. Lost's eyes began to swim again. They were the ugliest eyes that Eric had ever seen—like ferrets, gnawing their way into his sockets.

Eric turned away from them. "I . . . I think I will see the Number today," he said slowly.

"Ah," Lost snapped his fingers. "Better. Much better. I will call you at four this afternoon. If everything works out, perhaps we can meet tonight. At the Caravan," he added softly. He snapped his fingers again. His ugly eyes gleamed. "I will call you." He walked out, slamming the door. Eric exhaled a hard sigh. He felt as if he had been tickling an adder.

"Eric?" He turned. Carolyn was standing in the doorway. "Are you all right, Eric?"

"I don't know. Everything . . . like a pit of dark snakes, coiling and uncoiling. I can't touch them. I'm afraid to touch them. I don't know what—Carolyn, can't you tell me anything about what I did when I was Joe? I mean, the part with these men, with the Number."

She shook her head. "You never told me. I never want to know." She looked at him steadily. "If I were you, I would call Luling."

"Luling . . ." He remembered the foolish little goatee, the owl's eyes, and a strange moment of peace slipped over him. "Yes, Luling . . . And Carolyn, Garzan is drunk. When he comes to, talk to him privately. Tell him the truth about me. Tell him we may meet at the Caravan tonight. Tell him to be careful. Lost suspects him."

"I AM dwelling between nowhere and somewhere," he said to Luling. "I am not yet Eric Sanders, and I am not yet through living the life of Joe. I am in the purgatory of nightmare. I am half-crazy, Luling. Oh, help me!"



"Be patient. Remember, your brain is still disturbed by the operation. You are trying, also, to recapture one life and recall another. I want you to lie there while I am gone. The tablet I gave you will make you drowsy. Sleep if you can. You'll need a clear mind later. I will be back within two hours." He bobbed his head, dragged on an immense overcoat, thrust a pipe in his mouth, and fluffed his goatee.

Strange . . . Like a dream here in the silence, Eric mused sleepily when Luling was gone. I'd like to sleep forever. Never think . . . again . . . He gazed dimly about Luling's book-filled room. He smelled the aroma of tobacco. Then he went to sleep.

"Now. Now, wake up. Wake up, now." The words drained down into his consciousness and he opened his eyes. Luling was perched in a chair sipping brandy. It was one o'clock in the afternoon. Eric felt as if years had passed. "Drink the toddy I put there beside you," Luling said. He sucked on the pipe and cleared his throat.

"I have had a confidential talk with a dear friend of mine—an Inspector of Police," Luling said. "I asked him what he knew about a certain man named Joe Darcey. He told me a curious story."

Eric sat up quickly. "What did he say?"

"The police had never heard of Joe Darcey until eight months ago when, in a West Side raid on a suspected dope house, a man named George Klix was arrested. He was high. He became furious at being arrested and babbled threats. He said he worked for Joe Darcey's outfit; that Darcey's outfit could buy or break every damned cop of them; just wait till Darcey heard the cops were pushing his man around. Well . . . The police laid it to dope until, the day Klix was released, he was found shot to death. Then they started wondering. Maybe Klix had talked too loosely to suit this Joe Darcey. So they hunted you—Joe Darcey—and asked some questions. The answers were not what they wanted. You wouldn't tell anything about your background. You lived high, but wouldn't explain where the money came from. They didn't like anything about you, but couldn't put their fingers on any facts. Then the crookedest little lawyer, pound for dirty pound, in New York came in. Phillip Lost. After that, you didn't say anything."

"So Lost is a lawyer. What else did the police say?"

"They knew you were plenty hot, having Lost for a mouthpiece. They assigned a man to trail you around. You almost drove him crazy. Four times he trailed you as far as an abandoned warehouse on upper Third Avenue. Four times you went into the barn; four times you didn't come out. Police

checked the place. They couldn't find anything but dust and the smell of old grease. They checked banks. You had no account. Everything was in the cash department. They were stymied; they couldn't *prove* you did anything but take night walks. They were thinking about a vagrancy charge to try to shake you down. Then a call came one night. Someone had tried to beat you to death in your new penthouse. And that, Eric, is precisely *all* the police know about you. Nothing."

"But that—that doesn't explain anything!" Eric cried.

"That much doesn't—no. But something new has been added, now that you've brought out this matter of Carlos." Luling began to suck noisily on the pipe. "The Tuxedo Towers on Park Avenue is at least the second most exclusive and expensive residence address in Manhattan. Only one Carlos lives there—Carlos Orlando. Does that mean anything to you?"

"The Carlos in Mexico—my Carlos—never mentioned his other name. I don't know—" Eric stopped and reached out to take a photograph from Luling. A vast olive-skinned face smiled above a stiff collar. "That's Carlos—my Carlos!" Eric exclaimed.

"Ah," Luling breathed. "And that is perhaps the third or fourth richest man in the world. Carlos Orlando, head of an organization known as Orlando Enterprises. An extremely odd outfit. Does some importing from the Orient. Has engaged in oil leasing and development in the near-East and Mexico. Holds a large section of Manhattan real estate. Sometimes seems to fade entirely from activity. Carlos Orlando is the whole works. There is no permanent business staff. The offices are between Orlando's two ears, apparently. A man of mystery, to coin a phrase," Luling said wryly. "Two years ago the Federal attorneys tried to indict him for income-tax evasion. No books. Couldn't prove a thing. Orlando made fools of them. Talked about being the illegitimate son of an Indian prince, and one-quarter Chinese. Gave a lot of mystic double-talk. Nobody knows anything about him. *But* . . . Orlando, it turns out, owns the vacant warehouse where you kept disappearing on your night walks. So . . ." Luling stopped and his owl-eyes settled on Eric's.

"Yes, I know," Eric said slowly. "I'll have to see him." He looked at the telephone. "And it frightens me. I can't explain."

"I know."

Eric drew a deep breath and opened the telephone directory. He dialed. "Mr. Orlando's suite, please," His voice had a lean sound. A servant answered. Another connection was made, and out of the realm of a twisted nightmare, a hot low voice murmured, "Yes? . . ."

"This . . ." Eric swallowed, "is Joe."

"I suspected as much."

"I need to see you. Very soon."

"Of course. It is one o'clock. Perhaps seven tonight?"

"Can't we make it earlier? Lost wants a meeting tonight."

"You are being careless with names," Orlando said curtly. "Set the meeting for midnight. Seven o'clock is more suitable for me. The usual place." Orlando hung up.

Eric looked at Luling. "Seven o'clock. He said 'usual place'. But I don't know where that is."

"A simple matter. I will take care of that."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Your Number's Up!

"WHAT time is it now?" Eric asked again.

"Six-thirty. Be patient," Luling said calmly.

Eric lit another cigarette and watched the creamy spires of the Tuxedo Towers melt against the deepening twilight. The motor of Luling's venerable Cadillac belched contentedly and moaned on. The little man stroked his goatee and seemed to sleep. Suddenly Eric sat forward.

"That man—the one turning the other way—that's Carlos!" he said sharply. Luling grunted. Eric watched the bulky figure turn the corner. Luling shifted gears. The Cadillac groaned around the corner. Carlos Orlando was closing the door of a cab behind him.

"Just relax. Sit back," Luling said. Eric tried to loosen his tense muscles. The cigarette turned stale in his throat. "Ah. Toward Third Avenue," Luling murmured. "Perhaps to the warehouse?"

It was semi-dark. Luling turned into a street that was crowded with massive steel beams, thunderous with the sound of trains overhead. "That is the El," Luling said. "I think we are going to the warehouse." His voice sharpened slightly. His eyes twinkled behind the thick glasses. "Watch. See? . . . That dark building. That's the warehouse. And the cab is slowly—Yes. No!" he exclaimed. "That adjoining building."

"Yes. That's where he's going."

There was a bar on the first floor. The upper two floors were dark. Eric watched Carlos enter a dark doorway at the side of the bar. He looked at Luling. Luling was watching the windows.

"See! The third floor at the back. A light just went on behind the shades. He's in there." He turned. "Now, here are two things you may need. First, keys in case the doorway is

locked. And second . . ." He handed Eric an automatic pistol. "The safety is off. Be very careful. Do not use it unless absolutely necessary. Good luck, Eric Sanders. I will wait for you at this corner."

The gun had a deadly weight and clamminess in Eric's fingers. He walked slowly across the street and tested the door. It was locked. He tried the keys. The eleventh worked. Eleven is lucky, he thought strangely. He closed the door behind him and felt his way up a musty-scented dark stairway, past the landing of the second floor, on up through the silence to the third.

He tip-toed down the hall, searching for a slice of light beneath the last door on the right. But there was no light. He touched the gun. He wet his lips. He turned the knob and stepped into darkness.

"Carlos? . . ." No answer. He struck a match. The room was dust-mantled and empty. There was a door at the back of the room. With the last flicker of match, he opened the door and glanced down a narrow stairway, completely enclosed.

He descended two floors and struck another match. A scarred metal door loomed at his right. He pushed it open and the scent of dank oil and coal-dust swept through his nostrils. He felt his way along the pipe-railing, past one landing, into deeper odors until a fragment of light twinkled off to his left. This, he knew, was a sub-basement. From the ways he had turned, it must be beneath the warehouse. He took a last breath and pushed at the lighted outline of a door.

He stood in a lamp-lit room. The walls were filled with dusty file-cabinets. In the center of the room sat a heavy table, three thick chairs, and the lamp. A pencil and pad of notepaper lay on the table, and in one of the chairs sat Carlos. He was looking at Eric across the winking haze of light, and his eyes were like molten chocolate.

"Good evening, Joe," he said. The same gentle smile was on the soft face. The same silken fingers were damp, and the broad belly was heaving like the motion of an ocean tide.

Eric closed the door behind him, and he smiled. "It's been a long time, Carlos. Good to be back."

"How do you feel?" Carlos motioned to a chair.

"I haven't got my legs, yet. I've had a headache all day, but that will pass." He sat down and watched Carlos open a long cigar.

Carlos lit the cigar and began to draw arcs and circles on the paper. Eric remembered that habit from the fevered months in Mexico. Presently, he knew by memory, Carlos would speak very dreamily.

"I will be leaving next week. I have been

waiting for you to get well. Naturally I will trust you to . . . put on the finishing touches."

"Sure," Eric said wisely. "That's what I'm here for."

"You are going to meet them tonight?"

"Yes. Midnight."

"Very well. Bring them here—Lost, Alberto, and Linke. Bring them to this room. Tell them I am ready to see them. Let them enter first, then close the door and drop the bolt. The fire can be started with the oil and waste. Lawyers, brokers and fences should be burned."

"You want them burned to death?" Eric gasped.

"Have you forgotten your own idea? I think . . ." He stopped and raised one eyebrow. Eric felt a curious coolness slide along his spine. He had made a mistake.

But Carlos was looking toward the door now, as if listening. A smile broke over his face. "Ah, come in," he said. "You know Joe?" Eric moved. The door was closed. There was no one. Too late he realized. He twisted, started to reach for the gun.

"No!" Carlos commanded flatly. Eric stared into the mouth of a revolver. Carlos smiled again and pushed the pencil and paper across the table. "Write the name and location of the place in Mexico."

Eric's fingers opened and closed. He looked at the pencil, then he looked back at Carlos. A deep laugh came from Carlos' belly. "It is amazing. Your eyes. Everything about you. You are Eric Sanders again. Aren't you?"

Eric's stomach began to crumble. His throat locked. He tried to think—to think of *anything*. He dredged up a smile. "I have been Eric Sanders since the operation. That's why I turned toward the door. You see, Carlos, I have been acting-out my role of Joe Darcey in order to trap you. If you will open that door, I think you will find visitors. For instance, the police."

"Indeed?" Carlos' lips twitched. "I think you are lying."

"Open the door."

For a moment Carlos shifted his burning eyes. Eric realized the man was not going to move. This instant was his only chance. With one frantic sweep, he hurled the lamp from the table. He crashed as Carlos' gun roared. In the after-echo came the malignant swish of flaming oil from the broken lamp. In the instant of darkness leaped a crimson glow of flame, smearing the damp face of Carlos with a shadowy light. Eric leaped, overturning the table. The gun roared again and the slug stung the wall like a vicious asp. The flames leaped higher toward the dusty wall. Carlos' gun kept hammering. Eric kept ducking, moving, hurling chairs,

too pressed to draw his own gun. Suddenly an empty metallic click came from Carlos' gun.

The bullets were spent! Eric closed in. He hurled a left into the lax mouth and felt teeth crumble. He drove a right between the eyes, and blood ripped from the nostrils. A roar broke from Carlos' throat. His arm went up. The gun flashed in the flame-light. Eric hurled another fist into the soft face. Just as it buried itself in flesh, the descending gun-butt smashed against his skull. A bright sheet of agony filmed his eyes. He staggered. Suddenly a maze, a torrent, a plunging flood roared through his skull.

He saw Carlos falling. And then he saw a turtle burning in the night. He saw a scotch-and-soda drifting through space. A beautiful girl was crying. He wanted to scream. Something horrible beyond comprehension was happening. But he could not scream. He could do nothing. He could only sway on his hands and knees and then something seemed to lift its weight in his brain. Fire was all around him. Fire.

"But— What in hell—" He saw Carlos. Carlos was unconscious on the floor. "How in hell did—" The flame touched his fingers. He jerked and started crawling. No time to save Carlos. Only time to get out. Too bad. Carlos was going to burn. But it was that way. It had to happen someday. To everybody.

*To everybody but Joe. It wouldn't happen to Joe . . . Joe was smart.*

He staggered to his feet, hurled the door open, and slammed it shut behind him. Through the darkness he moved with instinct toward the stairs. Up the stairs. Into the building above the bar. And at last he wiped his face. Blood. He was bleeding. Somebody had cocked him. Maybe the same guy who'd nailed Carlos. But they hadn't gotten Joe . . .

Too bad about Carlos. But it left things simple. Just Joe, now . . .

He laughed. "Sweet ermine." He spit blood and felt his pocket. "Yeah. Didn't lose my gun." He pulled himself straight and walked out into the dark street. Somebody was calling someone.

Joe stopped. A phoney-looking little patsy was climbing out of a car. Damned if he wasn't coming toward him. Had a goatee.

"Eric! Wait! Are you hurt? Did anything—"

"What's the matter, gramp. Lose your cane?"

"Uh? Huh?" The little guy halted and glared. "What was that?"

"Take a walk. You make me itchy."

"Eric, you— Oh, my God, no! Eric, listen! Come with—"

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## FRANCIS K. ALLAN

"Take your paws off— Why, you even got a gun! You should be careful. Things happen to guys like you. Like this." He grabbed the goatee, jerked it until the little man screamed, he dropped a left across the little guy's belt-buckle. He left the little guy in the gutter. Crazy little guy. Even had himself a gun . . .

He left the cab and took the elevator to his penthouse. There was a lot to do. A lot to do fast. Carlos was dead. Move in quick, he was thinking. Lost, Alberto, and Linke . . . Get rid of them. He laughed. He'd always wanted to kill them. Get rid of them, and the rest would be weet ermine.

"Get Lost on the phone," he said to Freddie as he entered the penthouse. He hurried into the bedroom, pulling off his soiled suit. He stopped, stared, and a crooked smile rose to his lips.

"Well, damned if it isn't. Little Carolyn," he said.

"I've been so worried. I didn't— Oh! You've been hurt!"

"But not enough to hurt," he sing-songed. He threw off his shirt. Come back for dough, maybe?"

"But I—" There was a harsh silence. "Eric. Eric, look at me," she whispered.

"Now, where in hell do you get that name?" He stared at her. "Beat it, sweetheart. You give me itches. I don't want any of—"

Her eyes stopped him. They crumpled into terrible clarity. Her fingers pressed her cheeks. She screamed. Joe swore. He took three steps across the room and slapped her until her dark hair danced.

"Get out!" he commanded. She looked at him. She took one step toward the door. Without a sound she slid to the floor. Joe swore again with his hands on his hips. He left her there and changed his clothes, bathed his face. Freddie was calling: Lost was on the telephone.

"I want a meeting in an hour," Joe said bluntly.

"But I— The boys thought—"

"This is important. It— It's straight from the Number and damned important. Bring any records that could get hot. And not to the Caravan. Go to the pier. I'll be there within—"

"But I want to meet at the Caravan."

"I said the pier. The Number wants the pier. Get to the pier!"

"Yes," Lost said gloomily. Joe slapped down the telephone and paced the room. There was concrete at the pier. Lost never carried a gun. Nor Alberto. Linke would be easy. There would be three shots at the end of the long black shed. Then the concrete. Three splashes in the water tomorrow night, after

## ALIAS MR. SATAN

the concrete had set. That would be it. And after that? . . . Joe laughed and whispered, "The sweetest ermine in the world. Why not?"

He kept pacing. "The Hell with the operations and the brain-stuff with the girls. Too damned much theory. Just play with Carlos' money. Use the place in Mexico, sure. But get rid of that crack-pot scientist-surgeon down there. One sure slug for him. Remember that, Joe," he told himself. He remembered Rick Garazan and stood still.

Rick. . . Rick had tried to kill him. Funny. . . It seemed a long time ago. He couldn't remember everything. Rick had tried to kill him. It had been in this room. Maybe Rick had moved him to the warehouse and called Carlos. Something. . . Hard to figure. But he would have to take care of Rick, too.

He looked at his watch. He looked at the gun and frowned. It wasn't his. He went into the bedroom. Carolyn was standing across the room. Her lip was cut. Her eyes were dead embers of blackness. He started to reach in the drawer for his own gun.

"What are you going to do?" she whispered starkly.

"You have that curious look, sweetheart. In fact," he murmured, "you look like somebody who might have been listening through a door."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am wondering," he said softly. "I didn't plan on this. I—"

"Eric! Joe! Don't—"

"Drop it!" a voice commanded. Before Joe could move, a stinging blow cracked across his wrist. The gun spun across the floor. He jerked around. A couple of guys—cops, sure—were looking. And that phony patsy with the beard was looking too. There were plenty of guns in sight.

Joe drew a long breath and let it out slowly. "Looks like a party's building up, huh?"

Carolyn gave a soft cry and rushed to the little guy. "It's happened! He's gone back—back to the way he was," she sobbed. "I heard him—on the telephone and talking to himself. Something about Mexico and a scientist and . . . and—"

"Yes," the little guy said tightly. "The detectives tore Carlos' apartment to pieces. They found his diary and a certain manuscript."

Then he motioned the police aside and walked slowly forward. His eyes were like an owl's, Joe thought. Hard and shiny, yet deep. He just stood there looking at Joe.

"This is a game, maybe?" Joe asked.

"Yes. A game. A terribly important game for you, my friend." He picked up the gun

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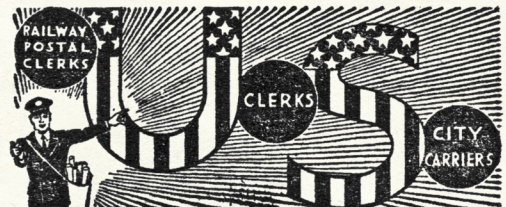
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## FRANCIS K. ALLAN

and handed it to one cop. He gave his own gun to the cop, then nodded to Carolyn. "I want all of you to step into the next room. I will call if I need you."

"But—" one cop started. The little man gestured. Slowly they went out.

"Now we are all alone. We can talk frankly," the little man said.

"What do you have in mind, gramp?" Joe asked ironically.

"A portion of Carlos Orlando's diary was read to me over the telephone. I know his plans—or what they were. He was criminally insane in the most diabolical way."

"Okay. You tell me. What did his little diary say?" Joe asked warily.

"It told that he had more money than he could ever spend. It told how he hated people—mainly beautiful women. He hated them because they had always scorned him, had been sickened by his advances. Beautiful women were the only luxuries his money would not buy as he wished. So his brain became twisted with the long-growing idea of punishment. And his ugly brain had always dreamed of crime. He was dreaming of crime in Mexico two years ago when he met a man named Eric Sanders. Do you know that man?"

"No."

"Carlos was not like the usual man who thinks of crime. Carlos had the imagination of a devil-genius. He dreamed of a world wherein nothing but crime existed. He dreamed of creating a disease of evil. He dreamed of destroying all virtues. He loved such dreams. And in Mexico he found Sanders, a young man ill with fever. He half-hypnotized Sanders and dictated a book about a man of evil. Sanders brought the book to New York. He was injured. When he regained consciousness, he lived under the delusion that he *was* the man of evil in his book. Carlos came to New York, doubtless following Sanders, and heard of the accident. Next he heard that Sanders was calling himself by another name—the name of the man of evil. Suddenly Carlos was seized with a grotesque inspiration. He wrote it in his diary. His inspiration. Would it be possible to *create* totally criminal brains? Not just an average thief, or pick-pocket, or even a murderer. But why not, by tampering with the brain, create a person who had no conception of good, and who lived to do nothing but evil? . . . And then, Carlos thought, why not make all such criminals from beautiful women? *Because he hated women!* The idea became a giant, bursting from his head. You know the idea?"

"You are the guy who's talking," Joe said dully, "You tell me." This little guy gave him

## ALIAS MR. SATAN

an itchy feeling. Sweat touched his lips.

The little man continued. "Carlos, in his criminal insanity, made his plan. He would leave this country. Liquidate his wealth. He would move to a desolate region of Mexico and set-up his grotesque little kingdom. He would find a surgeon who would share his own mad dream. And there the minds of beautiful women would be changed. Oh, many would die in the experiments. It might take a long time. But someday, somehow, a way would be found to create a whole race of beautiful women of evil. Carlos went wild with his dream. You are remembering?"

"I—" He mopped his lips slowly. "Yeah. You know. You know it." He was frightened—deeply, strangely frightened.

"For the last sixteen months, Carlos Orlando laid his plans. He began selling his holdings in this country. He read of a surgeon who had been placed in an asylum for trying to plant human brains in dogs. That was the man he wanted. And you, Joe, remember? . . . You stole that mad surgeon from the asylum. He is now in Mexico at Carlos' retreat, waiting to begin."

"Yes. Yes. I know." He closed his eyes. He wanted to kill this man, but he could not move to lift a hand.

"And you were to be Carlos' agent. You, with your smile and dark eyes, would bring the beautiful women to him. You were to be the Devil's Agent. You have already sent one girl down there. Joan Linden. She is to be the first. Oh, all of this is in the diary."

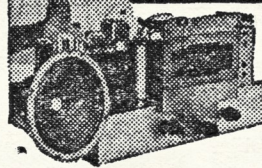
"Shut up! Shut up, damn you! I hate talking!" Joe screamed.

"Why are you so disturbed?" The little man leaned closer. "Haven't you been sick, Joe?" He waited. "Haven't you been sick?"

"I don't know! I don't give a damn!"

"You must break your own spell! Listen! Things like this—think! A burning turtle! A turtle is burning in the night! Remember?"

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## FRANCIS K. ALLAN

"I— I don't—"  
"A beautiful girl is crying! Remember!"  
"She's crying. She— She— Burn it, burn it, burn it! I— Oh, God, what am I saying! I'm crazy! I hate you! I want to kill you!"

The little man stared, then suddenly turned toward the door. "Carolyn. . ." He whispered. She nodded at last. Joe watched this girl he had married and hated. She came into the room and sat down on the bed. She picked up a pillow and patted it gently in her lap.

"Nice Vicky. Pretty Vicky. . ." she whispered.

"Are you crazy, too?" Joe demanded.  
"But this is my dog. You gave her to me for Christmas. Don't you remember?"

Joe swallowed and wet his lips. "You're crazy," he whispered. "That is a pillow."  
"No," said the little man. "It is a dog. And Carolyn loves it. *What will you do?*"

Then everything was nightmare. He was rushing, panting. The window was up, now. This thing of softness was outside on the ledge. Then he was laughing wildly. "Going to fall . . . fall . . . fall—"

It started to slip. It was going to fall! Carolyn screamed.

Something seemed to explode in his head. He screamed too, and leaped forward. The pillow vanished and went hurtling down.

**THEY WERE** looking at him. Carolyn and Luling. Something was wrong with their faces—something strained and gray.

"Yes? . . . Can you speak, now?" Luling whispered.

"I. . . Of course. What— How did I get here. We—"

"What is your name?" the words came with a sob from Carolyn.

"Why, darling, I told you. I explained. You don't need to be afraid. I am Eric Sanders. I— Carolyn, why are you crying?"

"You *whipped* it! And there is a theory, Eric," Luling said. "If you can ever whip those things yourself, you've whipped them forever." He straightened and held out his hand. "There is nothing more to worry about. We got them at the pier. With proof. And as a retired medical examiner on the police force, my explanation will carry some weight. And so, I say goodnight."

He walked out. Carolyn touched his cheeks. "Eric, I want to ask you one thing. A silly thing, but it will tell me something. Do you want me to have a dog? A dog . . . like Vicky?"

"Of course. I love dogs. Why?"  
"Oh, nothing. Nothing," she said softly.  
"It told me what I had to know."

THE END



## CORPSE COLLATERAL

(Continued from page 51)

a fingerprint on it when we found it. Someone wiped it clean. Whoever killed him set the clock back."

Masters hesitated and shook his head impatiently. "That didn't make much difference, anyhow. From the condition of the body, the room temperature, and other facts we know he was killed at about eleven. Forget the clock. It isn't important."

Desperately I tried to think. I'd done too good a job with the clock! Yet it didn't seem to make any difference to them. There was something else.

"I don't know anything about fingerprints," I said. "It must have been some hardened criminal who knows about fingerprints and—"

"That's right," Masters interrupted again. "You don't know anything about fingerprints. You don't know that we can pick up prints from paper. Especially crisp, new bank notes. A ten per cent solution of silver nitrate does the job nicely. It did in this case. The prints check with yours we have on file!"

"I might have handled them without knowing," I objected. "Anyhow, how do you know those thousand dollar bills were some of the ones that were stolen? I don't see how you can assume that I had anything to do with it just because I may have handled some bank notes!"

"The man who bought the ranch was a careful man. He made a list of the serial numbers of those bank notes. In case he were held up while carrying them there'd be a chance to recover them. Out of courtesy he gave the list to Ordman when he paid Ordman the money and saw Ordman put the list in his wallet."

A cold fear seized me as I saw Masters' confident smile. I had destroyed that list. How could they know the numbers?

Masters answered that without my asking. "When the buyer made his list, he wrote on a pad with a sharp pencil. Fortunately he hadn't



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## DAVE SANDS

used the pad again, so the figures were imprinted on the blank sheet below the one he used. We got them easily. We know where three of the notes are. We're looking for the others. Will you submit to a search, or do I have to arrest you?"

I breathed a little more easily. The rest of the thousand dollar notes were safely hidden in my room. "I'm not afraid to be searched. I didn't do it," I said. I stood up, but before Masters could start his search, the telephone rang. It was for him.

He listened a moment and then thanked the person at the other end of the line. He looked at me and a tight smile touched his lips. "That was one of my deputies," he said. "He just found twenty-two thousand dollar bills scattered between leaves of the Gideon bible in your hotel room."

I sat down in the chair again. It was the only thing to do. My legs wouldn't hold me any longer. "How did you know I—that I was the one who—?" I faltered.

"His account book indicated blackmail. So we looked for someone who might be blackmailed. We learned from the ranch buyer that there was a list of the serial numbers in the wallet. Yet the list was stolen with the money. So we suspected it was someone who would know at a glance that the numbers were currency serial numbers and not just a list of numbers. The average layman wouldn't know that at a glance and wouldn't be likely to take the list. A man working in a bank would spot the list for what it was and realize it would be dangerous in our hands. The initials 'P.C.' in the accounts book indicated definitely a man who worked in a bank— you."

He stopped speaking for a moment, smiling at me grimly. Confusion swept my mind into turmoil.

"Come on," Masters said. "We'll start the long trip you're going to take."

I tried to get up, but the trembling was too great. It was as if the sinews and muscles and bones of my legs had dissolved, as if there was nothing there but water. "Wait," I whispered. "Wait until I can walk—"

He gave me a break. He waited.

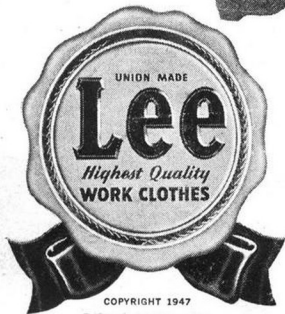
Where I am now they say that they don't wait. If your legs won't carry you down that hall to the blank door and the chair behind it—the chair with the straps—they carry you.

I can't stand. The priest is talking, but I don't hear him. I'm trying to bring the strength back so that I can stand and walk, but I can't. My time is running out and I can't set it back.

I can hear them coming for me.

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