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MAGAZINE

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the AX

By
A. A. FAIR

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DETECTIVE NOVEL MAGAZINE

Vol. XVI, No. 1

AUGUST, 1945

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GIVE 'EM THE AX

By A. A. FAIR

Back from the Navy, it takes Donald Lam just half a day to dig up a murder case—and he and Bertha Cool discover that a clever blackmailer can make a fortune until the victim grows tired of paying and uses a hatchet instead of cash! 11

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Thrilling Short Stories

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The mystery of a phony amnesia victim, a metal dog and a strange corpse

THE POUTER PIGEON MURDER Ted Coughlan 84

A little bird tells Judge Wayne Wright about a grim crime

And

THE BULLETIN BOARD A Department 6

Next Issue: YOU ONLY HANG ONCE, a Complete Johnny Knight
and Sid Ames Mystery Novel by H. W. RODEN

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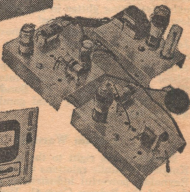
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The BULLETIN BOARD



JOHNNY KNIGHT didn't hear the door open or close. He was sprawled in a swivel chair, his feet planted on top of his desk, his morning newspaper opened at the sports page.

Then some sixth sense warned him that he had a visitor. He let his eyes crawl over the top of the newspaper and suddenly found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver.

The face behind the gun was startlingly vivid. He had a chin and a mouth like a girl's. His hair was blond and wavy. And the pupils of his eyes were like pin points. A hophead, Johnny thought angrily, and started to rise.

"Get your hat," the stranger ordered. His voice was low and even, yet there was menace behind it. Johnny didn't like the ugly, deepening glitter in his eyes. The fellow was playing for keeps!

Johnny got his hat. They moved out of Johnny's office, walked down the stairs and out through the lobby. There was a Chevy coupe at the curb with an ex-pug at the wheel. Johnny was pushed into the car. They drove rapidly to the Sundown Club where Vitala Barretti, local gambling czar, was waiting for them.

A Grim Warning

Barretti came right to the point. Johnny Knight did public relations work for Marvin Reynolds, powerful industrialist and president of the Reform Council. Reynolds had closed down several of Barretti's businesses, but when he initiated a campaign against the Sundown Club, Barretti was ready for war.

"They call it off and keep out of here," Barretti warned, "or somebody gets hurt. Bad."

Johnny listened to Barretti, then told him to wash his own dirty linen and keep his gunsels away from him. After that he strode out of the club and thumbed a lift back to town.

On the way the Chevy coupe, its exhaust roaring, raced past the truck in which Johnny was riding. Johnny went directly to his office.

When he opened the door he saw a man sitting in the swivel chair. He was slouched way down on his spine, a soft hat pushed well forward on his head with the brim resting on the bridge of his nose. A gun lay on the desk.

Johnny yelled, but received no answer. He moved around the desk and shook the man. Immediately the man folded up like an accordion and pitched off the chair. His hat rolled away. There was a gaping hole in the middle of his forehead!

Although Johnny didn't realize it, this was only the first stop on a deadly merry-go-round of violence and murder that headlines the speedy two-fisted \$2.00 William Morrow & Company mystery novel, starring Johnny Knight and Sid Ames, which appears complete in our next issue:

YOU ONLY HANG ONCE

By

H. W. RODEN

With a start of surprise Johnny recognized the dead man as a lawyer by the name of Berenton with offices on the same floor. And suddenly he remembered Barretti's warning that if Reynolds and the Reform Council didn't leave him alone things would begin to happen.

Had they begun to happen already? There was no time to find out now. But one thing he knew. He couldn't afford to have Berenton's body found in his office. So he called his pal, Sid Ames, a private investigator.

Ames arrived in a hurry. Together they searched Berenton—and discovered a billfold containing fifty thousand dollars. Johnny placed the money in an envelope and put

(Continued on page 8)



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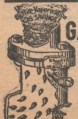
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THE BULLETIN BOARD

(Continued from page 6)

it in his pocket until he had a chance to turn it over to the police.

Fifty Grand Steal

Then Johnny and Sid picked up Berenton and dragged him to his own office. They had just stepped inside the door when the ceiling seemed to fall on Johnny's head. Ten minutes later he came to with Sid Ames beside him. They had both been sapped—and Berenton's body was gone and so was the fifty grand!

They rushed back to Johnny's office. A surprise awaited them there. Berenton was back in the swivel chair!

Johnny and Sid stumbled over to the desk, then halted with the blood freezing in their veins. Far off in the distance, but racing closer with each passing second, came the dread sound of a police siren.

Somebody had set the stage and pulled up the curtain whether Johnny and Sid were ready or not. From that moment Johnny and Sid found themselves playing a grim game of tag with the cops and a ruthless killer.

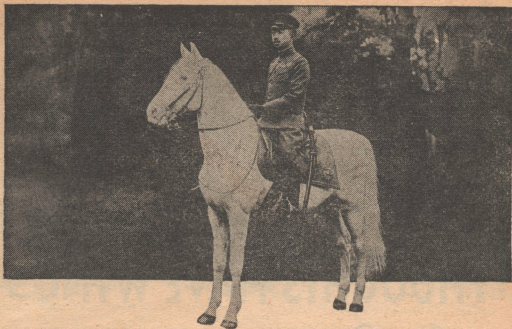
Even though Johnny knew that Berenton had once been Barrett's attorney there didn't seem to be any reason for the murder or any connection between Berenton and himself.

(Continued on page 95)

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LET'S GET THE ADMIRAL HIS HORSE!



Official U. S. Navy Photo

Admiral Halsey has his eye on a fine white horse called Shirayuki.

Some time ago, at a press conference, he expressed the hope that one day soon he could ride it.

The chap now in Shirayuki's saddle is Japan's Emperor—Hirohito.

He is the ruler of as arrogant, treacherous, and vicious a bunch of would-be despots as this earth has ever seen.

The kind of arrogance shown by Tojo—who was going to dictate peace from the White

House . . . remember?

Well, it's high time we finished this whole business. High time we got the Emperor off his high horse, and gave Admiral Halsey his ride.

The best way for us at home to have a hand in this clean-up is to support the 7th War Loan.

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TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a positive demonstration that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

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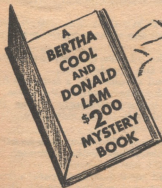
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GIVE 'EM the AX

BY
A.A. FAIR



A clever blackmailer can make a fortune—until the victim grows tired of paying, and uses a hatchet instead of cash!

CHAPTER I

AS I got off the elevator and started down the corridor, the old familiar surroundings took me back to that first day when I'd made that same journey, looking for a job.

At that time, the sign on the door had read,

B. COOL, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS. Now it read, COOL & LAM, with the name B. COOL in one corner, and DONALD LAM down in the other. There was something reassuring about seeing my name on the door. It was as though I really had something to come back to.

I pushed open the door.

Elsie Brand was pounding the keyboard

Back from the Navy, it Takes Donald Lam

of the typewriter. She turned and looked up over her shoulder, her face automatically assuming the welcoming smile.

I saw the expression jerk off her face. Her eyes widened.

"Donald!"

"Hello, Elsie."

"Donald! My, I'm glad to see you. Where did you come from?"

"South Seas, and various places."

"How long are you . . . When do you have to go back?"

"I don't."

"What happened?"

"Bugs—tropical bugs. Okay if I take it easy for a while, live in a cool climate, and don't get too excited. Bertha in there?"

I jerked my head toward the door of the office that had B. COOL, PRIVATE, lettered on the door.

Elsie nodded.

"How is she?"

"Same as ever."

"How's her weight?"

"Still keeping it at one hundred sixty-five, and hard as barbed wire."

"Making any money?"

"She did for a while, and then she got in sort of a rut."

"Have you been sitting there hammering that typewriter all the time I've been gone?"

She laughed. "No, of course not."

"What do you mean?"

"Only eight hours a day."

"Seems like pretty much of a rut to get into. I thought you'd have quit the job and gone into an airplane factory."

"Didn't you get my letters?"

"They didn't say anything about staying on the job."

She avoided my eyes. "I don't know. Guess it's my contribution to the war effort."

"Loyalty to the job?"

"Not to the job," she said, "so much as—Oh, I don't know, Donald. You were out there fighting and—"

The inner office buzzer made noise.

Elsie picked up the receiver on the telephone, switched it over to Bertha Cool's office, said, "Yes, Mrs. Cool."

Bertha was so mad the receiver couldn't contain all of her voice. I could hear the rasping, angry tones over where I was sitting. "Elsie, I've told you to talk with clients only long enough to find out what they want, then call me. I'll do the talking for the outfit."

"This isn't a client, Mrs. Cool."

"Who is it?"

"A—a friend."

Bertha's voice rose a full octave. "My God! Do I pay you to hold social soirees in the office? For God's sake . . . a friend! . . . A . . . Well, I'll soon fix that!"

The slam of the receiver in Bertha's office threatened to pull the telephone out by the roots. We heard the pound of two quick steps, then the door was jerked open and Bertha stood on the threshold, her glittering little eyes sharp with anger, her big jaw thrust out.

She flashed a swift look to get my bearings, then came barging down on me like a battleship.

Halfway there, her eyes managed to get the message to her angry brain.

"Why you little devil!" she said.

FOR a moment she was glad to see me, then you could see her catch herself. She whirled to Elsie and said, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was trying to, Mrs. Cool, when you hung up."

"Humph!" Bertha snorted her into silence. She turned to me. "It's a wonder you wouldn't send a wire."

I used the only argument that would impress itself on Bertha's mind. "Wires cost money."

Even that didn't dent her. "Well, you could have sent one of those tourist messages and . . ."

Bertha broke off, her eyes on the frosted glass panel of the corridor door.

The head and shoulders of a feminine figure were silhouetted against the glass, a chic slender woman, evidently young, the head perked slightly to one side, giving it a jaunty appearance.

Bertha muttered, "Clients always do catch me in the outer office. Looks as though we weren't busy."

She grabbed up a bunch of papers from Elsie's desk, started pawing through them. But the visitor didn't come in.

There was a long matter of seconds which seemed minutes during which the silhouette was pasted against the frosted glass, then abruptly the shadow went on down the hall.

Bertha Cool slammed the papers down on the desk. "There you are," she said. "That's the way things have been going lately. The little tramp will probably go on down the hall to the Transcontinental Detective Agency and spill her troubles there."

I said, "Cheer up, Bertha. Perhaps she's coming back."

Just Half a Day to Dig Up a Murder Case!

"Well," Bertha snorted, "something about the place didn't seem right to her. It didn't sound like a business office. Elsie, you start pounding that typewriter. Donald you come in the private office. Remember, Elsie, if she comes in she'll be nervous. She'll sit down for a minute, then pretend she's forgotten something and jump up and run out, and

inside. Let Elsie get to work on that typewriter."

Elsie Brand flashed a glance at me and let me see the quiet amusement in her eyes, then she was pounding away again at the typewriter.

We entered Bertha Cool's private office. Bertha strode around the desk and slammed



Bertha's eyes fixed on the frosted glass panel (CHAPTER I)

that'll be the last we ever see of her. She's wearing a little hat on one side of her head with a . . ."

"I got a good look at her silhouette," Elsie said.

"All right. The minute she comes in let me know. Don't stall around. Reach for the telephone. I can't go out in the corridor and grab 'em the way they do when a customer stops in front of a pawn shop. Donald, come

herself down in a creaking swivel chair. I sat on the arm of a big overstuffed chair.

BERTHA looked me over, said, "You've toughened up, Donald."

"I've been toughened."

"You look taller."

"I'm not taller. It's the way they made me stand."

There was a moment's silence. Bertha had

an ear cocked for noises in the outer office but there was no cessation in the pounding of Elsie Brand's typewriter.

"Business not so good?" I asked.

"Terrible!" Bertha grunted.

"What's the matter with it?"

"Damned if I know. Before you came along, I was making a living with a lot of shadowing jobs, divorce cases, stuff of that sort. Mostly I got my business by catering to the domestic relations work that other agencies wouldn't handle. Then you came along. First rattle out of the box you threw me into the big time—more money, more risk, more excitement, more clients—and then you enlisted in the Navy and for a while I carried on all right. Then something happened."

"What's the matter? Don't people come in any more?"

"They come in," Bertha said, "but somehow I don't impress them. They don't do things my way, and I can't do them your way. I'm sort of a hybrid."

"What do you mean, you can't do them my way?"

"Look at that chair you're sitting on," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"After you became a partner you went down and spent a hundred dollars on that chair. Your theory was that you can't win a client's confidence when he's uneasy, and that you can't get a person to confide in you when he's uncomfortable. You let the client sit down in that chair, and he settles back and relaxes, and starts talking."

"Well, doesn't he?"

"He doesn't do it for me."

I said, "Perhaps you don't make the people feel comfortable."

Bertha's eyes glittered. "Why the hell should I? We paid a hundred bucks for the chair to do that. If you think I'm going to squander a hundred dollars just to . . ."

She broke off in midsentence.

I realized that Elsie Brand had quit typing.

A moment later the buzzer sounded on Bertha Cool's phone.

Bertha snatched the receiver off the cradle, said, "Yes?" then in a low voice, "is that the woman who . . . What's her name? . . . All right, send her in."

Bertha hung up the telephone and said, "Get out of that chair. She's coming in."

"Who?"

"Her name's Miss Georgia Rushe. She . . ."

Elsie Brand opened the door and said as though granting a concession, "Mrs. Cool will see you immediately."

Georgia Rushe weighed about a hundred and fourteen. She wasn't as young as I'd thought when I had sized up the shadow on the door—somewhere around thirty-one or thirty-two, and she didn't carry her head on

one side. That cocking to one side of the head that we'd seen must have meant that she was listening.

Bertha Cool beamed at her and said in a voice that dripped sweetness, "Won't you be seated, Miss Rushe?"

Miss Rushe looked at me.

She had dark, emotional eyes, full lips, high cheek bones, a smooth olive skin, and very dark hair. The way she looked at me you'd have thought she was about to turn and run out of the office.

Bertha said, "This is Donald Lam, my partner."

Miss Rushe said, "Oh!"

"Come in, come in," Bertha invited. "Sit down in that chair, Miss Rushe."

She still hesitated.

I took a notebook from my pocket, said casually, "Well, I'll go cover that matter we were talking about—or," I added as an afterthought, turning to Miss Rushe, "do you want me to sit in on this?"

I made my tone sound bored. I heard Bertha gasp, but Georgia Rushe smiled at me, said, "I think I'd like to have you sit in on it," and walked over and settled herself in the big chair.

Bertha's face was beaming. "Yes, yes, Miss Rushe. What is it?"

"I want some help."

"Well, that's what we're here for."

She crossed her knees, carefully smoothed her skirt down, her eyes avoiding those of Bertha.

She had nice legs.

Bertha said enticingly, "Anything we can do . . ."

Georgia Rushe hastily averted her eyes.

I scribbled a note to Bertha Cool. "Quit being so eager. People want results. No one wants to hire a big-boned woman detective who's all sticky with sweetness."

I tore the page out and slid it across the desk to Bertha.

Georgia Rushe watched Bertha pick up the note and read it.

Bertha's face got red. She crumpled the note, slammed it in the wastebasket, glowered at me.

"Okay, Miss Rushe," I said casually, "what's your trouble?"

Georgia Rushe took a deep breath and said, "I don't want to be censured."

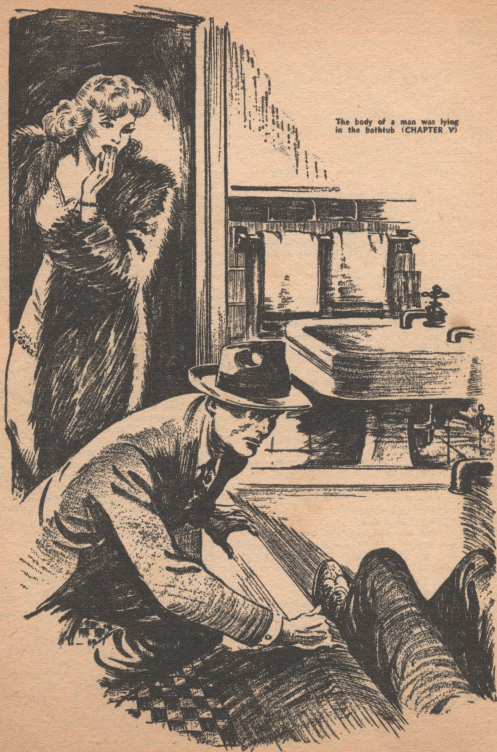
"You won't."

SHE glanced apprehensively at Bertha and said, "A woman might not be as tolerant."

Bertha said coyly, "Oh, my dear," then suddenly remembering my note jerked herself back into character and said abruptly, "What's on your mind?"

"To begin with," Georgia Rushe said determinedly, "I'm a home wrecker."

The body of a man was lying
in the bathtub (CHAPTER VI)



"Got enough money to pay our bills?" Bertha asked.

"Yes, of course, otherwise I wouldn't be here."

Bertha said grimly, "Go ahead and wreck 'em all you want, dearie. What do you want us to do? Scout out good homes for you to wreck? We can do it."

Miss Rushe laughed nervously, then said after a moment, "I'm glad you're taking it that way, Mrs. Cool."

Bertha said, "Homes aren't wrecked. They wreck themselves."

Georgia Rushe said, "I've been with Mr. Crail for nearly four years now."

"Who's Mr. Crail?" Bertha asked.

"Ellery Crail, head of the Crail Venetian Blind Company."

"I've heard of the company."

"Since the war we've taken over a lot of contracts in wood cartridge containers, things of that sort."

"How long's he been married?"

"Eight months."

I settled back and lit a cigarette.

Georgia Rushe said, "I started working in the personnel department. Ellery's wife died shortly after I came to work. I don't know how much he loved her, but he certainly missed her when she was gone. He's a great big, loyal, stouthearted man who is so fair and square himself that he just can't imagine anyone being otherwise."

She hesitated for a moment, then sighed deeply, and went on, "After a while he began to get over the first numbing shock of the grief, and—well, I saw a little something of him."

"You mean he took you out?" Bertha asked.

"We went out to dinner once or twice, yes."

"Call at your apartment?"

"No. He isn't that sort."

"When did his present wife meet him?"

Georgia Rushe said, "I was run down from overwork. Mr. Crail thought I should take a long vacation. When I came back he was married."

"Slipped a fast one over on you?"

"He was the victim of a shrewd, scheming, hypocritical, sniveling individual, if you can flatter a negative personality like that by calling her an individual."

"How did it happen?"

"It all began one night when Mr. Crail was driving his automobile back from work. He doesn't see too well at night, and it had been raining and the streets were slippery. Even so, I don't think it was entirely his fault, although he tries to make out that it was. There was a coupé immediately ahead of him, and the coupé came to a sudden stop. The brake light wasn't working. Of course, Irma

swore that she put out her hand, but she'd swear to anything that would feather her own nest."

"Irma is the girl?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"Mr. Crail bumped the back of her car—not particularly hard so far as the damage to the automobile was concerned. Fifty dollars would have covered both cars."

"Personal injuries?" Bertha asked.

"Some sort of a spinal injury. Ellery started apologizing just as soon as he saw the car was operated by a woman. And Irma Begley looked up at Ellery's big strong face, and into his sympathetic eyes and determined she was going to marry him—and she didn't lose any time."

"The sympathy racket?" Bertha asked.

"A little bit of everything. Ellery was lonely. He'd grown to depend on me a lot more than he realized, and then I'd gone away. Afterwards, I found in the files a wire he had sent, asking me if I could possibly cut my vacation short and return. For some reason the wire was never delivered. As it was, he thought I simply hadn't answered."

I looked at my watch.

MISS RUSHE hurried on. "Well, Irma Begley was very nice about it, but she thought that Mr. Crail would prefer to have the car repaired himself so that he'd be certain he wasn't being victimized, so naturally with true magnanimity he had the whole car overhauled. Then he returned it to Irma, and by that time, Irma was beginning to have headaches so she went to see a doctor, and the doctor took X-rays, and then it appeared that her spine had been injured. And she was so brave and so sweet and so self-effacing about the whole business!

"Well, of course, Ellery insisted on footing bills, and I returned from a month's vacation to find my boss on his honeymoon!"

"How long ago?"

"Six months."

"What happened then?"

"Well, he was particularly embarrassed when he was with me. He felt that he owed me some sort of an explanation and yet he was too much of a gentleman to say even a word about it."

"What did you do?" Bertha asked.

"I was too angry and hurt to make things easy for him. I told him I was going to quit as soon as he could get someone else to take my place. Well, he couldn't get anyone to take my place, and then he asked me to please stay with him and—and, well, I did."

"When did you determine you were going to be a home wrecker?"

"I don't know. At first I was completely crushed. I didn't realize how much I was in

love with Ellery until after—well, after things seemed to be irrevocably broken."

Bertha said, "I'm trying to find out the facts."

"Well, after all, Mrs. Cool, I don't know as it's important, because that doesn't enter into it except incidentally. I didn't want you to find out about it afterward and start getting upstage on me."

"But you're going after Mr. Crail?"

"I've made up my mind that I'm not going to put any obstacle in the way of his going after me."

"And he's showing some indications?"

"He's dazed. He's wandering around in a fog."

"And beginning to gravitate toward you for guidance?"

Georgia Rushe met Bertha Cool's eyes. "Let's be frank about it, Mrs. Cool. I think he's realized that he's made a terrific mistake—and I think he realized it very shortly after I came back."

"But he's too loyal to do anything about it?"

"Yes."

"Yet you think he may do something?"

"He may."

"And if he does, you're going to make it easy for him?"

Georgia Rushe said, "That little scheming trollop stole him from me. I'm going to steal him back."

Bertha said, "All right, we have the background. Go ahead and tell us what's on your mind."

"Do you know anything about the Stanberry Building?"

Bertha shook her head, then said, "Wait a minute. It's out on Seventh Street, isn't it?"

Georgia Rushe nodded. "A four story building—stories on the lower floor, offices on the second floor, the Rimley Rendezvous on the third floor and apartments for Mr. Rimley and his executives on the fourth floor."

"What about the Stanberry Building?"

"She wants Ellery to buy it for her."

"Why the Stanberry Building?" I asked.

"I think it has something to do with the night club."

"What is there about the night club that makes the building such a marvelous investment?"

"I don't know. Pittman Rimley has four or five places scattered around town. I think he's the only one who's been able to make a success out of combining a lunch trade, swinging into an afternoon pickup business, and then operating as a night club."

"What do you mean a pickup business?"

"Afternoons," she said. "Women gravitate to these joints for a cocktail and there's dance music and pickups."

"Crail has money?" I asked.

"Yes—quite a bit."

"And just what do you want us to do?"

She said, "I want you to find out what's back of it all. I want you to find out what's going on."

Bertha Cool said, "All that's going to cost you money."

"How much?"

"Two hundred dollars for a starter."

Georgia Rushe was coldly businesslike. "To just what does that two hundred dollars entitle me, Mrs. Cool?"

Bertha hesitated.

I said, "It entitles you to ten days work."

"Less expenses," Bertha snapped, hastily.

"What can you find out in that time?"

Bertha said, "We're detectives, not clairvoyants."

Georgia Rushe opened her purse. "No one must know that I'm back of this," she said.

Bertha Cool nodded. Her greedy little eyes fastened on the purse.

Georgia Rushe took out a checkbook.

Bertha fairly shoved the fountain pen into her hand.

CHAPTER II



ERTHA helped herself to a cigarette, said to me, "Well, that's the way it goes."

"It's okay."

"Just a little piddling case for a woman who's eating her heart out, and has an exaggerated idea of what a detective agency can do."

"It's okay, Bertha."

"When you went away,"

Bertha said, "you'd got us into the big time stuff. You could take even the most insignificant little case, and before you got done it developed into big business and big money. Then after you left, I could take what seemed to be the biggest case and it would peter out into little business and little money. I did all right for a while. And then the bottom dropped out and it's been a whole procession of little stuff like this."

"Don't bother about it. I'll take over on this."

"What are you going to do?"

"Consult the Bureau of Vital Statistics, get whatever dope is available on the present Mrs. Crail, find out where she lived before she was married, try to find out why her sudden interest in the Stanberry Building."

"That's a lot of leg work," Bertha said.

"That's all marching is," I said, and walked out.

Elsie Brand looked up from her typewriter.

"Out for the day," I told her, "working on a case. I'll telephone in later on and see if there's anything new."

Elsie hesitated a minute as though trying to say something. Whatever it was she was going to say, she didn't get it out. She turned swiftly in her chair and hid her embarrassment over the keyboard of her typewriter.

I picked up the agency car from the parking station where we'd always kept it. The last eighteen months seemed like a dream. I was picking up the threads of life where I'd dropped them.

The statistical information showed that Ellery Crail was thirty-eight, Irma Begley twenty-seven; that Crail had been married once before and was a widower; that Irma Begley had not been married. She had lived at 1891 Latonia Boulevard.

It was a modest, four story, brick apartment house with a stucco front, and an ornate doorway. It bore the sign, *Maple Grove Apartments*, and a notice stating there was no vacancy. I rang the bell marked manager and had to wait for nearly five minutes.

The manager turned out to be a fleshy woman somewhere around forty. At the start, she was as belligerent as a big tank. Then I smiled at her and, after a moment, she smiled back at me and became kittenish.

"I'm so sorry. There isn't a vacancy in the place, and . . ."

"I wanted a little information about a woman who used to live here."

"What about her?"

"A Miss . . ." I made a great show of having forgotten the name, fished a notebook from my pocket and said, "A Miss Latham . . . No, that isn't the one. Begley, Irma Begley."

"She used to live here. She got married."

"Do you know whom she married?"

"No. She was rather uncommunicative."

"You were manager at the time?"

"That's right."

"Know anything about her—who her folks were? Where she came from, or anything?"

"No. She didn't even leave a forwarding address."

"Isn't that rather unusual?"

"Yes. They usually leave a forwarding address in case anything happens to come here."

I said, "Well, when she rented the apartment in the first place, she must have given some references?"

"Oh, yes."

"Suppose we could look them up?"

"Just what was your name?" she asked.

I smiled at her and said, "You won't believe me."

"Why not?"

"It's Smith."

"I don't."

"People seldom do."

"Won't you come in, Mr. Smith?"

"Thanks."

THE manager's apartment was on the ground floor and was overfurnished and smelled of sandalwood. There were too many pictures on the wall, too many chairs, too many tables and too many nicknacks.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Smith?"

"Thanks." I offered her a cigarette.

"Just why did you want to know?"

I said, "Shucks, I don't know. They never tell me. Just hand me a list of names, tell me to find out things. It may be she's applied for an insurance policy, or it might be an old bill, or perhaps she's inherited money and they're trying to locate her to close up an estate."

"She was a very nice girl," the manager said.

I blew out cigarette smoke and said, "Uh huh."

"Very quiet as I remember her. No wild parties."

"That's nice."

"She wasn't the type to have any unpaid bills."

"Then it can't be an unpaid bill," I said.

"But you don't know what it is?"

"That's right. Someone wants to know, that's all. That's my business, investigating. I get a dollar a name and furnish my own expenses."

She said, "I have a few people I'd like to know about."

"Give me their names. I'd have to turn them in through the office. There's some charge for a retainer. You have to guarantee so much business and, of course, they charge you more than a dollar. A dollar is my cut."

She said, "Well when you put it that way, it's not worth much to me to find them, because you can't get blood out of a turnip. Let me see what I can find."

She opened a drawer in a flat-topped desk, pulled out some cards and started riffling through them.

After a moment, she found the card she wanted, pulled it out, said, "That's right, Irma Begley. She lived at Three Ninety-two South Fremington Street before she came here."

"Give any references?" I asked.

"Two, Benjamin C. Cosgate, and Frank L. Glimson."

"Any address?"

The manager said, "It's a downtown business address—and that's all the information we have about her except that she paid her rent promptly."

"All right, that's all I need," I said.

The manager said, "If you can get enough

of them in a day, you should be able to make money at that."

I said, "You have to keep jumping around."

"Yes, I hadn't thought of that. How much information do you have to get?"

"Oh, enough to let them know whatever it is they want. Most of the time you can count on an average of forty-five minutes to a name. Well, I've got a couple of more names in the neighborhood."

"I hope you find what you want, Mr. Smith," she said.

"Thank you," I told her.

A telephone book in a near-by drugstore showed me that Benjamin C. Cosgate was a lawyer, Frank Glimson was a lawyer, and there was a firm of Cosgate & Glimson.

I started to call them, then postponed it until after I'd driven once more to the courthouse.

This time I looked at the Register of Actions, Plaintiff, and read through so many names that I all but passed up the one I wanted, but there it was: Irma Begley versus Philip E. Cullingdon. I made a note of the number of the case, told the deputy clerk I was a lawyer and asked for files on the case.

There was a neat little complaint, a demurrer, an amended complaint, a demurrer to an amended complaint, and a notice of dismissal. Attorneys for the plaintiff were Cosgate & Glimson.

I skimmed through the complaint. It stated that on the fifth day of April, 1942 while the plaintiff had been operating a motor vehicle in a careful and law-abiding manner, the defendant had so carelessly, negligently, and unlawfully driven and operated his automobile upon a certain public highway known as Wilshire Boulevard, that he had caused his said automobile to collide with the automobile driven by the plaintiff; that as a result of said collision, plaintiff had sustained a permanent injury of the spine which had necessitated the payment of doctor bills in the amount of two hundred and fifty dollars, nursing and medicine in the amount of eighty-five dollars and twenty cents, X-rays in an amount of seventy-five dollars and specialist fees in an amount of five hundred dollars; that plaintiff was permanently injured, and that the careless driving of the defendant's automobile as aforesaid was the sole and proximate cause of said injury. Wherefore, Plaintiff prayed judgment in an amount of fifty thousand dollars and costs.

The suit had been filed on the thirty-first day of March 1943.

I made a few notes from the papers, getting the names and addresses of the defendant's lawyers, and looked in the telephone book for Philip E. Cullingdon. I found him listed as a contractor and made a note of his residence. Then I went down the hall



"Get out of here," said the girl, placing a pack of cigarettes on the table (CHAPTER III)

to a telephone booth, called the office, found Bertha Cool was out, told Elsie Brand I was going to drop around for a cocktail at the Rimley Rendezvous; that if anything important turned up, Bertha could reach me there.

CHAPTER III



AT ONE time the Rendezvous idea had swept the country. Night clubs built up a fine afternoon trade, catering to women between thirty and forty who wanted romance. Some of these women were grass widows on the make. Some of them were married women who kidded their husbands and, perhaps themselves, pretending they'd been shopping and had "just dropped in" for a drink.

It was a nice racket for a while. Then the grief began to catch up. The general nature of the setup began to leak out, and the first thing these places knew, they were writing the answers in red ink.

Most of them began to put drastic regulations into effect—no unescorted women, no table hopping.

The Rimley Rendezvous kept open and, as nearly as I could tell, there were no restrictions.

Because the Stanberry Building was on the edge of a congested business district, it was hard to find a parking place. There was a parking lot in the middle of the next block, and I was heading for it when I got a break. A taxi moved out from in front of the entrance to the building and I spotted a space between the painted strip of curb which marked the loading zone and taxi stand and a big Cadillac parked just behind. I didn't intend to stay long and acted on the assumption the big Cad might belong to one of the big shots. I squeezed the agency car up pretty close. After I got out, I saw it was even closer than I'd thought, but I left it there anyway.

The elevator shot me up to the Rimley Rendezvous—a faint hint of heady perfume, deep carpets, subdued lights, dreamy music—an atmosphere of clandestine class, coupled with security and stability.

I had a Scotch and soda. It was served in an amber glass so I couldn't see how pale the drink was. Even if Pittman Rimley was paying twenty dollars a bottle for his Scotch, he could still make money at the prices he was charging.

The place had a marvelous orchestra, quite a few women and a sprinkling of men—the fat-faced executive type who had stayed over from the merchant's lunch, the poker-faced

guys with long sideburns who kept their stomachs lean and hard, and tried to look like movie actors. The younger class couldn't stand the tariff.

A voice came drifting over my shoulder. The accents were those of routine seduction, "Cigars—cigarettes?"

I turned around and got an eyeful. She was about twenty-three with a skirt that stopped two or three inches before it reached her knees, a fancy white apron, a blouse with wide, flaring collar and a low V in front. The conventional tray suspended from the shoulder harness held cigars, cigarettes and bonbons.

I paid two-bits of Georgia Rushe's expense money for a package of cigarettes ostensibly that I might open a contact, actually because I was enjoying the scenery.

She had light gray eyes that smiled a sophisticated "thank you," and seemed to have a philosophical consideration for men who liked to look at legs.

She waited to strike a match for me.

"Thanks," I said.

"It's a pleasure."

I liked her voice, but that was all I heard of it. She gave me another smile and moved away.

I looked the place over and wondered if by any chance Mrs. Ellery Crail might be among those present. I didn't see any woman who would have fitted the description. Anemic, female droops didn't go in for afternoon romance. It took women with a restless sex consciousness.

There wasn't any use losing any sleep over it. There was no occasion to use a lot of finesse. I walked out to the telephone booth and called the agency.

Bertha was out. I gave careful instructions to Elsie Brand. "I'm at the Rimley Rendezvous. Wait exactly seven minutes, then call and ask if Mrs. Ellery Crail is here. Say that you'd like to have her come to the telephone, to page her if they don't know her, that it's important. Wait until they go to get her and then hang up."

"Any messages you want to leave for Bertha?"

"Tell her I'm down here."

"Okay, Donald. Good to hear your voice."

"Good to hear yours. Good-by."

I went back to my table. The waiter was hovering around as though I hadn't been drinking my liquor fast enough. So I finished it up and ordered another.

The drink came just about at the expiration of the seven minutes.

I started looking around. The head waiter summoned one of the underlings, said something to him and the man nodded, moved very unobtrusively over to a table where a woman and a man were sitting. He said

something to the woman and she got up and excused herself.

At first I couldn't believe it. Then I saw from the way she walked as she headed toward the telephone that she must be the one I wanted. There was a little one-sided hitch to the walk.

But she wasn't like anything Georgia Rushe had described. She was all woman, and she knew it. The cardigan suit was smooth over well-shaped hips; her chin was tilted at a saucy angle. When she walked, men turned to look at her.

THE man who was with her was a tall drink of water with all the robust sex magnetism of a marble slab. He was somewhere around fifty with the expression amateur theatrical players like to assume when they're taking the part of an English butler.

A couple of minutes later, Mrs. Crail returned to the table. The man who was with her arose and seated her with punctilious, unsmiling formality. For all of the expression on their faces, they might have been discussing the National debt.

I sauntered to the telephone booth and again called the office. Elsie Brand told me Bertha was in now, and I told her to put Bertha on.

"Hello," Bertha said. "Where the hell are you, lover?"

"Down at the Rimley Rendezvous."

"That's a hell of a way to work on a case," she said angrily, "sitting at a table guzzling drinks on the expense account and . . ."

"Shut up," I interrupted, "and get this straight. Mrs. Ellery Crail is here with a man. I don't think they're going to stay long. I'd like to know who the man is. Suppose you pick them up when they come out."

"You've got the agency car."

"You have your personal car, haven't you?"

"Well . . . Yes."

I said, "Mrs. Crail is about twenty-eight. She weighs a hundred and twelve pounds. She's five foot four and a half inches tall, is dressed in a black dressy suit, a large black straw hat, red reptile shoes and a red bag."

"The man who's with her is fifty-two, five feet ten, a hundred and seventy-five, double-breasted bluish gray suit, long nose, long jaw, an expressionless map, dark blue necktie with a red pattern, sandy complexion."

"You can pick up the woman by watching her walk. She swings her legs from the hips. But when she swings her right leg, her back has just a slight hitch."

Bertha, somewhat mollified, said, "Well, that's all right, if you've got them spotted. I'll come right down. You think I'd better go inside the club and wait?"

"I wouldn't. I'd wait on the outside. It

might be a little too noticeable if you got up and went out at the same time they did. They may be just a little suspicious after that telephone call that didn't materialize."

I went back and sat down at the table. The waiter, I noticed, was watching me rather closely.

"Cigars—cigarettes?"

The voice with the smile was right over my shoulder. I turned and looked at the legs. "Hello," I said. "I just bought a pack of cigarettes. Remember?"

She leaned slightly forward, said in a low voice, "Buy another one. I want to talk with you."

I caught the expression in her eyes and reached in my pocket for another quarter. "Fair exchange," I said.

She placed a package of cigarettes on the table, leaned forward to take my quarter and said, "Get out!"

I raised my eyebrows at her.

She smiled tolerantly as though I'd made some verbal pass, and tore off the corner of the package. "You're Donald Lam, aren't you?" she asked, striking a match.

This time my eyebrows popped up by themselves. "How," I asked, "do you know?"

"Don't be silly. Use your head. You've got one."

She applied the match to the cigarette "Leaving?"

"No."

"Then for Heaven's sake, circulate! Pick up some of these women who are looking you over. The way it is now, you stand out like a sore thumb."

That was an idea. I realized suddenly that unattached men didn't drop into the Rendezvous simply to sip a highball. But I was still worried about how the cigarette girl had learned my name. I'd been in the Southwest Pacific for some eighteen months now.

The dance orchestra started making noise. I picked a vivacious looking brunette a couple of tables over.

"Dance?" I asked.

SHE looked up at me with a well-simulated expression of haughty surprise. "Why . . . aren't you being just a little abrupt?"

I met her eyes and said, "Yes."

That brought a laugh. "I like abrupt men," she said.

We danced half around the floor. Then she said, "Somehow you aren't the type I had pictured."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The way you sat over there frowning into your drink—you looked melancholy and belligerent."

"Perhaps it was belligerency."

"No. I suppose I've given myself away."

"Any harm in watching me?"

"One isn't supposed to admit it."

I didn't say anything and we danced some more.

I said, "Let's talk about you for a while. Who are the two women with you?"

"Friends."

"You surprise me."

She said, "The three of us go around together quite a lot. We have something in common."

"Well . . . No, not that."

"Divorced?"

"Yes."

She said, "You don't come here very often."

"No."

"You don't look like the sort of man who does come here. You're—well, there's nothing aimless about you."

"What about the men who come here?" I asked.

"Most of them are no good. Occasionally you see someone who is—interesting. Once in a blue moon."

"You like to dance, and occasionally you find a partner here, is that right?"

"That's about it."

The music stopped. I took her back to her table. She said coyly, "If I knew your name, I'd present you to my friends."

"I never tell my name."

"Why?"

I said, "I'm married. I have three children who are starving. I can't support my wife because I'll be walking along the street and see a beautiful face and figure like yours headed into one of these joints, and immediately I go plunging in after it, spending my last cent just for the pleasure of talking with you, holding you in my arms while I dance around a crowded floor."

She laughed and said, "Girls, I think his name is John Smith. He has the most delightful line."

Two feminine faces looked up with amused interest.

The head waiter stood close to me. "I beg your pardon, sir, but the manager asked me to present his compliments and ask you to join him for a few moments."

"Well, I like that!" the girl with whom I had been dancing said.

The waiter remained silently insistent at my elbow.

I smiled at the three young women, said, "After all, I can be back, you know," and then followed my guide through a curtained doorway into an anteroom, then through a door marked *Private*.

He said, "Mr. Lam for you, sir," and retired.

The man who was seated behind the big polished walnut desk looked up from some papers and his eyes hit mine; hard, dark,

restless eyes that threw out the magnetic fire of a dynamic personality.

A smile softened the heavy mouth. The man pushed back the swivel chair and came around the desk.

He wasn't particularly tall and he wasn't fat, but he was thick all the way through. A tailor had done a marvelous job on him, and there was a well-groomed appearance about his hair that indicated a barber had spent quite a bit of time in painstaking toil.

"How are you, Mr. Lam? My name is Rimley."

I shook hands.

HE SIZED me up thoughtfully, said, "Sit down. Care for a cigar?"

"No thanks. I smoke cigarettes."

He opened a humidor on his desk. "I think you'll find your favorite brand here."

"No thanks, I have a package in my pocket I want to get smoked up."

"Care for a drink?"

"I just had two of your Scotch and sodas."

He laughed and said, "I mean a *real* drink."

"Scotch and soda," I said.

He picked up a desk telephone, flipped over a switch and said, "Two Scotch and sodas, my private brand."

He clicked the switch off and said, "Just back from the South Pacific, I understand."

"May I ask how you know?"

He made arches out of his eyebrows, "Why not?"

I went back to first principles. "I've been away for quite a while. While you were in business when I left, I don't think I'd ever been out here."

"That is why your present visit interests me."

"But how did it happen you knew who I was?"

"Put yourself in my position. In order to run a place like this, one has to make money."

"Naturally."

"In order to make money, one has to put himself in the position of his customers. Obviously, Mr. Lam, if you'd put yourself in my place, and remember I am trying to think in terms of customers' wants, you will understand that the unannounced visit of a private detective is something to be reported to me."

"Yes, I can see that. Do you know all the private detectives?"

"Certainly not. But I know the ones who are smart enough to be dangerous."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Being a private detective is like following any other profession. The incompetent ones have a tendency to weed themselves out. The ones who can just get by remain unknown. The ones who have what it takes attract at-

tention. They get more and more business. People talk about them. I know all of those."

"You flatter me."

"Don't be so modest. Before you enlisted in the Navy, you'd made quite a name for yourself. I watched your career with a great deal of interest. I thought I might need you myself, sometime."

"And then, of course, there's your partner, Bertha Cool. Rather an outstanding figure."

"You've known her for some time?"

"Frankly, I never bothered with her until you teamed up with her. Bertha was on my list, of course—she handled routine stuff in a routine way. Then you came along and began handling routine stuff in a very unconventional manner."

"You know a lot about me," I said.

He nodded matter-of-factly.

Knuckles tapped on the door.

"Come in," Rimley called.

I noticed a slight movement of the right side of his body, heard a muffled click. The door opened and a waiter came in bearing a tray with glasses, a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label, a container filled with ice cubes, and a big quart bottle of siphon water.

The waiter put the tray down on the corner of the desk, walked out without a word. Rimley poured.

"Regards," he said.

"Regards," I replied.

We took a sip. Rimley smiled and said, "I hope I don't have to dot the i's and cross the t's."

"You mean that you don't want me here?"

"Definitely."

"Is there," I asked, "anything you can do about it?"

"Quite a bit," he said.

"I'm interested. I don't see anything very subtle or very effective that you could do."

"I never talk about what I'm going to do. I do it. And, above all, I wouldn't be so foolish as to tell you. Working on some particular case?"

I smiled and said, "Just dropped in because I wanted a little social life."

"Obviously," Rimley said smiling, "you can appreciate the reaction of my customers if someone should point you out and say, 'That's Donald Lam of the firm of Cool & Lam, private detectives. They're one of the firms that handle divorce cases.' I rather fancy there'd be lots of diners who would remember engagements elsewhere."

I said, "I hadn't exactly thought of that angle."

"Suppose you think of it now, then."

"I'm thinking of it," I said.

I wondered if Mrs. Crail and her escort had left the place yet, and if Bertha Cool was on the job. I also wondered if Pittman Rimley's aversion to private detectives might not be due, at least in part, to the fact that he may have had some idea that a sale of the building in which his club was located was in process of negotiation.

RIMLEY said, "Well, don't let it get you down, Lam. How about freshening up your drink?"

He reached across for my glass with his left hand, held the bottle of Scotch over the glass.

I don't know just how it happened that my eyes dropped down for a casual glance at the very expensive wrist chronometer with its sweep-second hand circling the dial, but they did. It was a big watch and only a big man could have worn it, but it was a watch that could keep time to a split fraction of a second.

The watch said four-thirty.

It couldn't have been that late. I wanted to look at my own watch, but it didn't seem the thing to do.

Rimley smiled at me across the brim of the glass. "After all," he said, "just so we understand each other."

[Turn page]

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"Certainly," I told him.

I looked around the office very casually.

There was a clock on top of a filing case, a nautical affair mounted inside the spokes of a bronze wheel.

I waited until Rimley was looking at something else then took a quick glance at the face of the clock.

The time was four thirty-two.

I said, "You must have your problems running a place of this kind."

"It isn't all gravy," he admitted.

"Have trouble getting liquor?"

"Some."

"I've got a client who wants to bring suit for an automobile accident. Know any good lawyers?"

"Is that the case that you're working on now?"

"Know any good automobile accident lawyers?" I asked.

"No."

"Guess there are some pretty good ones around."

"There should be."

I said, "Well, it's nice liquor and I've enjoyed my visit. I suppose you'd prefer I didn't go back to my table."

"Go right ahead, Lam. Enjoy yourself. Relax. And when you leave, don't bother about the check. Just get up and walk out. But *don't . . . come . . . back!*"

He'd been holding me with liquor and talk. Now both had dried up. It was quite all right for me to go back to the Rendezvous—now. Could it be because Mrs. Ellery Crail and her escort had left?

I tossed off the last of the drink, got up and extended my hand. "Nice meeting you," I said.

"Thank you. Make yourself at home, Lam. Have a good time, and I wish you every success with whatever case you happen to be working on."

I went back to the main dining room.

I knew I didn't have to look. I did it just to make sure.

The table where Mrs. Ellery Crail had sat with the unsmiling individual was vacant.

I looked at my watch.

The time was three forty-five.

I didn't see my cigarette girl, so I asked a waiter casually, "Cigarette girl here?"

"Yes, sir, just a moment."

A girl came toward me, but it wasn't the same one.

I bought more cigarettes. "Where's the other girl?"

"Billy? Oh, she went home an hour early today. I'm filling in for her."

My girl friends over at the other table kept looking in my direction. I went over there. I didn't dance but just chatted for a minute. I was, I told them, being arrested for non-

support of my wife and seven children.

I saw they were puzzled. And the waiter came along again. Mr. Rimley's compliments and would my friends care to join me in a drink on the house, some champagne, perhaps, or some of that Black Label?

The young women stared as though they were seeing and hearing things. "My God," one of them said, "he must be the Duke of Windsor!"

They all laughed.

I smiled at the waiter. "My thanks to Mr. Rimley," I said, "but I never drink more than I can hold comfortably. However, my friends will probably accept a drink on the house. I'm leaving."

"Yes, sir. There's no check, sir."

"So I understand. But I suppose a tip would be in order?"

He seemed positively embarrassed. "If you don't mind, sir, I'd rather not."

I nodded, turned and bowed to the three most startled women in the city. "A business appointment," I assured them gravely, and walked out.

I recovered my hat from the hat-check girl and she was perfectly willing to accept the two-bits I handed to her.

I headed for the agency car. I'd misjudged the owner of the big Cad. Not only had he gone out before I did, but he'd calmly shoved the agency car forward so that it was right in front of the entrance. A cab had moved into the place where the Cad had been parked.

A cab driver walked over to me. He had a broken nose and a cauliflower ear. "Your car?"

"Yes."

"Get it the hell out of here."

"Someone shoved it out here. I didn't leave it here."

He spat insultingly. "I had to let a passenger out of my car way out from the curb. It cost me a dollar tip."

"You mean you lost a dollar?"

"Yeah."

I reached for the door of the agency car. "I'm sorry, Buddy. I'm going to make it up to you."

"That's the general idea."

"I'm from the income tax department. Take it off your return and tell the department I said it was okay."

He lunged toward me, met my eyes, hesitated.

It was four twenty-three when I got to the office.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL
YOU ONLY HANG ONCE
By H. W. RODEN

CHAPTER IV



JUST before five Bertha came in. She jerked the door open, strode into the office, took one look at me and said all in one breath, "Donald, why don't you go in the private office and read the newspaper?"

"I've seen the newspaper."

"Well, sit in there and twiddle your thumbs then. Don't sit out here. It takes

Elsie's mind off her business."

I said, "It's quitting time."

"Well," Bertha snapped, "it takes her mind off her business. I'll bet she's been making mistakes."

She strode to the typewriter, pointed an accusing finger. "There you are," she said. "An erasure, another erasure. Here's a third one."

"What of it?" I said. "Rubber companies pay dividends out of selling typewriter erasers. Three mistakes on four pages isn't too much."

"Humph! That's what you think. Look at these."

She ran through several other pages. There wasn't so much as the evidence of an erasure on them.

I looked at Elsie. Her cheeks were flaming red.

"A fine detective you are," Bertha grunted.

I started to say something but Elsie's eyes were pleading with me, so I followed Bertha into the private office.

"A mess!" Bertha said angrily, helping herself to a cigarette.

"What's the matter, did you miss them?"

"No, I picked them up all right. She's Mrs. Ellery Crail and she's driving a Buick Roadmaster that's registered in her name. The man with her is Rufus Stanberry. He's the man who owns the building. He lives at Thirty-two-seventy-one Fulrose Avenue in the Fulrose Apartments. That's a swanky place with lots of liveried servants and a lot of gingerbread. He drives a big Cadillac."

I said, "It looks to me as though you've done a pretty good job, Bertha. What's the trouble?"

"Trouble!" Bertha all but screamed at me.

"Go ahead, unburden yourself."

Bertha, controlled herself with an effort. "I guess it's a knack you have. Whenever you start in on a case, it never runs smooth. Something always goes sour."

I fished out one of the packages of cigarettes I had bought from the girl at the Rendezvous.

Bertha's hand jerked toward the humidor.

"Use these during office hours. I charge them to office expense."

I conveyed my cigarette to my lips and said, "This is on the expense account, too."

"How come?"

"I bought it from the girl at the Rendezvous."

I took all three packages from my pocket, placed them on the desk.

Bertha glowered. "What's the idea?"

"Nothing," I said casually. "She had pretty legs, that's all."

"Damn you," Bertha said, "I don't know whether you realize how much you irritate me."

"Want to dissolve the partnership?"

"No!" she yelled.

"Then shut up," I said.

We locked eyes for a minute, then I gave her a chance. "What happened when you shadowed Mrs. Crail?"

Bertha exhaled, said, "I sat out in front of the Rendezvous. I've been there perhaps five minutes when the door opens and these two people come out. You've described them to a tee. It's shooting fish in a barrel."

"They separate. The man looks at a wrist watch, then gets in a big Cadillac. The woman goes tripping down the street. I pick the man."

I nodded. "The man was the one I wanted."

Bertha's eyes glittered at me. "You'd jammed the agency car right up against this big Cad, and he just shoved it the hell out of there without even trying to inch his way out."

I didn't say anything.

"Well," Bertha went on, "I tailed this Cad. He drove down Garden Vista Boulevard and damned if there wasn't some car tagging along behind me! I took a gander, and it was Mrs. Crail following this Cad."

I RAISED my eyebrows.

"Well, I pulled off to the right to see whether she was trying to tail me, and she slowed right down, waiting for some other car to move in. She didn't want to get close enough to the Cad so the driver could see her."

"So what did you do?" I asked.

"Well I was in a spot, so I swung clean over to the right hand traffic lane and trailed along in the blind spot of the Cad and to one side of Mrs. Crail's Buick."

"Good stuff," I said, "unless they happen to turn left."

"Well," Bertha snapped, "he turned left."

She puffed angrily at the cigarette for a moment, then said, "When I saw he was going to turn left, I slowed for the car that was directly behind me to go on past, then I was going to cut across to the left-hand lane of

traffic. The car behind me was driven by a buck-toothed little trollop who didn't like the way I was driving. She slowed when I slowed, then suddenly pulled up abreast of me and yelled at me, then gave it the gun and shot on past."

"And then?" I asked.

"And then," Bertha said, "she looked to see where she was going just a little too late. Another car coming from the opposite direction was making a left-hand turn. I don't think this trollop ever saw him until half a second before the crash. She was going fast and she tried to whip around the corner and cut inside of him."

"Anybody hurt?"

"The man wasn't, but the woman with him pulled a faint. They blocked me completely. There was traffic behind, and this mass of wreckage right in front of me."

"And that was when Stanberry turned left?"

"Don't be silly," Bertha said. "Traffic was jammed. It took a cop five minutes to get it moving. And the buck-toothed trollop flagged a cab and rode away as calmly as you please, leaving her goddamned car right in my road."

"Without getting witnesses, or seeing who . . . ?"

"She gave her name and address to the driver of the other car, and she went over to Stanberry's car, got his name and address, then went around to the other cars. She even came to me. It was through her that I got Stanberry's name and address."

"How come?"

"Traffic was all snarled up. Stanberry seemed very decent about it. Of course the cars behind were raising hell. The driver of the other car was writing down license numbers. The buck-toothed biddy was getting names and addresses. I saw she had Stanberry's name in her book so when she came to me I smiled sweetly at her and told her I'd be glad to, but that she'd have trouble spelling my name, and I'd better write it down for her."

"What did she do?"

"She gave me the little notebook and told me to write it down. The name directly above mine was Rufus Stanberry, Thirty-two seventy-one Furose Avenue. I fumbled around with her pencil getting a good look at the names and addresses so I'd remember them, and then I wrote down a name for her."

"Your own?" I asked.

"Don't be a fool. I thought up the damnedest Russian spelling I could think of and gave the first address that popped into my head out in Glendale. Then I started signaling for the traffic behind me to get out of my way and tried backing up."

"And then what?"

"I had to argue with some bird behind me who couldn't back up because there was somebody behind him. I lost my temper. I tried to slam the car back and locked bumpers with some egg, and this traffic cop came along and poured acid all over everybody, and the horse-toothed cluck that had caused the whole business gave a sweet smile to the traffic cop, caught a taxi and left her heap right in the street."

"What did you do?"

BERTHA said, "I finally stood on my bumper while the other man lifted on his. By that time . . ."

"Did the woman get Mrs. Crail's name?"

"It was a couple of names above Stanberry's. I didn't bother with the address because we have it."

"Did Stanberry see Mrs. Crail's name?"

"No. I'm the only one who wrote down my own name in the book. She'd done the writing on the others, also their license numbers. You can bet I didn't write my license number for her."

"So what did you do when you got free of the other car—come directly back here?"

"No. I figured she'd probably be taking Stanberry home, so I beat it out to Thirty-two-seventy-one Furose Avenue. I cased the joint and found it had a private switchboard, hung around there for a while, and then when they didn't show up, I came back to the office. What did you do?"

I said, "I got kicked out of the Rimley Rendezvous."

"Flirting with women?"

"No. The manager told me to get out and stay out."

"He's got a crust."

"He's right," I said. "He's running a joint where married women drop in for an afternoon pickup, where a few tired businessmen hang around to do a little casual dancing. A private detective is as welcome there as a case of smallpox on an ocean liner."

"How did he know you were a private detective?"

"That," I said, "is what gets me. He knew my name, knew everything about me, knew all about you."

"Did he know what case you were working on?"

I said, "I'm wondering whether he put two and two together; that call for Mrs. Crail, and then no one being on the telephone; the fact that Mrs. Crail and Stanberry must have left just about the time I was in the office, and then all of a sudden Rimley wanting to terminate the interview. I don't think it occurred to anybody that you'd be waiting to pick them up, and . . ."

The telephone rang.

Bertha Cool scooped up the receiver. I heard Elsie Brand's voice coming through, then a click and another voice. Bertha was all suave smiles. "Yes, Miss Rushe," she said, "we're making progress. Mrs. Crail was at the Rimley Rendezvous this afternoon with Mr. Stanberry."

There was silence for a while, then Bertha said, "I'll let you talk with Donald. He's here."

She passed the phone over to me and said, "Miss Rushe wants a report."

I picked up the telephone. Georgia Rushe said, "Do you have anything to add, Mr. Lam?"

I said, "You say the present Mrs. Crail was formerly Irma Begley, and she got acquainted with Ellery Crail through an automobile accident?"

"That's right."

"She sustain personal injuries?"

"Yes. A spinal injury."

"Think she really has it?"

"It seems to have been definitely authenticated by X-rays."

I said, "Well, she probably got it a year or so earlier in another automobile accident. If we could prove that, would that mean anything to you?"

"Would it!" she said ecstatically.

"Well, don't get excited about it. Let us handle it."

"You're sure about this other automobile accident?"

"No, of course not. It's simply a lead."

"How long will it take you to find out?"

I said, "It depends upon when I can locate the other party to the accident, a man named Cullingdon."

"How long will it take you to do that?"

"I don't know. I'm starting on it right away."

"I'll be waiting to hear from you, Mr. Lam. Call me at once in case you find anything. At once, please."

"Okay, I'll let you know," I said, and hung up.

All of a sudden Bertha began chuckling.

"Why the amusement?" I asked.

Bertha said, "I'm thinking of the way that little strumpet bawled me out when she went past, and then came back with that sickly sweet smile when she wanted me to be a witness for her. And I'm also thinking of the sweet time she'll have when she goes messing out around the address I gave her in Glendale trying to find a woman by the name of Boskovitch."

CHAPTER V



HILIP E. Cullingdon turned out to be a middle-aged man with tired gray eyes. There were calipers around the edge of his mouth, and a certain firmness about the jaw. He gave the impression of being a man slow to anger who could really go to town once aroused.

I didn't beat around the bush. I said, "You're

Philip E. Cullingdon, the general contractor who was the defendant in the case of Begley versus Cullingdon?"

The tired eyes sized me up. "What's that to you?"

"I'm checking up on the case."

"What about it? It was all settled."

"Sure it was. You carried insurance, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the amount of the settlement?"

"I know the amount of the settlement, but I still don't know to whom I'm talking, or why you want to know."

I handed him a card. "Donald Lam," I said, "of the firm of Cool & Lam, private investigators, and we're checking up on the case."

"Why?"

"I'm trying to find out something about Irma Begley."

"What about her?"

"I want to find out about her injury."

He said, "I guess she was injured all right. The doctors say she was—doctors on both sides. Somehow, I never felt right about that case."

I said, "I notice from the complaint that it was filed just about eleven months after the date of the accident. Were any previous demands made on you?"

Cullingdon said, "No. That's because the woman didn't think she was injured at first. She had a little trouble, I guess, which gradually got worse. She went to a doctor who gave her some routine treatments, then finally she went to a specialist who told her she'd developed a complication from an injury to the spine."

"And that went back to the automobile accident?"

He nodded.

"So then she got some attorneys and sued you?"

Again he nodded.

"And your insurance company made a settlement?"

"That's right."

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"At your suggestion?"

"As a matter of fact," Cullington said, "I was quite a bit put out about that."

"Why?"

"Well, it was just one of those things. I'll admit I was trying to beat a signal but she was as much to blame as I was. Of course, the way it looked at first, no great damage was done. She jumped out of the car as spry as you please, and I thought I was in for a tongue lashing, but she just laughed and said, 'Naughty, naughty, you shouldn't try to beat a signal.'"

"Then what?"

"Oh, we took each other's license numbers and exchanged cards, and a few people came up and gave advice, and then someone kept yelling to get the intersection cleaned up, and that was about all there was to it."

"Make any settlement with her?"

"She never submitted a bill."

"You didn't submit a bill to her?"

"No, I kept waiting, thinking something might come of it. To tell you the truth, I had just about forgotten about it when the action was filed."

"How much did the insurance company pay?"

"I don't know as they'd like to have me tell."

"I'd like to know how much."

HE SAID, "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll ring up my insurance people tomorrow and ask them if there's any objection. If there isn't, I'll telephone your office."

"Will you tell me who carried your insurance?"

He smiled and shook his head. "I think I've told you about all I want to—going at it blind this way."

I said, "It's an interesting case."

"What interests me is what you're investigating. Do you think there was something fishy about it?"

I said, "Don't get that idea. I might be just checking up on her general financial responsibility."

"Oh, I see," he said, "I'll tell you, Mr. Lam, unless she spent that money foolishly, she should be a pretty good credit risk for anything within reason. She got a mighty nice settlement."

"Thanks," I told him. "You get in touch with them tomorrow, and give our office a ring and tell us how much it was—in case there's no objection. Will you?"

"Okay, sure."

We shook hands. I went down to the agency car and was just switching on the ignition when I saw another car pull up to the curb behind me and stop.

The young woman who got out of that car was a slender-waisted, smooth-hipped, easy

moving package of class. I looked at her twice. Then I recognized her.

She was the girl who sold cigarettes at the Rendezvous.

I switched off the ignition on my car and waited.

It was about a five minute wait.

The girl came out, walking rapidly, pulled open the door of her car and jumped in.

I got out of my car and raised my hat. She waited while I walked over. "You have to have a license for that, you know," I said.

"For what?"

"For acting as private detective."

She flushed. "You certainly do get around."

"So so. Not half as much as I really should have."

"What do you mean by that?"

I said, "I'm a dumbbell when it comes to being a private dick."

"You don't seem to be dumb."

"I am."

"Just why?"

I said, "The county clerk's office is closed now."

"Well?"

I said, "I thought I was smart. I checked back on the Register of Actions, found where Irma Begley had been the plaintiff in a suit to recover damages from an automobile accident and thought I'd done something smart."

"Hadn't you?"

"No."

"Why?"

I said, "As soon as I found where she had been a plaintiff in one suit, I made a note of the defendant, the attorneys for the plaintiff, and walked out."

"What should you have done?"

"I'm hoping you weren't as dumb."

"Why?"

I said, "We can pool information and it will save me going to the county clerk's office tomorrow."

She said, "You're smart, aren't you?"

"I'm just telling you I'm dumb."

She said, "There are four actions that I know of."

"All under her own name?"

"Of course. She's not crazy that way."

"How long have you been checking on it?"

"I . . . Some little time."

"Why?"

She said, "You ask a lot of questions, don't you?"

I said, "Are you going to ride with me? Am I going to ride with you? Or have I got to follow you?"

She thought that over for a moment then said, "If you're going any place with me, you're going in my car."

I was careful to walk around the front of

the car so she couldn't start out without running over me.

"Okay, drive carefully because I'm always nervous with a strange driver."

She hesitated, then accepted the situation. "Do you," she asked, "always get what you start after?"

I said, "You'll feel better if I say yes, won't you?"

"I don't give a damn what you say," she said angrily.

"That simplifies it," I told her, and kept quiet.

After a while she said, "Well, what do you want?"

"I want to know all the answers."

"Such as what?"

"What are your hours at the Rendez-vous?"

She jerked her face around in surprise, said, "Well, of all the questions."

I didn't say anything.

SHE said, "I go on at twelve-fifteen. I'm supposed to be dressed, or undressed, whichever you want to call it, and on the floor by twelve-thirty. I work until four o'clock, then I come back at eight-thirty and work until midnight."

"You know Mrs. Ellery Crail?"

"Of course."

"Do you know the man who was with her this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Now then," I said, "Why were you interested in checking up on Mrs. Crail's past?"

"Just as a matter of curiosity."

"Why this particular curiosity about Mrs. Crail?"

"I wondered about her—how she got her start."

"We wouldn't be going around in circles?"

"What do you mean?"

"I asked you why you're checking up on her. It's curiosity. I asked you why the curiosity. You say it's because you wondered how she got her start. All of those words mean just about the same thing."

"I'm telling the truth."

"I'm interested in the reason back of the curiosity."

She drove along for awhile then abruptly said, "What did you find out from Cullingdon?"

"He wasn't suspicious when I called on him. He was going to find out if it was all right to tell me the amount of the settlement. I suppose after you talked with him he thought things were coming pretty fast."

"He did."

"What did he tell you?"

"He asked me questions."

"And you lied to him?"

"I told him I was a newspaper woman get-

ting material for a feature story on automobile accidents."

"And he asked you what paper?"

Her face colored. "Yes."

"And then rang up the city desk?"

"How bright you are!"

"And that was when you walked out?"

She nodded.

I said, "Well, the fat's in the fire now."

"What were you after?" she asked.

"The amount of the settlement."

"The amount of the settlement," she said, "was seventeen thousand eight hundred and seventy-five dollars."

It was my turn to look surprised. "What were you after?"

"Copies of the X-rays of the injuries, of course."

I thought for a minute then said, "I beg your pardon."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I shouldn't have been so dumb. I guess my mind's a little sluggish—a little out of practice."

"What'll the insurance company do?" she asked.

"They may start an independent check-up of their own."

"That wouldn't make it so bad," she said, and then added, "if they did it soon enough."

"You still haven't accounted for your curiosity."

"All right," she said angrily, "in case you're so damn dumb, which I don't think you are, Mrs. Crail was about to purchase the Stanberry Building."

I nodded.

"Well," she said, "use your head."

"You mean there's something in Rimley's lease?"

"I believe so."

"In case of a bona fide sale the lease is terminated?"

"Within ninety days."

"Just what's your connection with Rimley?"

"Is that a crack?"

"If you want to take it that way, yes."

She said, "I own the hat-checking concession outright as well as the cigar, cigarette and candy concessions."

"Do you have to work at them yourself?" I asked.

"I don't have to for financial reasons, but when you've got a business it's better if you keep on the job yourself."

"You don't mind—the working conditions?"

"You mean the costume? Don't be silly. I have nice legs."

"After she bought the building, Rimley would have to negotiate another lease and that would enable him to terminate your concessions or raise the ante?"

"Something of that sort."

"So Rimley knew about Irma Crail's past and gave you the information and told you to look it up, is that right?"

She hesitated, said, "Let's not talk about Rimley."

I LET it go at that. "You say that Irma Crail had pulled this stuff before?"

"Several times."

"Where?"

"Once here, once in San Francisco, once in Nevada and once in Nebraska."

"Using her own name each time? You're sure of that?"

"Yes."

"And how did you get this information?"

She shook her head.

I said, "All right, it's a reasonable inference that Rimley gave it to you. Now, let's go on from there. What was the name of this man you just called on?"

She frowned, "Covington."

I shook my head. "Cullington."

"Yes, that's right."

"You didn't remember it very well, did you?"

"I'm not good at remembering names."

"Speaking of names?" I said and waited.

"You want my professional name or my real name?"

"Your real name," I said. "Do I get it?"

"No."

"What's your professional name?"

"Billy Prue." She switched on the headlights.

"Nice name," I said. "It doesn't mean anything."

"Do names have to?"

"It sounds like a professional name—a stage name."

"Well, that's what it is."

"I suppose we could keep on arguing about that until you'd had sufficient opportunity to think up what you wanted to say about something else."

"Will you be quiet? I want to think."

"Cigarette?" I asked.

"No. Not while I'm driving."

I settled down comfortably in the seat. We drove along for eight or ten blocks at almost a snail's pace, then suddenly she stepped on it.

"Well, that's something," I said.

"What?"

"That you've decided where we're going."

"I knew that all along—where I am going."

"Where's that?"

"To my apartment and change my clothes." "And I take it the emphasis means that my ride terminates when we get to the apartment?"

"I don't have any etchings if that's what you mean."

I didn't say anything.

She turned toward me, started to say something, checked herself and remained silent.

After four or five minutes, she eased the car into the curb. "It's been nice knowing you."

I said, "Don't bother, I'll wait."

"You'll have to wait a long time."

"That's all right."

"What are you waiting for?"

"To hear why you were so curious about Mrs. Crail."

"Well," she blazed. "Sit there and wait then!"

She flounced out of the car, latchkeyed the door of an apartment house and went inside.

By watching from the corner of my eye, I could see that she stopped and remained standing there in the dimly lit lobby. Then she melted into the shadows and was gone.

Three minutes later and the door opened. A figure that clutched a knee-length fur coat tightly about her came running down the stairs toward the car.

I got out and started around politely to open the door.

Cold fingers grabbed my wrists. "Come," she said in a hoarse whisper. "Please come—quick! Oh my God!"

I started to ask her a question, then took another look at her face and plodded along behind without a word.

The door had clicked shut, but she had the latchkey in her right hand. Her left hand was clutching the coat.

She unlocked the door and walked through the lobby, entered an automatic elevator that wheezed and rattled up to the fourth floor.

She led the way down the corridor, paused before a door on the left. Once more her latchkey clicked and she pushed the door open. The lights were all on.

It was a three-room apartment and cost money.

Her purse, gloves and the jacket she had been wearing, lay on the table in the entrance room. There was an ash tray on that table with a single cigarette about half smoked. Through an open doorway I glimpsed a bedroom, and on the bed saw her skirt and blouse.

She said in a hoarse whisper, "I was just changing my clothes—getting ready to take a bath. I flung on the first thing I could find to cover me up."

I looked again at the fur coat.

"What's the rest of it?" I asked.

Wordlessly she crossed over to the door of the bathroom, then hung back.

I opened the door and looked inside.

The body of the man who had escorted Mrs. Ellery Crail to the Rimley Rendezvous that afternoon was in the bathtub, the knees

high up against the chest, the head back against the sloping end of the bathtub, the eyes about two-thirds closed, the lower jaw hanging limp.

Even in death, however, he had that shrewdly calculating leer on his face. The man might have been making an audit of eternity.

"He's . . . dead?" she asked.

"He's dead," I said.

CHAPTER VI



WE WENT back to the bedroom.

I said, "Sit down. We have a little talking to do."

"I don't know a thing about it," she said. "You know that as well as I do."

I said, "Let's start with facts. What happened?"

"I came in here and started to undress. I headed for the bathroom, switched on the lights

and . . ."

"You switched on the bathroom light?"

"Yes."

"You're sure it wasn't on already?"

"No. I switched it on, and then I saw him. I grabbed the first thing I could and ran down to get you."

"You were frightened?"

"Of course."

"You didn't know he was here?"

"I . . ."

"Go ahead. Look."

I pushed her over to the bathroom door. She grabbed at the side of the door. The coat fell open. She had on a bra, panties and dark lustrous stockings. "Take a good look," I said.

She said, "What is there to see?"

She darted back to the bedroom.

I closed the bathroom door. "Where's the phone?"

"Right there."

"Oh, yes," I said. I sat down and took one of the packages of cigarettes she had sold me that afternoon, extended it to her, "Smoke?"

"No, I . . ."

I took a cigarette from the pack, put it in my mouth, lit it and settled back in the chair.

"Aren't you going to call the police?"

"I'm waiting."

"For what?"

"For you."

"What about me?"

"To think up a better story."

"What do you mean?"

"The police won't believe that story of yours."

A hot flash of anger crossed her face. "If

you don't call the police, I'll call them," she threatened.

There were magazines on the table. I picked up one and started turning the pages.

"Go ahead."

"If you're not going to call the police, I'll call them."

She picked up the telephone receiver, started to dial, looked back at me and then slammed the receiver back into place.

"What's wrong with my story?"

"One thing," I said, "that the police will notice. A couple of other things they won't."

"All right, if you're so smart, tell me what's wrong with my story."

I pointed to her purse on the table.

"What about it?"

"Your keys were in that purse."

"Naturally."

"How many keys do you have?"

She showed me the leather key container with its open zipper. There were four keys on the inside.

I said, "All right, you took out your keys downstairs. You opened the zipper, selected the key to your apartment. I take it that key opens the spring lock on the door downstairs?"

SHE nodded.

I said, "You kept the key out because you entered your apartment. Then what did you do?"

"I started to change my clothes and . . ."

I said, "The natural thing was to close the zipper and drop the key container back into your purse."

"Well, that's what I did. Good Heavens! I put the keys back in the purse, put the purse on the table. I walked across to the bedroom. I switched on the bedroom lights. I kicked off my skirt. I went to the bathroom. I opened the door of the bathroom . . ."

"Go on from there."

"I switched on the lights and saw that man."

"Did you know he was dead?"

"No, of course not. I wasn't certain but what he might have been waiting for me."

"To harm you?"

"Well, yes—or perhaps—"

I said, "They make passes at a girl in your position?"

"They make passes at women in any position."

"Most men think you're easy because you wander around and show your legs?"

"It's a natural assumption, isn't it? You can't blame them too much."

"How did you know this wasn't a Johnny who had staked himself out?"

"I didn't."

"Then you thought that when I opened the door I might have a battle on my hands."

"I wanted you to see—what I'd seen."

I shook my head and said, "You knew he was dead."

"Is that the point the police will disbelieve?"

"No."

"What is it?"

"Your key, and your purse."

"What about it?"

I said, "According to your story, you were in a panic. You grabbed up a fur coat, wrapped it around you and dashed downstairs to call me. That doesn't fit with the facts. If you really were in a panic, you certainly wouldn't have stopped to open the purse, take out the keys, put the purse back on the table and then run down to find me."

"And that's it?" she asked somewhat scornfully.

"That's it," I said quietly. "The fact that you had the key in your hand when you came downstairs showed that you knew you were going to have to use it."

"I knew I was going to have to use it to get back into the apartment house and also into my apartment. There are spring locks and automatic door closers on both doors."

I said, "So that's why you kept it in your hand, why you went in and tossed the purse on the table. Then you went into the bedroom, tossed the keys over on the bed, slipped out of your skirt, blouse, and jacket, wrapped up in the fur coat, popped your head in the bathroom to make sure the body was still there, then grabbed the keys and ran down the stairs."

"Phooey!" she said scornfully, picked up the telephone again. "Now I'll dial Police Headquarters."

"And on that pillow," I said, "you can see where the keys landed when you tossed them onto the bed."

She dropped the telephone receiver, jumped up and ran to the door of the bedroom, then came out saying scornfully, "What a smart detective you are. Even if I'd thrown the keys on the pillows there wouldn't have been enough indentation through that heavy bedspread to have let you see what it was."

I said, "If you'd actually been telling the truth, you wouldn't have rushed to the door in a panic to see if there actually was an indentation there."

SHE thought that over for a moment, then sat down. I said, "Some other things don't check. You were anxious to let me see that you had on just panties and a bra under the fur coat so as to give authenticity to your story. And you were trembling all over when you came out of Cullingdon's apartment. The way I put that together, you came home, took off your clothes, saw the body of Rufus Stanberry in the tub, con-

vinced yourself he was dead, sat down and thought for a moment, smoked one cigarette about half through, put your clothes back on and went out, being very, very careful to leave absolutely nothing which indicated you'd already been in your apartment and discovered the body. You overlooked the cigarette."

"Then you went to Cullingdon's in very much of a hurry. You'd found I'd been there and that upset your plans. I picked you up as you came out, and that bothered you still more. You sparred for time while you were doing some thinking—you needed some witness to show that you had entered your apartment innocently and this dead man was occupying your bathtub. After all, why wouldn't I be a better witness than someone you'd pick up to back your play. So you elected me as the fall guy. You thought I'd fall for it, telephone the police and vouch that you'd gone up to your apartment, hadn't been gone more than two or three minutes and . . ."

She said wearily, "All right, what do you want?"

I gave her a cigarette. "I want the truth," I said.

"All right, it happened just about the way you thought it did. I didn't realize the keys would betray me."

"Know who he was?"

"Of course."

"Found out he was dead?"

"Yes."

"And did what?"

"Naturally, I thought Mrs. Crail was playing me for a fall guy. He'd been with her. Now he was in my apartment—dead. I didn't like the smell of it. I decided to get what I could on Mrs. Crail and then go to see her and call for a showdown—or else pick up some witness who could come to the apartment with me and—well, sort of give me an alibi. Then you showed up and I decided you'd be a good witness."

I said, "You're not going to like my next question."

"What is it?"

"He ever been here before?"

She met my eyes. "Yes."

"No passes?"

"That wasn't what he came for."

"But he did make passes?"

"He tried an awkward clumsy approach, just to see if it would get him anywhere."

"What did he want?"

"Wanted to find out whether Rimley was doing a good enough business to stand for a boost in rent."

"Did he find out anything?"

"Not a thing."

I said, "Let's go take another look at that body."

We went back through the bedroom and into the bathroom. She was calmly practical now, with no trace of panic in her manner.

As well as I could without disturbing the body, I looked it over. Evidently he had been killed by a single hard blow on the left temple with some object that had left an oblong depressed fracture of the skull. I looked in the right-hand inside pocket of the coat. There was a billfold in there. It was filled with folding money, lots of it. I put it back. The side pocket on the left held a notebook. On the front page the words had been written in pen and ink, "Rufus Stanberry, 3271 Fulrose Avenue. In case of accident notify Archie Stanberry, 963 Malolo Avenue. My blood type is 4." I closed the book, slipped it back in the pocket.

I saw an expensive wrist watch on his left wrist. I looked at the time. It was five thirty-seven.

I consulted my own watch.

The time was exactly six thirty-seven.

"What's the matter?" she asked, watching me. "What's wrong with the watch?"

"Nothing," I said, and took her out to the other room. "It's all right. We call the police now."

CHAPTER VII



THE two officers from the radio prowler car who got there first asked only a few sketchy questions. Then Homicide showed up and we told our stories. Nothing else happened for about an hour, then Sergeant Frank Sellers came strolling in, a soggy cigar half chewed to ribbons in the side of his mouth.

"Hello, Donald," he said.

"Damn glad you're back."

We shook hands. I introduced him to the girl.

They'd taken our stories down in shorthand. Sellers had evidently familiarized himself with it.

He jerked his head toward Billy Prue. "Business or social?"

"Confidentially it's a little of both. That's not for the press—and it's not for Bertha."

He looked Billy Prue over, said, "Now as I understand it, she parked her car down in front and went up to change her clothes."

"That's right," she said in a low voice.

"You two were going out to dinner?"

I nodded.

"She didn't know you well enough to invite you in and she didn't want to keep you waiting?"

Billy Prue said, with a nervous little laugh,

"I was undressing almost before I'd got through the door. I started for the bathroom and—found that."

"What did you do with your keys when you came in?" Sellers asked casually.

"Put them in my purse," she said, "and dropped the purse on the table."

"And when you ran out, what did you do—take the keys out of the purse?"

"Certainly not. I grabbed up the whole purse, tucked it under my arm and dashed out of the place."

Sergeant Sellers heaved a sigh. "Well, folks, I guess that's all. We may want to ask you some more questions later on. Guess you can go on out to dinner now."

"Thanks," I told him.

"How's Bertha these days?"

"Seems to be the same as ever," I said.

"Haven't seen her for a while. Well, now that you're back, I may see her more frequently."

Billy Prue asked, "Are the police through here?"

"Not yet," Sellers said. "Don't worry, everything will be all right. You've got your keys, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"All right, run along to dinner and have a good time."

Sergeant Sellers watched us from the doorway as we walked down the corridor to the automatic elevator.

"Well," Billy said as we entered the elevator, "that's that."

"No talking," I warned.

The elevator rattled to a stop. A plain-clothes man in the lower corridor passed us through. There was a uniformed officer on duty at the doorway. Billy Prue's car was parked where we had left it. There was white dust on the steering wheel and the door catches where the police had gone over it for fingerprints.

Without a word, I opened the door of the car. She got in with a swift all-of-a-sudden twist of her supple body.

We moved away from the curb.

"All right, sucker," she said.

I didn't say anything.

"You stuck your neck out," she said. "You're in it as deep as I am now, and you've got nothing further on me."

"So what?"

"So," she said, "I do you the extreme courtesy of taking you back to where you left your automobile—if you're nice. Otherwise, I'd dump you out on the street."

"Rather a hard-boiled attitude, isn't it?"

"That," she said, "is what you get for being a sucker."

I took a cigarette package from my pocket, shook out one. "Cigarette?" I asked.

"Not while I'm driving."

HER eyes blinked rapidly two or three times. Then I saw a tear come out and trickle down her cheek.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing."

She turned a corner. I saw we were headed for the Stanberry Building.

"Change your mind about taking me back to where my car is?"

"Yes."

"Why are you crying?"

She slammed the car to a stop, groped in her purse, pulled out some cleansing tissue and wiped her eyes. "You make me so damn mad," she said.

"Why?"

"I wanted to see what you'd do. I pulled that gag on you that you'd been a sucker just to see what happened."

"Well?"

"Nothing happened, damn you. You thought I was the kind that would do a trick like that, didn't you?"

"That's what you said."

I watched her clean up the traces of her tears. "I'd kill myself before I'd do anything like that for a man who befriended me. Darn few have ever taken the trouble, unless they wanted something very obviously."

She flashed me one look still hot with hurt and anger. Then she snapped her purse shut, adjusted herself in the driver's seat and started driving again. We stopped in front of the Stanberry Building.

I said, "Pittman Rimley doesn't like me."

"You don't need to go in. You can wait here."

"And then?"

"Then I'll drive you out to where you left your car."

I thought that over. "Going to tell Rimley I was with you when you notified the police?"

"Yes. I'll have to do that."

I said, "Go on up. Better lock your car just in case."

She looked at me sharply, then locked the ignition. "Some day," she warned, "I'm going to jar you out of that detached, don't-give-a-damn pose."

I waited until she was inside, then got out and looked for a taxi. I waited ten minutes then started walking down the avenue. I'd gone five blocks before I found one.

I gave the address of Cullingdon's place where I'd left the agency car. I paid off the cab, and drove the agency heap to the office—fast.

The office was dark when I arrived.

I called Bertha's apartment. She didn't answer. I sat down to do a little thinking.

After about ten minutes, I heard the pound of heavy steps in the corridor. A latchkey jabbed the door. The lock clicked back, and Bertha Cool flung the door open.

She glowered at me.

"Had dinner?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I haven't."

Bertha heaved herself into a chair. "When it comes time to eat, I eat."

I shook the last cigarette out of the package.

"Well, we've run slap bang into a murder case."

Bertha said, "Who was bumped off?"

"Rufus Stanberry."

"Where? How? Why?"

I said, "The place was the apartment of the cigarette girl who works at the Rimley Rendezvous. Her stage name is Billy Pruett. As to the how, it consisted of hitting the man a very hard blow on the temple. It's the why that complicates things."

"Well, what's your best guess?"

"Either the man knew too much, or..."

"Or what?" Bertha snapped as I paused.

"Go ahead."

"Or," I said, "he knew too little."

Bertha glowered at me. "Just like one of those news commentators," she snorted.

After a minute Bertha said, "You do get the agency in the damndest things."

"I didn't get the agency into it," I said.

"You may think you didn't, but you did, just the same."

"The minute you started to check," I said, "you'd have found something that would have been of the greatest interest to our client—something about Mrs. Crail."

"What?"

I SAID, "She's a professional malingerer."

"What have you got on her?"

"Some of it's hearsay. There's a case of Begley versus Cullingdon. Going back a while before that, I understand there are other cases in San Francisco and in Nevada."

"Fakes or injuries?" Bertha asked.

"No, that fake stuff is too risky. She suffered an injury all right, probably in the first accident, found out how easy it was to collect and decided it was easier than working for a living. She'd wait for an opportunity to have just the right sort of accident, one where she didn't stand too much chance of getting busted up."

"Couldn't they catch her at it?"

"Not very well. She'd wait until just before the expiration of the statute of limitations before she'd file suit. X-rays would show she had an injury. She's an attractive girl. Insurance companies would settle. Cosgate & Glimson handled her last case."

"Why did she quit it?"

"Because it got too risky. Insurance companies have a way of comparing notes. In all probability, she didn't intend to use the same racket to get herself a husband. But

when she had this accident—well, it developed Crail was a good matrimonial catch, so she did her stuff."

Bertha said, "Well, we've done two hundred dollars worth of work for our client. Stall around for a couple of days picking up the record on these other cases, then we'll let Miss Georgia handle Mrs. Crail any way she damn pleases. We'll just check out of it and keep from getting mixed up in murder. You aren't mixed up in it, are you, lover?"

"What makes you think so?"

"The way you say you aren't. Is there a girl in it?"

"Not in it. He was found in this girl's apartment."

"You say it was the cigarette girl?"

"That's right."

"Humph," Bertha said. "Legs?"

"Naturally."

"Humph," Bertha said, then added, "Now you listen to me, Donald Lam, you keep out of this, and . . ."

Knuckles sounded on the door of the office.

I said to Bertha, "Call out through the door that you're closed up."

Bertha said, "Don't be silly. Perhaps it's a client."

I said, "I can see her outline through the frosted glass. It's a woman."

"All right, then, perhaps it's a woman with money."

Bertha marched across and pulled the door open.

She looked like a million dollars net with a fur coat and a big collar that came up to frame her face. She carried her own Dun & Bradstreet rating on her back, the sort of client who can really finance an investigation.

Bertha Cool's manner melted like a chocolate bar in a kid's fist. "Come in," she said, "come in! We're closed, but since you've come up here, we'll see you."

"May I ask your name, please?" our visitor asked Bertha.

I could see Bertha looking at the girl with a slight frown as though she was trying to place her.

"I'm Bertha Cool," Bertha said, "one of the partners in this agency, and this is Donald Lam, the other partner. Now you're Miss . . . Miss . . . Miss . . ."

"Miss Esther Witson."

"Oh yes," Bertha said.

"I wanted to talk with you, Mrs. Cool, about . . ."

"Go ahead," Bertha said, "talk right here. Mr. Lam and myself are completely at your service."

Miss Witson turned large blue eyes at me. Her lips slid back along prominent teeth.

Bertha recognized her then. "Fry me for

an oyster! You're the woman who was driving the automobile."

"Why, yes, Mrs. Cool, I thought you knew. I had quite a time finding you. You remember you gave the name of Boskovitch." And Miss Witson threw back her head and let the light gleam on a whole mouthful of horse teeth.

BERTHA looked trapped.

"There's some dispute about responsibility for the accident, is there, Miss Witson?" I asked.

She said, "That's a mild way of expressing it."

"Just what do you mean?" Bertha demanded.

She said, "The other car was driven by a Mr. Rolland B. Lidfield. His wife was riding in the car with him."

"But the cars weren't badly damaged, were they?"

"It's Mrs. Lidfield. Claims she suffered a severe nervous shock and she's placed herself in the hands of her physician, leaving her husband to do the talking for her—her husband and her lawyers."

"Lawyers!" Bertha exclaimed. "So soon!"

"A firm of attorneys who specialize in that sort of thing, I understand—Cosgate & Glimson. The doctor got them."

"Cosgate and—what was the other name?" I asked.

"Cosgate & Glimson."

I glanced at Bertha, slowly closed my left eye.

"Humph!" Bertha said.

"I wanted you to help me out, Mrs. Cool."

"It was just another automobile smash-up," Bertha said, glancing uneasily at me.

"But you know that I was driving very slowly; that I was behind your car for two or three blocks; that you slowed down almost to a snail's pace and I went around you . . ."

"I don't know any such thing," Bertha said.

"And," Miss Witson went on triumphantly, "you tried to get out of it by giving an assumed name when we wanted you as a witness. That won't do you any good, Mrs. Cool, because I took down the number of your car. So they'll call you for a witness anyway, which, after all, Mrs. Cool, means that you'll have to make up your mind which car was in the wrong."

Bertha said, "There's nothing for me to make up my mind about. I don't have to take sides with anyone."

"There were some other witnesses?" I asked.

"Lots of them. A Mr. Stanberry, a Mrs. Crail, two or three others."

I said to Bertha, "That would make it very, very interesting—hearing what Mrs. Crail

would have to say on the witness stand about that."

Bertha said, "Well, I can tell you one thing. The car that whipped around to the left saw that Stanberry's car was going to turn to the left, so he thought there was a chance for him to cut his own car sharp to the left and go through all the other traffic."

Miss Witson nodded. "I had the right of way on him."

Bertha nodded.

"And," Miss Witson went on triumphantly, "He's the one who hit me. You can see from the marks on the car that he ran right smack into me."

Bertha was suddenly friendly. "All right, Dearie. I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. The man was speeding across an intersection, and Mrs. Liddfield sounds to me like a gold digger."

Ether Witson impulsively gave Mrs. Cool her hand. "I'm so glad you feel that way about it, Mrs. Cool, and you don't need to worry about the time you put in being a witness. Of course, I can't make any promise, because that would look as though I were trying to buy your testimony. But I realize that you're a professional woman and that if this is going to take some of your time, well . . ." She smiled sweetly. "You know, I always try to be very fair in my business deals."

"Don't you," I asked abruptly, "carry insurance?"

Miss Witson laughed. "I guess I was a little careless about that. Well, thank you ever so much, Mrs. Cool, and you can rest assured that . . . Well, you know, I can't say anything, but . . ."

She smiled significantly and wished us a good night.

Bertha sniffed the air. "That perfume," she said, "costs about fifty bucks an ounce. And did you notice that mink coat? That's what you have to do in a detective business, Donald darling. You have to establish contacts, particularly among the wealthy."

CHAPTER VIII



MY DESTINATION turned out to be a three story brick apartment house with a stucco front. It didn't have a switchboard. There was a row of bell buttons with speaking tubes and cards.

I'd picked out the name, STANBERRY, A. L. After a few seconds, a speaking tube emitted a shrill whistle. A moment later, a voice said,

"What do you want?"

I put my mouth up to the speaking tube. "Archie Stanberry."

"Who wants him?"

"My name's Lam."

"What do you want to see him about?"

"You guess."

"Newspaper?"

"What do you think?"

The buzzer sounded on the door, and I went in.

An automatic elevator whisked me up to the floor. I walked down to apartment 533 and tapped on the door.

Archie Stanberry was about twenty-five or twenty-six. His eyes were swollen and red from crying, but he was trying to be brave. The apartment was swank.

"It's been an awful shock to me," he said.

I didn't wait for an invitation, but walked on in calmly, picked out a comfortable chair, jiggled out a cigarette, lit it, said, "What's your relationship?"

"He was my uncle."

I pulsed a notebook out of my pocket. "What's your draft status?"

"Four F," he said, bristling defensively.

"And I see no reason for giving you details."

I grinned at him and said, "Neither do I."

That made him feel better.

"When did you last see your uncle?"

"Yesterday night."

"Ever hear him speak of Billy Prue—the young woman in whose apartment the body was found?"

"No."

"Know what he was doing there?"

"I don't," Archie said, "but I can assure you that my uncle was a paragon of virtue."

"Lived here long?" I asked.

"Five years."

"Who owns the building?"

"Uncle Rufus."

"Left rather a considerable estate?"

"I know very little about his financial affairs. I've always gathered that he was affluent."

"You work?" I asked.

"At present," he said, "I am doing research work for an historical novel."

"Ever had anything published?" I asked.

"I don't think that needs to enter into it."

"I thought you might like the publicity."

He said, "This is an idea for an historical novel that appealed to Uncle Rufus."

"He was financing it?" I asked.

FOR a minute the eyes avoided mine—bloodshot, restless eyes that seemed afraid of something. "Yes," he said, "and now I suppose I'll have to drop it."

"What's it about generally?"

"The Coast Guard."

"And historical?"

"Back to the days of the real Merchant Marine," he said with a note of enthusiasm. "Back when San Francisco was a real port, a real city that had ships from all corners of the world crowding in through the Golden Gate."

"Nice stuff," I said. "Your uncle married?"

"No."

"Any other relatives?"

"None that I know of."

"Leave a will?"

"Really, Mr. Lam. May I ask what paper you're with?"

"None."

"I understood you were gathering material for the press."

I said, "I'm a detective."

"Oh!" The exclamation was short and sharp.

"When did you hear about it?"

"After the body was found I was notified and asked to go over to the apartment."

"Nice place you have here," I said.

"I like it. It's rather elaborate—two apartments merged into one."

He blew his nose again, abruptly said to me, "There's something in my right eye. Will you excuse me?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps I can help you," I said.

"Perhaps."

He rolled his right eye up. There was a little brownish speck down at the very bottom of the eye. I speared it with a handkerchief, and he said, "Thanks."

We went back to our chairs and sat down.

"Have you any clues as to—as to how it happened?"

I said, "I'm not with the police. I'm private."

"May I ask who employed you, what your interest is, why you . . ." He stopped and looked at me.

"I'm interested in a very incidental angle. Your uncle was about to sell the Stanberry Building."

"I think he was."

"Know what the price was?"

"I don't know, and if I did, I see no reason why I should communicate the information to you."

"How old was your uncle?"

"Fifty-three."

"Ever been married?"

"Yes."

"Widower?"

"No. There was a divorce."

"How long ago?"

[Turn page]

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"About two years, I believe."

"You knew his wife?"

"Oh yes, of course."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"Did she get the divorce, or did he?"

"She did."

"A property settlement?"

"I believe so, yes. Really, Mr. Lam!"

"Did you tell the police any more than you told me?"

"I don't think I told them as much."

"I'm sorry," I said. "You see I . . ." I choked in midsentence, coughed, muttered, "Bathroom, quick!"

HE RAN to a door, opened it. I lurched through. He opened the bathroom door. I went in, waited five seconds, then opened the door. I could hear his voice in the living room. He was telephoning.

The bedroom was neat and well kept. The closet was filled with clothes. On the dressing table, brushes and comb were neatly arranged. There were, perhaps, a dozen framed photographs on the dresser, or on the walls. Directly across from the bed was an oval space just a little different color than the rest of the wall. On the dresser, a cigarette had been torn in two, and both ends lay there. It was the only bit of litter in the room.

Abruptly the door opened. Archie Stanberry stood in the doorway looking at me reproachfully. "I thought you wanted to go to the bathroom?"

"I did. Nice place you have here."

"Mr. Lam, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Okay by me," I said. I walked out to the sitting room. Stanberry made something of a ceremony of flinging open the outer door. I walked back to the easy chair and sat down.

Stanberry said, "I'm asking you to leave. If you don't leave, I shall have to do something about it."

"Go ahead," I invited.

Stanberry said, "I did you the extreme courtesy of permitting you to intrude upon my grief because I thought you were a gentleman of the press."

"I told you I'm a detective."

"Had you told me that earlier, I should not have admitted you—particularly a private detective."

"A detective has to look around," I said.

"Mr. Lam, I don't know just what your game is, but if you don't leave at once, I shall call the officers."

"Suits me," I said. "When you call them, call Frank Sellers. He's working on your uncle's death."

After a moment, Stanberry walked du-

biously to telephone, then detoured and sat down. "I can't understand the reason for this rudeness," he said.

I said, "In the first place while you are a meticulous little man with neat habits, you aren't *that* neat." I jerked my thumb toward the bedroom. "You are the favorite nephew of a rich uncle who owns the joint. Therefore you get maid service—and how."

"What's that got to do with it?" he asked.

I said, "That's the weak point in your armor."

"What do you mean?"

I put assurance in my voice. "The maid," I said, "will be able to tell what picture was taken down from that wall—that's where you made your mistake."

He looked at me as though I'd hit him in the stomach.

"So," I said, "go ahead and call the police. When Frank Sellers comes, we'll bring the maid in here and show her Billy Prue's picture and ask her if that's the one that was removed from the wall."

His shoulders sagged.

"What . . . what do you want?"

"The truth, naturally."

"Lam, I'm going to tell you something that I've never expected to admit to a single soul."

I didn't say anything, but just sat there waiting.

He said, "I dropped in at the Rendezvous every once in a while. It's only natural that I should have."

"So you played around with Billy Prue?"

"Billy Prue sold me cigarettes. I looked her over and thought she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen."

"So you made passes?"

"Naturally. And I got absolutely nowhere."

"Then what?"

"Then I became even more seriously interested, and I'm afraid my uncle didn't approve of the manner in which I was—doing what he called losing my head."

"What did he do?"

"I give you my word of honor I don't know."

"But what do you think?"

"I don't even think."

I said, "Perhaps I can do some thinking for you."

He looked at me with swollen, bloodshot eyes.

I said, "Your uncle thought she was a gold digger?"

"I think that was rather obvious from what I said."

"So he went to see her and told her that if she'd give you a thorough jolt so it would cure you, do something that would disillusion you, he'd give her more money than she could hope to get by making a legitimate

matrimonial alliance and then trying to collect."

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think that Uncle Rufus would have done anything like that. I think Billy would certainly have resented it."

"With a hand ax?" I asked.

"My God," he said, "you're driving me mad with those cynical nasty cracks of yours. Billy wouldn't harm a flea. We've got to keep Billy out of this! We must!"

"How about the picture?"

"I took it down as soon as I found out."

"She gave you the picture?"

"No. I found out what photographer took her publicity pictures and bribed him to take a nice pin-up picture for me. She didn't know I had a print."

I said, "So far you've been one hundred per cent."

"One hundred per cent what?" he asked.

"Rat," I said and walked out.

CHAPTER IX



THE apartment house where I had been able to get a single apartment by dint of some pull and a lot of luck was about three blocks from the place where Bertha Cool had her apartment, which was altogether too close. It was a swanky place with a private switchboard and a garage, a rather ornate lobby, and the rent must have been

fixed when the OPA had its back turned.

The man behind the desk looked at me sharply. "Oh yes. Mr. Lam, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"There's a message for you."

He handed me my key and the folded slip of paper. The paper said, "Call Bertha Cool, at once."

"Also, a young woman has been calling you every ten or fifteen minutes. Says she'll call back."

I pushed Bertha's message down in my pocket and went up to my apartment.

The telephone was ringing as I entered. I closed the door and waited until it had quit ringing. Then I walked back to the telephone and said to the switchboard operator, "Don't call me any more tonight."

The operator said, "I'm sorry, I told this party that you didn't answer. She seemed very much disturbed."

I changed my mind and said, "All right, go ahead and ring if the call comes in again. I'll take it."

I threw my grip on the bed and started taking things out. One thing about the Navy,

it teaches a man to cut his possessions down to the minimum.

I turned down the bed and got out my pajamas.

The telephone rang.

Bertha Cool's voice said, "What's the matter with you? Are you getting so damned high hat you can't call your boss on a matter of business?"

"Partner," I said.

"All right, partner then. Why didn't you call me?"

"I was busy."

"You're in a mess. Get over here."

I said, "I'll see you in the morning."

Bertha said, "You'll see me now. Frank Sellers is over here and the only thing that's keeping you out of the hoosegow right now is the fact that Frank is my friend. I should let you get thrown in the can. It might do you some good."

"Put Sellers on the phone," I said.

I heard Bertha say, "He wants to talk with you."

Sellers' voice rumbled into the telephone. I said, "Listen, Frank, I'm all in. I don't want to go round and round with Bertha over some trivial technicality. Now suppose you tell me what's the beef."

"You know what the beef is, and don't pull any of that innocent stuff with me. I'm sticking my neck all the way out to protect Bertha."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. Of all the dumb places to plant the murder weapon, that was it."

"And where am I supposed to have planted it?" I asked.

"Don't be a sap," Sellers told me, "you're in so deep, the only way you can get out is by coming absolutely clean. How soon can you get over here?"

"Exactly five minutes," I said, and hung up.

Bertha's apartment was on the fifth floor. My knees were weak as I stepped out of the elevator. It seemed like a mile to Bertha's door. I pushed the button.

BERTHA opened the door.

The smoky aroma of good Scotch whisky tingled my nostrils. I looked past Bertha and saw Frank Sellers sitting in his shirt sleeves, a glass in his hand. He looked as worried as a big cop can look.

"Well, come in," Bertha snapped at me.

I walked in.

Bertha said, "My God, you've done some dangerous things in your time, but this is the first time you've ever gone plumb dumb on me. Of all the boob things to do. I suppose it was the legs."

"What legs?" Frank Sellers asked.

"When this guy gets around a girl with

looks and legs, he loses all sense of perspective."

Sellers said mournfully, "That explains it then."

"That doesn't explain a thing," I told him.

Bertha said, "Don't try to kid me out of it because you can't make it stick."

Sellers said, "I hate to do it to you, Donald, but you're probably going to lose your license. I may be able to keep Bertha out of it, but you're in."

"Wait until you hear what he says," Bertha snapped. "Don't go pushing your weight around on Donald."

Sellers said somewhat sullenly, "I'm not pushing any weight around, I'm telling the boy, that's all."

"Well, you don't need to tell him," Bertha said bristling with belligerency. "He's got more brains than you'll have if you live to be a thousand."

Sellers sipped his drink.

Bertha's eyes were suddenly solicitous. "You're white as a sheet, lover, what's the matter? You were supposed to take it easy. You—have you had dinner?"

"No. Come to think of it, I don't believe I have."

Bertha said, "That's just like you, coming home with your system full of tropical bugs under orders to avoid excitement and take it easy, and you go stir up a murder case and then go without your dinner."

Bertha glowered at the two of us, then said, "Now I suppose I've got to cook something for you."

"There's a place down the street," I told her. "I'll see what the law has to say, and go down there."

"That joint!" Bertha moved toward the kitchen, her big body flowing inside of the loose house dress.

I took a drink and went out to the kitchen. Sellers tagged along.

Bertha broke eggs into a bowl, dumped sliced bacon into a frying pan, shoved a pot of coffee on the stove, moving with an unhurried, ponderous efficiency.

Frank Sellers sat down in the little breakfast nook. He fished a fresh cigar out of his pocket and said, "Where did you get the hand ax?"

"What hand ax?"

Bertha said, "They've found the ax in the agency car, lover. The handle had been sawed off so it was only eight and a half inches long and the sawing wasn't a neat job. It had been sawed part way through on one side, then turned around and sawed some more on the other side."

Sellers looked at my face. I met his eyes, shook my head and said, "It's a new one on me, Frank."

"Tell him how you found it, Frank," Bertha

said. "I believe the little weasel's telling the truth."

Sellers said, "The police aren't so dumb, you know."

"I know."

"We went out to see Archie Stanberry. He'd learned about the killing before we'd got there and . . ."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"The way he acted," Sellers said. "He was putting on an act that he'd rehearsed. He was all suave smiles when he greeted us, and wanted to know what he could do. Then we told him and he was knocked for a loop—but it was acting. He made the mistake most people do of putting it on just a little too thick."

I nodded.

"Okay," Sellers said. "We told him a few things, then went out and tapped his telephone line and put a couple of shadows on the job."

"You showed up in the agency car. You went inside and the boys thought it might be a good plan to give your car the once over, just to make sure about the registration certificate and all that. They didn't recognize you, and they didn't recognize the car."

Again I nodded.

"Okay," Sellers went on wearily, "they cased the back of the car and there was a nice little short-handled hand ax. There was blood on it. They handled it too damn much, but you can't blame them for that."

THE aroma of bacon mingled with that of coffee.

"It was the murder weapon?" I asked Sellers.

He nodded.

I said, "I'm darned if I know."

"You'll have to do better than that," Sellers said.

"He's telling the truth," Bertha announced.

"How do you know?" Sellers asked.

"Because," Bertha flared at him, "if he was telling a lie, he'd have one that sounded convincing and he'd have it ready."

I said wearily, "Okay. I got the agency car. I went down to the County Clerk's Office to look up some records. I went out to the Rimley Rendezvous, I got kicked out and came back to the office. Then I went out to look up a witness and left the car parked there . . ."

"You'll have to do better than that," Sellers said. "On the witness, I mean."

I said, "All right. This witness lived out on Graylord Avenue."

"What number?"

I said, "Nix on it. You'd rock the boat."

"It's the hammer they killed him with, Donald. I'm standing between you and the D.A.'s office right now."

I said, "Philip E. Cullington, Nine hundred and six East Graylord Avenue. It's another case."

"What time did you get out there?"

"I don't know."

"How long were you there?"

"Long enough for an ax to have been planted, I guess."

"Cullington, eh?" Sellers said.

Sellers lurched up from the little bench in the breakfast nook, all but upsetting the drinks.

Bertha looked up and said, "Damn you, Frank Sellers, if you spill any of that whisky I'll brain you."

He went in to the telephone. I heard him turning the pages of the telephone book, then heard the sound of the dial on the telephone and low-voiced conversation.

"You're in Dutch," Bertha said to me.

I didn't say anything. There was no use.

The whisky felt warm in my stomach and I didn't feel quite as much as though someone had pulled out the plug and let all of my vitality drain out through my toes.

"You poor little weasel!" Bertha said.

"I'm all right."

"Food's what you need," Bertha said.

"Food and rest."

Sellers hung up the telephone, then dialed another number and talked. Then he hung up the telephone and came back to the table. He looked at me with puzzled scrutiny.

Bertha glowered, but didn't say anything.

A moment later, Bertha slid a plate over to me that had hot scrambled eggs, toast with lots of butter, golden bacon, fried just right, and a big cup of coffee with little cream globules floating on the top.

I nodded my thanks. The coffee turned the warmth that had been kindled in my stomach into a solid, substantial glow. The food tasted good.

Bertha watched me eat. Sellers frowned into his drink.

"Did you get him?" Bertha asked Sellers.

He nodded.

"Well?" Bertha said.

SELLERS shook his head.

"All right, clam up if you want to," Bertha snapped.

Bertha sat down and Sellers reached out and put his hand over hers. "You're a good egg," he said.

"It wouldn't hurt you to say what's on your mind."

"Cullington is gun-shy. Too many people have tried to get him to talk by too many different arguments."

"So what?" Bertha asked, her eyes beligerent.

I said to Bertha, "Be your age. He con-

tacted a prowler car and officers are on their way out."

Sellers looked at me, then back at Bertha. "Bright kid," he said.

"I told you he had brains," Bertha announced.

"Let's go back to your story," Sellers said to me. "You left the car out there. See anyone else out there?"

"I could have—but no one who had any chance to plant that murder weapon."

"You tell me facts, names and places."

"Not some names."

"How many?"

"One."

"I want it."

I just kept on eating.

Bertha glared at me as though she could bite my head off. "If you don't tell him, I will," she said.

"You don't even know," I pointed out.

"Any time you spend the partnership funds to get three packages of cigarettes and then get that moony expression on your face, I know the answer. After all, you can't be blamed. You've been down in the South Seas for so long you've got your head filled with a lot of romantic ideas about womanhood."

Sergeant Sellers looked at Bertha with admiration. He reached out and took her hand.

Bertha jerked her hand out from under his and said, "I'll bust you on the jaw one of these days, if you keep making passes at me."

Sellers grinned, "That's the way I like women—practical and hard."

I said, "Women like to think they're soft and feminine, Frank."

Bertha said to me, "Keep your mouth shut. You've got troubles of your own."

I pushed the empty coffee cup across at Bertha and said, "Guess you'll have to do the honors."

Bertha refilled the coffee cup.

Sellers watched her pouring in thick yellow cream and said, "I can't get cream any more."

"It's too bad about you," Bertha said sarcastically.

The telephone rang.

Sellers spilled coffee over the edge of my cup as he made for the living room.

Bertha called after him, said, "Just a bull in a China shop, a big flat-foot cap trying to act civilized."

She went over to the sink and emptied the saucer, put more coffee in the cup, brought it back and said, "What's the matter? Didn't Bertha cook the bacon right?"

I nodded, said, "What I ate tasted fine."

"Well, eat the rest of it."

I shook my head.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It's been like that lately. I'll be hungry, then just a few mouthfuls of

food, and my stomach turns. This is the most I've eaten for a long time."

"Poor kid," Bertha said sympathetically.

I sipped the coffee.

Bertha's little greedy eyes regarded me with a motherly solicitude.

AFTER a while, Sergeant Sellers came walking back into the room. He was so absent-minded he'd forgotten to take his drink along and pour in fresh whisky.

Bertha grabbed up my cup and saucer and held it above the table while Sellers sat down. Then she put it back on the table and said, "Well, what about it?"

"It's okay. A couple of guys went out in a prowler car and shook this guy down. He says Donald came out. By God, that's once you fooled me."

"How?" I asked.

"When you said it was something that didn't have anything to do with this case. But the guy says you were asking him about an automobile accident that took place quite a while ago. Then he says a girl came out and claimed to be a reporter and started asking him questions about the same accident. He found it was an act she was putting on, so he chased her out."

Bertha looked at me.

Sellers went on, "Okay, the way I dope it out, Donald was a little careless, but he isn't exactly a fool. He had this man Cullingdon spotted, went out to talk with him. The jane tagged Donald out there. Donald knew she was tailing him. He waited until she went in and then he pulled a fast one on her. Cullingdon says he saw her get into her car, then Donald climbed out of his car and walked over. Then he climbed in the car and drove away with her. Cullingdon said Donald was careful to walk around the front of the car so the girl couldn't give him the slip. Cullingdon thinks Donald is a pretty smart egg."

"He is," Bertha said.

"So Cullingdon went out to Donald's car and looked at the registration to check up on Donald. Donald was telling him the truth. He'd given him his right name and told him what he was there for."

I sipped coffee and didn't say anything.

"The car was parked out there for quite a while, Cullingdon says. He didn't see Donald come and get it. Now then, Donald can tell us . . ."

I opened my wallet and took out the taxicab slip that I keep for my expense account voucher. I handed it to Sellers. "That's the taxicab that took me out there."

"Where did you pick it up?" Sellers asked.

"Somewhere on Seventh Street," I said casually.

Sellers heaved a sigh and said, "Well, I guess this will do it all right. Someone plant-

ed the weapon in that car. Now who the hell could have done that?"

I said, "That's the job for the police department. I'm going home and get some shut-eye."

Sellers said, "Your friend Cullingdon appreciates the fact that you told him the truth, Donald. Cullingdon said to tell you that the amount of the settlement was seventeen thousand, eight hundred and seventy-five dollars, and that he thinks her lawyer got either a third or a half."

I said, "That's nice of him."

Sellers frowned and said, "The hell of it is that you were investigating another matter. I can't get over that."

"Well," I said. "I'm going home, I'm all in."

"You poor kid, you look it," Bertha said.

Sellers followed me to the door with Bertha. He said, "Lam, I should have known better. You wouldn't have done anything so dumb as to have found that weapon and then dumped it in the back of the automobile."

"Any fingerprints on it?" Bertha asked.

"Just prints of the two guys that picked it up and looked it all over before they knew what it was," Sellers said. "Any murderer has sense enough to wipe off the handle."

"But the head of it?" Bertha asked.

"Bloodstains and a couple of hairs that showed up under the microscope. It's the murder weapon all right."

"Thanks for the food," I told Bertha.

Bertha's tone was maternally tender.

"You're entirely welcome, lover. Now you get to sleep and get a good night's rest and don't let anything bother you. After all, we're not mixed up in this murder case and we're not going to get mixed up in it."

"Good night," I said.

CHAPTER X

ONCE I was back at my apartment house I breathed easier. I went right down into the garage and grinned at the attendant. "I'm going to have to take my car out again," I said.

He looked at the two-bits I handed him as though it was an insult rather than a tip, then moved a couple of cars and jerked his thumb toward the

agency car.

I started the motor and eased it out of the garage I ran down the street for half a dozen blocks and pulled into the curb and parked. I waited for about five minutes then started up, gave it the gun, went around



the corner fast, and did a couple of figure eights around blocks.

No one was following me.

A fog had drifted in from the ocean. The air had turned cold, and the damp chill went clean through to my bones. I'd be all right for a while and then the weakness would grip me and my blood, thinned from the tropics and weakened by bugs, would turn cold, and I'd shiver and shake the way I did when the old malarial chills would get me. But these spells only lasted for a minute or two and then I'd be myself again. It was just weakness.

I drove up to the Hall of Justice, found a good place to park and parked the bus.

I waited for half an hour that seemed like eternity. Then Billy Prue came bustling out of the lighted entrance, looked up and down the street, turned to the right as though she knew exactly where she was going.

I waited until she had nearly a block head start, then slipped the car into gear.

After a couple of blocks she began to look around for a taxicab.

I slid the car up close to the curb, rolled down the window and said, "Want a lift?"

She looked at me at first dubiously, then with recognition, then with anger.

"You may as well," I said. "It doesn't cost any more."

She came across and jerked the door open. "So you snitched on me. I should have known it."

I said wearily, "Don't be a fool. I'm trying to give you a break."

"How did you know I was here?"

"Somebody planted the murder weapon in my car while it was parked in front of Cullingdon's place."

Her gasp of surprise might have been overdone.

"Naturally, they hauled me over the coals. Bertha Cool, my partner, thought you'd snared me into it."

"And so blabbed to the police?"

"Don't be silly. She isn't that dumb."

"Well, how did it happen . . . ?"

I said, "Bertha Cool was sore. She made some crack about me having bought three packages of cigarettes and Frank Sellers, of Homicide, apparently didn't even notice the crack. That's when I knew where you were."

"I don't get it," she said.

I said, "Sellers isn't so dumb. If he hadn't known all about you, he'd have jumped on that opening and pried enough information out of Bertha so he'd have known what he was after. He ignored it, so I knew he'd found out all about you. And if he'd found out all about you before he came to call on me, it was a good bet that you were being held in the D.A.'s office. The only thing I didn't know is whether they were going to

hold you or turn you loose. I couldn't have stuck it out for more than another half hour, but I . . ."

A SHIVERING fit gripped me. I put on the brake and slowed the car, but by gripping the wheel, didn't show how I was shaking.

Billy Prue kept looking at me. After a minute the fit passed and I speeded up the car again.

"So," Billy Prue said, "you were waiting—for what?"

"To see you."

"What about?"

"How did that murder weapon get in my car while it was parked out at Cullingdon's?"

"I don't know."

"Try again."

"I'm telling you the truth, Donald. I don't know."

I said, "I don't like to be played for a fall guy."

"I shouldn't think you would."

"And when I don't like something, I do something about it."

"I'm telling you I don't know anything at all about it."

I drove along slowly and said, "Let's look at the thing this way. You go out to Cullingdon's. You want a witness. You take me back and pull a razzle-dazzle about finding Stanberry's body. Then you go to Rimley's and I duck out as you could have known I would. I found a cab. I picked up my car and drove back to the agency, had a talk with my partner and then drove out to see Archie Stanberry."

"Well?" she asked as I stopped.

"There was plenty of time for Rimley to have the murder weapon dropped in my car before I got there," I said.

"And you think he dashed out and planted the weapon and . . . ?"

"Don't be silly. He simply picked up the telephone and said to someone, 'Donald Lam's car is parked out at nine hundred and six South Grayford Avenue. It would be a swell place for the police to discover the murder weapon because Billy Prue had him with her when the body was discovered.'"

"Baloney!" she interrupted.

I said, "I know—it's easy to pull that stuff."

"If you'd use your head for a minute, you'd realize that that would be the last thing on earth that Pittman Rimley would do. The minute you are brought into it, that attracts attention once more to me. That's why they had me down at the D.A.'s office and gave me such a grilling. I couldn't understand it, unless it was because you had double-crossed me."

I pulled the car into the curb and stopped.

It was a quiet, business street with virtually no traffic and a few lights.

"Is this where I get out and walk?" she asked.

"I've got something to say."

"Go on and say it."

I said, "I went out to the Rimley Rendezvous. You told me to get out. The headwaiter sent me in to see Rimley. Rimley told me to get out and stay out."

"Tell me something I didn't know already."

I said, "Rimley's wrist watch was an hour fast. The clock on his mantel was an hour fast."

She sat absolutely motionless. I don't think she was even breathing.

"Is that something new?" I asked.

She kept perfectly still.

I said, "We found the body of Rufus Stanberry in your bathtub. His wrist watch was an hour slow."

"What does Mr. Master Mind deduce from that?"

"From that," I said, "I deduce that Rimley was building himself an alibi. He arranged to have his clock and his watch an hour fast. Perhaps shortly before that Stanberry went into the rest room and took off his wrist watch when he washed his hands. The rest room attendant was under orders to set the watch an hour fast."

She said, "An hour fast?"

"That's what I said."

"But you just said that when we found his wrist watch, it was an hour slow."

"Do I have to dot all the i's and cross all the t's?"

"You'd better. Since you started making i's and t's."

I said, "Rimley was working out a slick alibi. Stanberry went in to see Rimley after his watch had been tampered with. Rimley took occasion to call Stanberry's attention to the time. Stanberry didn't realize it was that late, but he checked his watch with Rimley's clock. And then to reassure him, Rimley showed him his wrist watch. From there on it's just a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth."

"What do you mean?"

I SAID, "When you discovered Stanberry's body, you knew that his watch should be an hour fast. You didn't know what time it was because you don't wear a wrist watch. You simply took it for granted that Stanberry's wrist watch was an hour fast, so you set it back an hour. But someone else, who also knew that the wrist watch was an hour fast, had already set it back an hour."

She was silent for so long that I looked at her to see if she might have fainted.

"Well?" I asked.

"I haven't anything to say—not to you."

I said "Okay," and started the motor.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to Bertha Cool's apartment."

"What's at Bertha Cool's apartment?"

"Sergeant Frank Sellers of Homicide."

"And what are you going to do there?"

"Tell him what I told you and let him do the talking from then on. I've been a sucker long enough."

She stuck it out for a dozen blocks, then twisted the key in the ignition. "Okay," she said, "shut it off."

I eased the car to the curb and settled back against the cushions. "Go ahead."

She said, "I'd get killed if they knew I told you this."

"You'll be arrested for murder if you don't."

"You're hard when you want to be."

I fought against another spell of shivering as the cold damp fog penetrated into the marrow of my bones, and managed to say threateningly, "I'm as hard and as cold as the back of a barred jail door."

"All right, what do you want to know?"

"Everything."

She said, "I can't tell you everything, Donald. I can tell you the things that concern me. I can tell you enough so that you'll realize you're not being framed."

I said, "You tell me the whole story here and now and without waiting for reinforcements or you get a third degree from Sergeant Frank Sellers. Make up your mind."

She said, "That isn't fair."

"Make up your mind. I've stuck my neck out for you a couple of times. Now I'm getting tired of it. You can start paying me back, beginning right now."

"I could get out of this car and start walking away."

"Try it and see what happens."

I was shivering again now, but she was so intent on her own predicament that she didn't realize it.

She sat silently for about ten seconds, then she said, "How did you think Rufus Stanberry made his money?"

I said, "You're doing the talking."

"Blackmail."

"Keep talking."

"We didn't know it for quite a while."

"Who's we?"

"Pittman Rimley."

"What happened when he found out?"

"He got busy."

"Tell me about the blackmail."

"It wasn't just the usual thing. He was clever as the very devil. He did lots of embellishment and embroidery—the little things that really got in the big money."

"Mrs. Crail, for instance?"

"Exactly. He didn't bother with her on

the small stuff, but waited until she got married and then cashed in in a big way—and he was doing it so that there wouldn't really have been any comeback. He was selling her the building at a price about three times what it was worth."

"Nice business if you can get it," I said.

"He was getting it. He did it in such a way there was almost no comeback. Most of the time his victims didn't even know him personally. He *may* have been blackmailing people he didn't know by sight."

"How come?"

"He has some sort of an organization, of course—a little secret service that gets the goods. But Stanberry's cleverness was in the way he'd save information for months or years—until the time was ripe for a good killing. Then the victim would get a telephone call—just one."

"What would be said?"

"A nice little threat and orders to pay money in cash to his dear nephew, Archie. After that there might be an anonymous letter or two, but usually that first telephone call was so devastating the rest was just a mop-up that Archie could handle."

I said, "Archie's eyes were all swollen with tearful grief—induced by breaking open a cigarette and putting a little grain of tobacco in each eye. I had to help him get one out. I saw the broken cigarette on his dresser."

She didn't say anything.

I said, "Archie had had your picture on his wall."

"He'd taken it down, hadn't he?" she asked quickly.

"Yes. He said it was a pin-up picture he'd bribed your publicity photographer . . ."

"Blackmailed was the word he should have used," she said bitterly. "Archie's a poor sap. His uncle had brains—dangerous brains."

"And where did Rimley come in? Don't make me laugh by telling me he was blackmailing Rimley."

"He was, in a way. But, of course, it was indirect."

"How?"

"Blackmailing Rimley's clients, using the Rendezvous to pick up stuff that he could use later. But he was able to keep under cover and do a lot of his stuff before we found out what was happening. It was the Crail deal that really put us wise. And, of course, Rimley had quite a stake in that. His lease lapsed within ninety days after a bona fide sale."

"So Mrs. Crail really didn't want to buy, and Rimley really didn't want to have Stanberry sell. Is that it?"

"Something like that."

"What's the rest of the deal?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Stanberry had a whole safe full of papers and we got them."

"Who did the getting?" I asked.

SHE said simply, "I did."

I jerked up in my seat with the sheer surprise of that. "You got them!"

"Yes."

"When?"

"This afternoon."

"How?"

She said, "It worked out just about as you figured. You know the washrooms there at the Rendezvous, they have a colored grafter who turns on water in the bowl, sprinkles in a little toilet water, hands you some soap and a towel and stands poised solicitously with a brush, all ready to go to work as soon as your hands are dried, which, of course, means a nice tip. Stanberry always washed his hands as though he wanted to make the scrubbing last until Saturday night. He'd take off his wrist watch and hand it to the attendant. Rimley simply instructed the attendant to set the watch ahead an hour."

"Then what?"

[Turn page]

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Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

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(Ado.)

"Then, almost as soon as Stanberry went back to the dining room, Rimley sent for him. And, of course, Rimley had fixed the watch and the clock in his own office."

"All right," I said, "that accounts for that much of it. Now tell me how he happened to be in your apartment."

"Don't you get the sketch?"

"No."

"He was blackmailing me."

"Over what?"

She laughed and said, "Over some bait that I gave him. When Rimley wanted to stop his blackmailing activities, he needed a decoy. I was it."

"And so?"

"Archie Stanberry had been making little passes at me. I let Archie get the bait and take it to his uncle. The uncle swallowed it."

"What did he find out about you?"

She smiled. "I was wanted for murder."

"Any foundations?"

"Of course not. It was a plant. I had some old newspaper clippings and a couple of incriminating letters that I'd written to myself and a few other things in a drawer in the table where Archie could find them. He found them, read them and took them to uncle."

"And what did uncle do?"

"Called on me this afternoon, you dope. Haven't you got the play yet?"

"And you cracked him over the head with a hatchet?"

"Don't be silly. I slipped him a drugged drink that was due to make him unconscious for just about an hour and fifteen minutes."

I said, "I get it now. You had an appointment with him for a definite time. You made some mention of the time when he came in so that he would see that he was exactly on time. Then when he became unconscious you'd set his watch back to the right time, tell him that he'd only been out for ten or fifteen minutes; that it must have been a spell with his heart, and let it go at that."

"Exactly."

"And during that hour and fifteen minutes, what were you doing?"

"During about forty-five minutes of that time, I was playing burglar."

"Did you leave any back-trail?"

"I don't think so."

"How did you work it?"

She said, "About a month ago, I got an apartment in the Fulrose Apartments. I was very careful never to go there except when I knew Stanberry was out. And even then, I only stayed there overnight once in a while so the maids would find the bed had been slept in. My story was that I was a newspaper woman who was working on a story and commuting between here and San

Francisco. When I get ready to give up the apartment, it's going to be because I find that I'm in San Francisco so much of the time it will be cheaper to stay at a hotel whenever I happen to be back here."

"Go on with the rest of it."

"That's just about all there was to it. He had his drugged drink, got groggy and started for the bathroom. Then he got sleepy and half fell in the bathtub. I slipped the keys out of his pockets. We already knew that the combination of the safe was written in his notebook so it would look like a telephone number. Rufus Stanberry never trusted anything entirely to memory."

"It was duck soup. I simply whizzed out to the Fulrose Apartments, went up to my apartment, then down the hall to his, opened the door with his key, spun the combination on the safe and cleaned it out of everything that was at all incriminating to anyone. We put Rufus Stanberry out of the blackmail business in one clean sweep."

"Then what happened?"

"You know. I got back to my apartment. He was dead."

"What did you do with the keys?"

She said, "I put them back in his pockets."

"Then what?"

She said, "I telephoned Rimley. He told me over the telephone to beat it out right away to Philip Cullington's place and find out everything he knew about an Irma Begley who had shaken him down in an automobile accident."

"Did you ask him why?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"That Irma Begley was Mrs. Crail."

"Who told you about the amount of the settlement and about those other actions?"

"Rimley did."

"Over the telephone?"

"Yes."

"And what did he tell you to do after that?"

"He said to get out and get the stuff on Mrs. Crail, then I was to pick up some witness, very casually, make it seem accidental if possible, and go to my apartment and discover the body."

"So you picked me as a witness?"

"After you horned in on my play I thought that you might make a swell witness. The trouble was you were too good. You figured things out because of that key."

"Why the sudden interest in Mrs. Crail?" I asked.

"Because Mrs. Crail was with him in the Rendezvous. She went out when he did. And when Stanberry's car pulled away, Mrs. Crail was following it."

"How do you know?"

"Rimley told me."

"How did he know?"

"I don't know."

I SAID, "And you think Rimley thought Mrs. Crail was implicated in the murder?"

"I think he thought it would be a good thing to have enough evidence . . . oh, Donald, I don't know what Rimley thought. He's a deep one."

"All right, let's get back to the murder. You drugged Stanberry's drink. Where did you get the drug?"

"Rimley gave it to me."

"Have you ever drugged a drink before?"

"No."

"Now then, when you went out leaving Stanberry in your apartment, exactly what did you do? You locked your door, of course?"

"No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I was instructed not to."

"By whom?"

"Rimley."

"What was the idea?"

She said, "I was to leave a note in Stanberry's hand where he'd be sure to see it when he woke up, saying: 'You've had a spell with your heart. I'm dashing down to the drugstore to get some medicine.' In that way in case Stanberry recovered consciousness before I returned, I could account for my absence."

"That's all right, but why did you leave the door of the apartment unlocked?"

"Unlocked and slightly ajar so that Stanberry would think I'd dashed out in a hurry."

"Whose idea was that?"

"Rimley's."

"I don't like it."

"Why not?"

I said, "If your story is true, it looks as though Rimley had played you all the way through for a fall guy. It's all just too convenient—a perfect setting for murder. The man passes out in your apartment. You are instructed to leave the door open. You're sent out on an errand that . . . no, wait a minute!"

"What is it, Donald?"

I said, "Rimley's too smart for that. If he had wanted to frame you, he wouldn't have hit the man over the head with a hand ax. He could have put a pillow over his head and smothered him, and then it would have appeared that the drug had affected his heart. No, that tapping him over the head with a hatchet is just too crude. And it doesn't fit in with Rimley's scheme. Now I see Rimley's interest in Mrs. Crail. The note was still in Stanberry's hand when you returned?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with it?"

"Destroyed it."

I said, "Well, so far it checks. It was a nice scheme. Stanberry would have kept his appointment with you. Naturally it would never have occurred to him that his watch had been set ahead an hour and then turned back an hour. He might well have been suspicious that the drink was drugged, but would hardly have thought you'd have had time to get his keys and—his keys were important?"

"I'll say they were important. He had a lock on his door that no passkey would open. There was a very fine lock on the inner steel door of his safe and on another lock on the steel door of the compartment where the incriminating papers were kept."

I said musingly, "It could have worked out just that way. On the other hand, it could have been a perfect setup for the murder only . . ."

She flung herself on me. Her arm went around my neck. Her face pressed up close to mine.

Startled, I tried to pull away.

She crushed me to her, said in my ear, "Get hot! A prowler car just swung around the corner. We've got to be necking. If they catch you and me parked out here . . ."

She didn't need to say any more. I kissed her.

She mumbled, "Don't be so damn platonic."

I hugged her a little tighter.

Her full red lips half parted, clung to mine. Her body pushed itself up against mine.

I heard a car stop.

"You're not in Sunday School," Billy Prue muttered.

I warmed up to my job. A flashlight beat on my face. A hard-boiled gruff voice said, "What the hell's coming off here?"

I released Billy Prue and blinked into the flashlight.

"What the hell's the idea?" the man said. "This is a business street."

Billy Prue gave him one look, then covered her face with her hands and started to sob.

The flashlight darted around through the car. "Let's have a look at you," the cop said.

I held my face up to the beating rays of the flashlight. He took in the smeared lipstick, the rumpled hair, the necktie that was pulled to one side, said, "Okay, get the hell out of here and try an auto camp next time."

I started the car and drove away fast.

Billy Prue said, "Gosh, that was a squeak!"

"You thought that up quick," I told her.

"I had to, My God, Donald! Does it always take you that long to get going?"

I started to say something and then the chill of the fog and the emotional build-up

that had come when Billy Prue started necking hit me with the force of a sledge hammer. I was shivering all over. I tried to stop the car, but before I could get it stopped I was wobbling around the street.

"Say, what the hell's the matter with you?" Billy asked.

I said, "The tropics turned my blood to water and—and you started it boiling."

I brought the car to a stop.

Billy Prue pulled me out from behind the steering wheel. "Listen," she said, "you're going to bed. Where do you live?"

"Not my apartment," I told her. "You can't take me there."

"Why not?"

"Frank Sellers will be having it watched."

She didn't say anything, just started the car. "Where?" I asked.

"You heard what the cop told us."

CHAPTER XI



I HAD A confused impression of white lights over a portico, a row of neat little stucco bungalows. I heard Billy Prue say, "... my husband ... sick ... back from the tropics ... thank you ... Extra covers ... yes, a double."

I was dimly conscious of water running, then I was on a bed, and a steaming hot towel quieted jumpy

nerves that were causing the muscles to cramp.

Billy Prue was bending over me.

"Go to sleep."

"I've got to get my clothes off."

"Don't be silly. They're off."

I closed my eyes. Warmth enveloped me and sudden oblivion.

I awakened with sunlight streaming across the bed. The aroma of fresh coffee was in my nostrils.

I knuckled sleep out of my eyes.

The door gently opened. Billy Prue peeked into the room. Her face relaxed when she saw I was awake.

"Hello," she said, "how you feeling?"

"I think I'm feeling fine. Gosh! Did I pass out last night!"

"There wasn't anything wrong with you except you were weak and completely fagged."

"Where did you get the coffee?"

"I've been shopping. There's a store down the block."

"What time is it?"

"How the hell would I know?" she said. "I don't carry a watch. You remember you pointed that out to me yesterday night when

you were trying to pin a murder on me?"

Almost instantly all of the various ramifications of the Stanberry murder came crowding back into my mind.

I said, "I've got to telephone the office."

She said, "You'll eat before you do a thing. The bathroom's all yours. Don't be too long about it because I'm cooking waffles."

She went back in the kitchen. I went into the bathroom, had the luxury of a hot bath, dressed, combed my hair with a pocket comb, and went out to the kitchen. Billy had grub cooked, and I was really hungry.

She watched me with wide, thoughtful eyes.

"You're a good kid, Donald," she said.

"What have I done now?"

She smiled. "It's the way you didn't do the things you didn't do," she said, "that makes you a gentleman."

"How are we registered?" I asked.

She said nothing, simply smiled at me.

I ate quite a bit before my stomach suddenly went dead on me, right in the middle of taking a bite.

I pushed the plate back.

Billy said, "Go out there and sit in the sun. If the woman who runs the place comes over and talks with you don't be embarrassed. We haven't got any baggage and she thinks we're living in sin but she's got a boy in the Navy."

I went out and sat in the sun.

The auto camp was out of town on the rim of a valley that stretched away to where a tracery of white snowcapped mountains hung against the deep blue sky.

I settled back and relaxed.

The woman who ran the place came over and introduced herself. She had a son who was on a destroyer somewhere in the South Pacific. I told her I had been on a destroyer myself, that I might have seen her son, might have even talked with him without knowing his name. She sat down beside me in the orange blossom scented sunlight and we both kept quiet, each respecting the thoughts of the other. After a while Billy Prue came out and sat down beside us. Then Billy said we had to go and the woman who ran the place made some excuse to get away so she wouldn't embarrass us by letting us know that she knew we didn't have any baggage.

Billy slid in behind the wheel of the agency car and started back toward town.

"Cigarette?"

"Not while I'm driving, Donald."

"Oh yes, I forgot."

We were almost at the Rendezvous when she suddenly asked, "How much are you going to tell your friend Sergeant Sellers about what I told you?"

"Nothing."

She slid the car in to a place at the curb and stopped.

Soft gentle fingers that somehow had a lot of strength in them squeezed mine. "You're a good egg, Donald," she said, "even if . . ."

"Even if what?" I asked as she stopped.

She opened the car door. "Even if you do talk in your sleep. Good-by Donald."

CHAPTER XII



LEAVING the car in the parking place across from the office I went up. It was half past twelve when I latchkeyed the door of the office. Elsie Brand was out to lunch.

I heard the sound of a creaking chair from Bertha's private office, then heavy feet on the floor and the door was jerked open.

Bertha Cool stood in the

doorway looking at me with icy exasperation.

"You!" she said.

"That's right."

"Why, goddamn you!" Bertha said. "Who do you think you are, and what do you mean by taking a powder? Here I thought you were all in. You looked like a ghost. I slave my fingers to the bone cooking eggs and bacon for you and you start philandering . . ."

"Do you want to quarrel in the outer office where clients can hear us?" I asked, dropping into a chair and picking up the morning paper.

"You irritating little impudent cold-blooded ingrate. Bertha used an eight dollar bottle of whisky to square things with that flatfoot from the police force, and you go . . ."

I jerked my head toward the transom. "People walking up and down the corridor can hear you, Bertha. Perhaps some possible client is standing outside . . ."

Bertha raised her voice. "I don't care how many clients are standing outside. I'm going to tell you this, and you're going to listen to it. If you think you can come back here and . . ."

A black shadow formed on the door of the office. I pointed my finger at it.

Bertha checked herself with an effort.

Someone tried the knob of the door.

Bertha took a deep breath. "See who it is, lover."

I put down the paper, crossed the room and opened the door.

A middle-aged man with a prominent bony nose, high forehead and big cheek bones looked past me with gray eyes that twinkled shrewdly over the rims of half glasses and said, "Mrs. Bertha Cool?"

Bertha Cool's manner mellowed. "Yes. What can I do for you?"

The man reached in his pocket. "First permit me to introduce myself. I am Frank L. Glimson, senior partner of the firm of Cosgate & Glimson, attorneys at law. And now, Mrs. Cool, I want you to do something for me."

He extended a paper to Bertha.

Bertha took the paper mechanically and said, "We do a lot of work for lawyers, Mr. Glimson. We rather specialize in that field. Donald, put down that newspaper. This is my partner, Mr. Glimson, Donald Lam. He's been in the Navy. Just back, and already hard at work. Now what was it you wanted? Something in these papers?"

Bertha unfolded the papers.

"Why— Why— Fry me for an oyster! Why, damn you for a . . .!"

Glimson held up his hand. "Just a moment, Mrs. Cool. Just a moment. Please let me explain."

"Explain hell!" Bertha shouted at him. "This is a summons in the case of Mrs. Rolland B. Lidfield versus Esther Witson and Bertha Cool. What in hell do you mean?"

"Just a minute, Mrs. Cool. Just a minute. Please let me explain."

Bertha whipped through the pages of the folded legal documents. "Fifty thousand dollars!" she screamed. "Fifty . . . thousand dollars!"

"Exactly," Glimson said acidly. "And if you wish to remain hostile to me, Mrs. Cool, it is going to cost you fifty thousand dollars."

Bertha was for the moment, speechless.

Glimson went on smoothly, "Mrs. Cool, I am prepared to make you a proposition, a business proposition, which is why I brought the papers here myself."

Glimson looked over at me and included me with an affable smile. "Now, Mrs. Cool," he said soothingly, "we don't really think that you were at all negligent. We think that Esther Witson is the one who was solely to blame for the accident."

HE BEAMED at Bertha Cool.

Bertha's jaw was pushed forward like a prow of a battleship. "What's your proposition?" she said ominously.

"Now, Mrs. Cool, you're angry at me."

"You're damn right I'm angry at you," Bertha screamed.

"Mrs. Cool, I'm not going to take any unfair advantage of you. I'm a lawyer and you're not. I'm going to tell you exactly what the law is. It used to be considered that the exoneration of one tort-feasor exonerated the other. But that rule has now been changed—rather it has been clarified by our courts. The case of Ramsey versus Powers, 74 Cal. App. 621 holds that when a tort has

been committed, and two or more parties are alleged by the plaintiff to have jointly committed the same . . ."

"What do I care about tort-feasors!" Bertha interrupted.

"Don't you see, Mrs. Cool? All that you have to do is to help us show that it really was Miss Witson who was at fault and that's all there is to it. But there's one peculiarity of the law, Mrs. Cool, and that is that in order to take a quick deposition as a matter of right, the person whose deposition is to be taken must be a party to the action. Now I don't say that I made you a party to the action merely in order to take your deposition, Mrs. Cool, but I am going to tell you that I want to take your deposition right here at your office at three o'clock this afternoon. And if your testimony shows that the accident was all the fault of Esther Witson, we will ask the court to dismiss the case against you on the ground that there is no liability on your part."

And Glimson beamed at her.

Bertha said, "Suppose this client of yours—what's her name?"

"Mrs. Rolland B. Lidfield," Glimson said.

"All right. Suppose Mrs. Lidfield was the one who was at fault?"

Glimson put long bony fingertips together. "Now, Mrs. Cool, I think you must have overlooked the significance of what I said to you just now. If the accident was occasioned by the negligence of Miss Witson then we will move the court to dismiss the action. . . ."

"What is this, bribery or blackmail?" Bertha asked.

"My dear Mrs. Cool! My dear Mrs. Cool!"

"Don't you my dear me," Bertha said.

"What's the idea of this thing anyway?"

"We want your deposition, Mrs. Cool. We feel that we are entitled to have your evidence perpetuated so that when the case comes up for trial we will know *exactly* what we have to contend with. In so many of these cases, Mrs. Cool, the evidence has a habit of jumping around. You'll think you have a good case, and then when you get in court . . . But after all, Mrs. Cool, you are a woman of the world, and you understand these things."

"I don't understand a damn thing about it," Bertha said, "except that I'm not going to be dragged into it. If you can show any negligence on my part, I'll eat it!"

Glimson threw back his head and laughed. "You express it so quaintly, Mrs. Cool. But you're going to feel rather foolish explaining in court why you gave the name *Boskovitch*!"

The telephone rang. I moved over to Elsie's desk and answered it.

The voice that came over the wire was vi-

brant with eager excitement. "Hello, hello. Who is this?"

"Donald Lam talking."

"Oh, Mr. Lam! This is Esther Witson. You know, the Miss Witson who was in that automobile accident, and who called . . ."

"Yes, I know."

"I want to talk with Mrs. Cool."

"She's busy right now. It might be better if she talked a little later."

"But, can't she come to the telephone just long enough to . . ."

I said, "She's busy now. It might be better if she called a little later."

Esther Witson thought that over for a moment, then said, "Oh, you mean that she's busy in connection with—something that has to do with that case?"

"Yes."

She said, "I wonder if you could answer my questions, Mr. Lam."

"I'll try."

"Is a hatchet-faced lawyer by the name of Glimson there?"

"Yes."

"Talking with her now?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Mr. Lam, I wonder if you could get this message to Mrs. Cool. My lawyer said that Glimson is trying to make Mrs. Cool a party so he can take her deposition, and that if Mrs. Cool would agree to whatever it is that Glimson wants without committing herself as to what her testimony is going to be, it would be the best way to trap Glimson in what my lawyer says is sharp practice."

I SAID, "I'll see what I can do."

"I'll come over a little later and explain things in detail," she said.

"I'll let you talk with Bertha," I said, and motioned to Bertha.

"I'll take it later," Bertha said.

"Better listen to this, Bertha. You can make up your mind later, but listen now."

Bertha moved over to the phone, said, "Hello," then listened.

After a while she said, "All right, Good-by," and hung up.

She turned to Glimson. "Where do you want to take this deposition?"

He beamed at her. "We can take it right here, Mrs. Cool. I'll have a notary who is also a shorthand court reporter move right in. It won't inconvenience you at all, only a few minutes—a few simple questions . . ."

"What time?"

"I had suggested three o'clock, but . . ."

"All right," Bertha snapped. "Make it three o'clock, and get the hell out of here so I can work."

Glimson's hand shot out. He shook my hand. He shook Bertha Cool's hand. He

nodded his head and backed out of the office still nodding.

"The dirty damned shyster," Bertha said when the door closed on him.

I said, "Wait until after three o'clock this afternoon before you say anything. And you might start thinking over what you're going to say. I think he may be an automobile lawyer."

Bertha glowered at me. "Any time that bony-faced buzzard thinks he can rattle me, he's got another think coming. Automobile lawyer my foot! I'll show him a thing or two."

"It's okay by me," I said, and picked up the paper again.

Bertha glowered at me and was just starting to say something when Elsie Brand fitted her latchkey to the door, opened it and then seemed surprised as she saw Bertha and me there.

"Oh, hello! I'm not interrupting, am I?"

Bertha said angrily, "Do we always have to hold our conferences here in the outer office? What the hell do we have a private office for?"

Elsie Brand said, "Sorry," in an impersonal tone of voice and crossed over to her typewriter.

Bertha turned to me, "We got interrupted," she said, sudden anger in her eyes. "Where did you sleep last night? Frank Sellers said you . . ."

She broke off as the outer door opened.

The man who entered was a broad-shouldered competent individual who at the moment looked as awkwardly self-conscious as a man at the ribbon counter of a department store. "Mrs. Cool?" he asked.

Bertha nodded.

"Mr. Lam?"

I got to my feet.

"My name," he said, "is Ellery Crail."

Bertha flashed me a glance, said hastily, "Come in. We were just on the point of going out—that's how you happened to catch us in the outer office. But we'll postpone it."

"I'm sorry to interfere," Crail apologized, "but I'm exceedingly busy and . . ."

"Come in," Bertha said, "come right in."

We filed into the private office. Bertha seated herself behind the desk, indicated a chair for me on her right, seated Crail in the big comfortable client's chair.

Crail cleared his throat. "In a way," he said, "I'm not consulting you in your professional capacity."

"No?" Bertha asked, her personality withdrawing itself behind a hard shell of incipient hostility. "Then what do you want?"

Crail said, "You were, I believe, a witness to an automobile accident yesterday."

"Oh, that!" Bertha said.

"For reasons of my own," Crail went on,

"I would like very much to have that case settled out of court, have the matter compromised and dropped."

Bertha pricked up her ears. Shrewd calculation glittered in her eyes. "Just how," she asked, "did you propose to go about it?"

Crail said, "I don't want to approach the attorneys on either side, but it occurred to me that you, being a professional woman, might be in a position to arrange for a cash settlement so that the entire matter would be dropped."

"May I ask what's your interest in it?" I inquired.

Crail said, "That's a question I'd prefer not to answer."

I said, "One of the parties to the accident wrote down the license numbers of the cars that were near by."

Crail changed position in the big chair. "Then you know the answer."

"What," Bertha demanded, "would be in it for me—for us?"

"I could," Crail said, "arrange to give you five hundred dollars if you could settle the matter for twenty-five hundred. That would make a total expenditure on my part of three thousand dollars."

"In other words," Bertha said eagerly, "you'll pay three thousand dollars to settle the case, and anything we can get between the amount of settlement and three thousand dollars will . . ."

"I didn't say that," Crail interrupted with dignity. "I said that I would be willing to pay you five hundred dollars to effect a settlement up to an amount of twenty-five hundred dollars."

"Suppose we get a settlement for two thousand dollars?"

"Your fee would be five hundred."

"The same as if we settled for twenty-five hundred?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't give us very much of an incentive to get a lower settlement."

"Exactly," Crail said. "I am making my proposition in the manner in which I have outlined it for a very definite reason. I don't want you to try and increase your own compensation at the expense of delaying a settlement. I want this thing cleaned up at once."

Bertha said, "Now, let's get this straight. All that you want us to do is settle this lawsuit over the automobile accident? That's absolutely everything?"

"That's all, yes. What else would there be?"

"I'm just getting it straight," Bertha said, "so that it won't interfere with any other work that we might have here in the office."

"I see no reason why it should, Mrs. Cool. My proposition is very simple."

Bertha said, "We'd want a retainer. At least a couple of hundred in advance."

Crail reached in his pocket for his checkbook, unscrewed the cap of his fountain pen, then thought better of it, put the cap back on the pen, the pen back in his pocket, folded the checkbook, drew out a wallet and counted out two hundred dollars in tens and twenties.

Bertha scribbled a receipt which Crail folded, tucked in his wallet and then got to his feet smiling inclusively. He shook hands with Bertha and me and went out.

Bertha's eyes glittered up into mine. "Well, lover, it's working out all right. Two hundred bucks here and two hundred bucks there, and the first thing you know, we'll have a real case out of it."

I said, "Why do you suppose he wants the case settled, Bertha?"

Bertha's eyebrows came up. "Why for the simple reason that he doesn't want anyone to know his wife was following Stanberry."

I said, "Somehow, in Mrs. Crail's position, I'd hardly confide in a husband."

"Well, what you'd do, and what she's done, are two different things."

"Perhaps, but I'm beginning to wonder if this case doesn't have another angle we haven't considered."

Bertha said irritably, "That's the devil of it with you, Donald. You keep arguing against established facts. Now you're going out with Bertha and get a nice lunch so that you won't get all run down like you were yesterday night."

"I had a late breakfast," I said.

"The hell you did! Say, where were you last night? I . . ."

The telephone made sound. Bertha glared at me for a minute, then snatched up the receiver.

I heard Elsie Brand's voice saying, "Esther Witson is here."

"Oh my God!" Bertha said. "I forgot she was coming. Send her in."

Bertha slammed back the receiver and said to me. "Now if we could get two hundred dollars out of her, we'd really be getting somewhere."

CHAPTER XIII



ESTHER Witson came barging in, her face filled with toothful smiles. A couple of steps behind her, a pudgy man about two-thirds bald beamed amiably at us behind horn-rimmed glasses. He had bluish-green eyes, an appearance of beefy solidarity and a manner which was consciously dynamic.

It was as though he'd been reading books on how to impress people and had remembered just about all he had read. A short red mustache, ragged and stiff as a bottle brush, separated his nose from a thick upper lip. His thick fingers clutched the handle of a brief case.

"My lawyer, Mr. Mysgart, John Carver Mysgart. He's handled my legal interests for years," Esther Witson said.

Mysgart bowed so that the light from Bertha's window reflected from the shiny expanse of his bald dome.

"This is Mrs. Cool," Esther Witson went on, "and this is Mr. Lam."

Mysgart shook hands. He was, he announced, very pleased to meet us both.

"Won't you be seated?" Bertha asked.

Esther Witson said, "They've served papers on me. I brought my lawyer along because I wanted him to explain the legal aspects of the situation."

She turned to Mysgart and beamed at him.

Mysgart cleared his throat. The amiable expression instantly left his face as he marshaled his features into the judicial. He said in tones of deep solemnity, "This is a legal outrage, Mrs. Cool. It is unfortunate that the legal profession is besmirched by such a firm as Cosgate & Glimson."

"Shysters?" Bertha asked.

"Not exactly what you'd call shysters," Mysgart said. "They are shrewd, aggressive, able and scrupulous in observing the exact letter of the law. But that is all. Yes, Mrs. Cool, that is all. Understand, I wouldn't want to be quoted in this. It is merely a confidential statement that I'm making—a privileged communication, by the way."

"He's had dealings with them before," Esther Witson interposed.

Mysgart lifted his brief case, opened it. "Take, for instance, this despicable, this damnable attempt to influence your testimony, Mrs. Cool. It is legal in the sense that there's no law against it, but it is something where the ethical lawyer can never condone. You see what they have done, don't you?"

"They've sued me," Bertha said.

"Exactly. They've named you as a defend-



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ant in order to worry you, in order to harass you, in order to annoy you, and in order to stampede you so that in giving your testimony you will be swayed by a desire to placate them."

Bertha said, "They can't scare me."

Esther Witson nodded enthusiastically, "That's exactly what I told Mr. Mysgart."

Mysgart beamed at Bertha. "I'm glad to hear you say so, Mrs. Cool. Now my idea is to turn their despicable little trick against them. You are entitled to five days notice before they can take your deposition, but these lawyers naturally didn't tell you that. They wanted to force you to testify in their favor, to intimidate you, to browbeat you. However, we've worked out a perfect defense to their little scheme, Mrs. Cool. My client was not only blameless throughout, but she is a generous, warm hearted, sympathetic woman who has a keen appreciation for the inconvenience to which you have been subjected."

"Mrs. Cool, my client, Esther Witson, has told me that she will defray the expenses of making a legal appearance for you. In other words, I am instructed by my client to file an answer on your behalf and proceed as your attorney until the matter is disposed of and it will not cost you one red cent—not one red cent, Mrs. Cool. My client will defray the entire cost of the action."

Bertha beamed all over her face. "You mean I won't have to hire any lawyer?"

"No, Mr. Mysgart will appear for you. He'll take care of everything," Esther Witson said.

"And it won't cost me a cent?"

"Not a red cent," Mysgart repeated.

Bertha heaved a sigh of relief and reached for a cigarette.

There was a moment's silence while Bertha lit up. I could see Bertha struggling for a diplomatic approach.

Abruptly she blurted, "How about settling the case?"

"Settling it!" Mysgart said mouthing the words as though forcing himself to say something utterly reprehensible. "My dear Mrs. Cool, there is nothing to settle—absolutely nothing."

Bertha coughed a couple of times, looked over to me for help.

I didn't say anything.

Bertha said, "After all, you know, lawsuits are expensive. And it occurred to me that in order to avoid all of the trouble of litigation—well, you know, I might make some offer of settlement to the plaintiff's lawyer to see if he'd wipe the whole thing off the books."

"Oh don't do that! For Heaven's sake, don't do that, Mrs. Cool! That would be an admission of liability on your part. That would

jeopardize the entire case. That would be inconceivably disastrous!"

"Well," Bertha said, "I'm a busy woman. I can't take the time . . ."

"Oh, but it isn't going to cost you anything," Esther Witson interrupted. "Mr. Mysgart will represent you at every stage of the proceedings and there won't be any charge—none whatever."

"But there's my time," Bertha said lamely. "I thought perhaps—well, you know, I'd offer them a thousand or two and see what they did."

MYSGART and his client exchanged glances of incredulous amazement.

"You mean you'd offer it yourself out of your own pocket?"

"Why not?"

"But why should you?" Mysgart said. "Can't you understand, Mrs. Cool, the only reason on God's green earth that they have made you a party defendant to this action is so they could take your deposition and bullyrag you into distorting what had happened so that it would be in their favor. It's a very shrewd and a very desperate trick. They put you in the position of being a defendant faced with a large contingent liability, and then assure you that if your testimony is the way they think it is going to be, they will dismiss the action against you. It's very plainly an attempt to influence the witness."

Bertha looked over at me.

I lit a cigarette.

Bertha looked at Mysgart, floundered around for words, then suddenly turned on me and said, "Say something."

Mysgart elevated his eyebrows, glanced curiously over at me.

"Want me to tell you what I think?" I asked Bertha.

"Yes."

I said, "Go ahead, tell them the truth. Tell them that Miss Witson was driving along behind you; that you stopped your car because you wanted to turn left; that you motioned her to go on around you and she stopped to bawl you out, and that was the reason she didn't see Lidfield's car coming."

There was a silence that you could have put in a slicing machine, cut off into small slices and wrapped up in paper.

Esther Witson said suddenly, "Well, if that's the position you're going to take, I'll do a little talking myself."

Mysgart said soothingly, "Come, come now ladies. Let's . . ."

"Shut up," Esther Witson said. "As a matter of fact, this fat slob was driving all over the road. First she was on the left. Then she swung way over to the right, just in front of me. Then damned if she didn't stop and start

giving left-hand turn signals and then waving her arms and going through a lot of outdoor calisthenics . . ."

"Who's a fat slob?" Bertha yelled.

"You are!"

"Ladies, ladies," Mysgart interposed.

"My God," Bertha said, "no horse-toothed biddy is going to call me a fat slob. I'm heavy—but I'm hard. There's nothing slobby about me. Get the hell out of here!"

"And," Esther Witson went on, "because I didn't know what you were going to do, and was trying to get past you, I was lured out into the intersection and . . ."

"My dear young lady," Mysgart said, on his feet now and between her and Bertha Cool, "you mustn't, you simply mustn't make such statements."

"I don't care," Esther Witson screamed. "It was all her fault, and as far as I'm concerned, she's the one that's responsible for the whole business."

Bertha Cool said, "You were so damned anxious to bawl me out that you damn near twisted your neck off. You weren't even looking where you were going. All I saw was those horse teeth of yours . . ."

"Don't you say anything about my teeth, you fat swill barrel!"

Mysgart got the door open into the corridor. "Please, Miss Witson, please—I beg of you."

Esther Witson yelled back over his shoulder. "I didn't want you for a witness, anyway. I hate fat stupidity."

"Keep your lips over your teeth as much as you can, Dearie," Bertha said. "You look like hell when your mouth is all the way open."

The door slammed.

Bertha, her face almost purple, looked at me. "Damn you," she said, "you did that. Sometimes I could rip you apart just to see what makes you tick—only you don't tick. You're too smooth. You're just a lot of damn wheels running in an oil bath. God how I hate you!"

I said, "Your cigarette's burning the desk."

Bertha snatched up the cigarette end, ground it out in the ash tray and glowered at me.

I said, "It had to come out sooner or later. It's better this way. You try juggling the truth and you'll get hurt. Eventually we'll settle this case for Crail, but not by letting Mysgart think he's going to have a case he can win. Esther Witson has money. If you settle the case, Mysgart can't charge his client a fat fee."

"If you're on his side, he'll put in a lot of time on legal monkey business and when he's won the case send his client a bill for about three thousand bucks. Tell the truth and Mysgart may be willing to work out a settle-

ment. Well, see you around deposition time. Better think over what you're going to say."

I walked out of the office.

Elsie Brand was pounding away at the keyboard of the typewriter. Without missing a beat of a single letter, she glanced up at me, her right eye slowly closed.

I winked back at her and went out.

CHAPTER XIV



T PRECISELY three-seventeen I returned to the office.

The deposition was under way. A court reporter sat at Elsie Brand's desk, taking down everything that was said in shorthand. Bertha Cool was on the witness chair looking rather triumphant. The man of about fifty with a weak chin and eager greedy eyes

who sat next to Frank Glimson would be Rolland B. Lidfield, one of the plaintiffs in the case.

As far as possible, John Carver Mysgart had interposed his bulk between Esther Witson and Bertha Cool. He had Esther parked pretty well behind him and he was scribbling furiously on a notebook as I opened the door, evidently taking down something he wanted to ask Bertha when it came his turn.

They all glanced up as I entered. Then Glimson went on with his questioning. His hands were out in front of his chest, the fingers spread apart, tips touching. His head was tilted back slightly and his bony face was a complete mask. "Now, Mrs. Cool, tell us exactly what you did."

"I slowed my car at the intersection," Bertha said, "and then I heard this raucous horn blowing behind me."

"Yes, yes, go on."

"And then Miss Witson swung her car around me out into the middle lane of traffic."

"And what did she do, if anything?"

"She started giving me a tongue lashing because she didn't like the way I was driving."

"She stopped her car to do this?" Glimson asked.

"She did not. She was shooting around me with a heavy foot on the throttle."

"She was, of course, facing you," Glimson said as one who makes a statement rather than asks a question.

"I'll say she was facing me," Bertha said.

"You saw her eyes?"

"I saw her eyes and her teeth."

Esther Witson moved in her chair.

Mysgart reached back and made little

pattie-cake gestures with his hand to quiet down his client.

Glimson's eyes held a flashing glint of triumph. "Then when Miss Witson drove past you, she was looking at you and talking to you. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"Let me see if I have understood your testimony correctly, Mrs. Cool. I believe you said that when you came to the intersection you brought your car almost to a stop."

"That's right."

"Now let's not misunderstand each other. When Miss Witson went past you, she was looking at you and talking to you, and your car was at the intersection, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Then the front of her car must have been well into the intersection?"

"Well, yes."

"While she was looking at you and talking to you?"

"Yes."

"And all of this time she was traveling at a high rate of speed?"

"She was stepping on it. She had a heavy foot on the throttle."

"And when did she turn around to look where she was going?" Glimson asked.

"Well, all of a sudden, it seemed to hit her that she hadn't been looking . . ."

"Note an objection," Mysgart said, "that the witness cannot testify as to what seemed to have been passing through my client's mind. She can only testify . . ."

"Yes, yes," Glimson interrupted. "Just tell us the facts, Mrs. Cool, not what you think."

"Or what she thinks my client thought," Mysgart added sarcastically.

Glimson glared at him.

Mysgart wiggled his upper lip so that his mustache scratched his nose.

"Well, she suddenly turned around and there was this other car right on top of her," Bertha snapped.

"You mean the car which was being driven by Mr. Rolland B. Lidfield, the gentleman sitting at my right?"

"Yes."

"And this car driven by Mr. Lidfield was turning to the left, was it not, so that it was headed up Mantica Street in a northerly direction?"

"That's right."

"And Miss Witson, with what you have described as a heavy foot on the throttle, charged her car blindly into the intersection of Garden Vista Boulevard and Mantica Street directly in front of the car driven by Mr. Lidfield. Is that right?"

"That's right."

Glimson settled back in his chair and lowered his hands until they rested across his stomach. He turned to Mysgart with a be-

nign expression. "Would you care to cross-examine?"

Esther Witson stirred uneasily in her chair.

MYSGART made another little blind patting gesture in her general direction and said, "Certainly."

"Go ahead."

"Thank you," Mysgart retorted with heavy sarcasm.

Mysgart shifted the position of his chair somewhat. Bertha Cool glanced at me with a triumphant expression as much as to say that no damn lawyer was going to mix her up, and then turned her eager little eyes on Mysgart.

Mysgart cleared his throat. "Now let's just go back to the beginning and see if we get this straight, Mrs. Cool. You were proceeding in a westerly direction on Garden Vista Boulevard?"

"Yes."

"And how long had you been driving westerly along Garden Vista Boulevard before you came to the intersection of Mantica Street?"

"Eight or ten blocks, perhaps."

"Now at the intersection of Mantica Street, you have testified that your automobile was in the extreme right-hand lane, the lane that is next to the curb."

"Yes."

"And how long had it been in that lane?"

"I don't know."

"You wouldn't say for eight or ten blocks?"

"No."

"Some of the time you have been over on the extreme left-hand lane, the one that's closest to the center of the road, hadn't you, Mrs. Cool?"

"I suppose so."

"And part of the time you had been in the middle lane?"

"No."

Mysgart raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You're certain of that, Mrs. Cool?"

"Absolutely certain," Bertha snapped.

"At no time at all, had you operated your car in the middle lane? Is that right?"

"That's right."

"But you had been over on the left-hand lane?"

"Yes."

"And at the time of the accident you were over on the right-hand lane?"

"Yes."

"Then," Mysgart said with elaborate sarcasm, "will you be so kind to tell us, Mrs. Cool, how you could possibly have got from the left-hand lane to the right-hand lane without driving over the middle lane?"

"I may have crossed it," Bertha said with irritation.

"Oh," Mysgart said with well-simulated

surprise, "then you *did* operate your car on the middle lane?"

"I went across it."

"Straight across?"

"Yes."

"Then am I to understand you turned sharply and crossed the middle lane at a right angle?"

"Don't be silly, I *angled* over to the right-hand lane."

"Oh, then, you turned abruptly in front of oncoming traffic?"

"Certainly not," Bertha said. "You can't mix me up. I eased my way over."

"Taking perhaps a block in order to complete your maneuver, or two blocks, or three blocks, or four blocks?"

"I don't know."

"It *might* have been four blocks?"

"I don't know. . . . It could have been."

"Then for a long distance, Mrs. Cool, perhaps for as much as four blocks, you *were* operating your car in the middle lane of traffic?"

"I was easing my way across it."

"Then what did you mean by telling us that at no time did you operate your car on the middle lane of traffic?"

"Well, I meant that I wasn't—well, I wasn't going down the middle lane and intending to keep on it."

"But you did operate your car across the middle lane?"

"Across, yes."

"Then for a certain period of time you did have your car moving along Garden Vista Boulevard so that all four of its wheels were within the white lines of the middle lane?"

"I guess so, yes."

"I don't want any guessing about it," Mysgart announced. "I want the facts. Come, Mrs. Cool, if you're as expert an automobile driver as you claimed, you certainly should be able to tell us frankly and without equivocation whether you did or did not at any time within those eight or ten blocks operate your automobile so that all four wheels were within the white lines of the middle lane of the highway."

"I did, yes!" Bertha shouted at him.

Mysgart settled back in his chair with sad resignation. "Then you were testifying incorrectly, Mrs. Cool, when you said that at no time did you operate your car on the middle lane."

Bertha started to say something but the words sputtered into angry, inarticulate sounds. The court reporter looked up.

"Come, come," Mysgart said, "try and answer that question."

BERTHA said, "I've told you what happened."

"Exactly. You have told me two different

things, Mrs. Cool. I'm really trying to find out which is correct."

Little beads of perspiration appeared on Bertha's forehead. She said, "All right, have it your way."

"No, no, not my way," Mysgart interposed hastily, "*your* way, Mrs. Cool. And may I caution you that you're under oath, so this time try and tell the truth."

"All right," Bertha screamed at him, "I was on the left-hand lane. I crossed over the middle lane to the right-hand one. Now what's wrong with that?"

"A great deal *might* have been wrong with it," Mysgart said condescendingly. "It depends on how you did it. Did you give any signal before you cut across the right-hand lane?"

"No, I didn't."

"Did you look behind?"

"Of course I looked behind."

"Turned your head?"

"No. I took a glance into the rearview mirror."

"And, because of the angle at which your car was being operated, you couldn't see the road down that lane. In other words, since you had turned your car sharply to the right, your rearview mirror only showed the vehicles directly behind you. What I am getting at," Mysgart said soothingly, "is that you didn't see the car operated by Esther Witson which was coming behind you?"

"No, I didn't," Bertha admitted.

"When did you first see it?"

"When I got over to the right-hand curb and stopped. Then I looked up in the rear-view mirror and saw her right behind me."

"Oh, you *stopped*?"

"Yes, I stopped," Bertha said angrily. "Now try and twist something out of that."

"Did you give a stop signal when you stopped?"

"Yes, I did."

"How?"

"I put my arm out of the window on an angle."

"Your whole arm?"

"My whole arm."

"And gave a stopping signal?"

"A stopping signal," Bertha asserted.

"Now why did you stop, Mrs. Cool? You didn't have any passengers to let out at the curb, did you?"

"No."

"And you knew that this wasn't a parking place?"

"Of course."

"You were right at the intersection?"

"Right at the intersection."

"And there was a traffic signal on Mantica Street?"

"Yes."

"And that signal was in a position that held

traffic open for travel along Garden Vista Boulevard?"

"That's right."

"And yet you stopped?"

"Well, I just about stopped."

"Not whether you just about stopped, Mrs. Cool. I want to know whether you stopped."

"Well, I—I may have been moving very slowly."

"But a moment ago, Mrs. Cool, you said you stopped."

"All right," Bertha shouted at him, "I stopped, then."

"Brought your car to a dead stop?"

"To a dead stop, if you want it that way."

"Not the way I want it, Mrs. Cool, but what did you actually do?"

"All right, I stopped my car."

"To a dead stop?"

"I didn't get out and stick my finger and sight along the edge of it to see if the car was moving," Bertha said sarcastically.

"Oh, I see," Mysgart said as though that explained everything. "I think you misunderstood me, Mrs. Cool, or I misunderstood you. As I get your testimony now, you aren't absolutely certain whether your car was at a dead stop or whether it was moving?"

"That's right."

"But you did give a full arm signal that you were going to stop?"

"That's right."

"A stop signal?"

"That's what I said."

"And that's what you meant?"

"Of course that's what I meant."

"Now let me ask you again, Mrs. Cool, why did you stop? You didn't intend to park there."

Bertha said, "I intended to turn left as soon as this other car got around me."

"Oh, you intended to turn left? Did you convey your intention by means of any signal?"

"Certainly."

"You mean you gave a left-turn signal?"

"That's right."

"And how did you do that, Mrs. Cool?"

"How does anyone do it?"

"No, no, Mrs. Cool, I want to know how you did it."

BERTHA said, "I stuck my left arm out of the window—straight out."

"A full arm signal?"

"A full arm signal."

"And then you saw this car behind you."

"Yes."

"For the first time?"

"Yes."

"And you wanted that car to go around you?"

"Yes."

"Did you convey your intention to the driver of that car by means of any signal?"

"Certainly."

"What did you do?"

"I motioned her to go ahead."

"How?"

"By waving my arm."

"Just what do you mean, by waving your arm, Mrs. Cool?"

Bertha thrust her arm out and made a series of circular motions.

"Let the records show," Mysgart said, "that Mrs. Cool at this point extends her left arm and makes a series of circular motions—motions which go higher than her head when the arm is elevated, and down almost to the floor when the arm is lowered. That's right, Mrs. Cool?"

"That's right," she said, and then added sarcastically, "I'm glad you've got something right."

"And as soon as she received that signal, Miss Witson drove around you. Is that right?"

"Drove around me, giving me a piece of her mind," Bertha said.

"Now your window was down on the left-hand side, was it not?" [Turn page]

"People Who String Along With Me Get Along. But People Who Don't—"

VITALA BARRETTI, the gambling czar who ran the Sundown Club, looked piercingly, meaningfully at Johnny Knight as he spoke. "You fix it up with the reformers to lay off my club," Barretti continued, "and you are in the big leagues. Pass up this chance I'm giving you, and things happen to you. Not nice things."

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COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE



"Yes."

"And how about the window on Miss Witson's car?— Careful now, Mrs. Cool. I don't want to trap you. I simply want to test your powers of observation, and see what you can remember. Was the right-hand window on Miss Witson's car down or up?"

Bertha thought for a minute then said, "It was up."

"You're positive?"

"Positive."

"All of the windows on the right-hand side of Miss Witson's car were up?"

"Yes."

"All the way up?"

"That's what I said."

"And exactly what did Miss Witson say to you? What words did she use?"

A gleam of triumph came into Bertha's eyes. "You're not going to trap me that way," she said.

Mysgart raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that if the windows on the right-hand side were up, I couldn't hear what she was saying, and you know it as well as I do. I could see her talking."

"But you couldn't hear the words?"

"Naturally not. Not with the windows up."

"Couldn't hear any words?"

"No. Well, I heard . . . no, I won't swear to it."

"Then how do you know that Miss Witson was giving you what you have referred to as a piece of her mind?"

"I could tell it by the expression on her face."

"You didn't hear a word she said?"

"No."

"Then when you say she was giving you a piece of her mind, you're depending upon mental telepathy."

"I could see the expression on her face."

"Can you tell what people are thinking by the expression on their faces?"

"Yes. When their lips are moving."

Mysgart immediately moved his lips soundlessly for several seconds and then asked,

"What did I say then, Mrs. Cool?"

"You didn't say anything then."

"But I was moving my lips. I was actually stating something. I made a very definite statement, Mrs. Cool. I was moving my lips, and you could see the expression on my face, couldn't you?"

Bertha didn't say anything.

"So you don't know what I said?"

Bertha took refuge in a sullen, badgered silence.

Mysgart waited for several seconds, then said, "Let the record show that the witness either cannot or will not answer the question."

Bertha was sweating now.

MYSGART went on. "So, Mrs. Cool, having suddenly shot from the left lane of traffic over to the right lane of traffic, directly in front of the car being operated by my client, Miss Witson, you suddenly gave a stop signal, slowed your car somewhat, you don't know how much because you don't know whether it was stopped or whether it was still moving. You abruptly gave a left-hand turn signal, then you suddenly gave this whole wild series of arm signals, and thereupon proceeded to block traffic completely and thoroughly so far as the right-hand lane of traffic was concerned. Can you give any logical explanation of why you did that?"

"I tell you I wanted to turn left, and I wanted this car to go around me."

"You knew that you had no right to stop in the intersection when the signal was for open traffic operating along Garden Vista Boulevard?"

"Well, if you want to be technical about it, yes."

"So you brought your car to an illegal stop."

"All right."

"You knew that you had no right to turn to the left from the right-hand lane of traffic?"

"Of course. That's why I wanted this other car to go by me."

"So you gave two signals for two illegal maneuvers, one right after the other?"

"Well, if you want to put it that way, yes."

"Now this car that was being driven by Mr. Lidfield, when did you first see it?"

"Just before the crash."

"Exactly how long before the crash?"

"I can't tell you. I'd say it was a second."

"And where was it when you first saw it?"

"It was just swinging into a left-hand turn."

"And you know where the actual collision took place?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Right in front of my car. It blocked me so I couldn't move one way or another."

"Exactly. I don't want to trap you, Mrs. Cool. I'll say that an actual survey shows that the distance from the place where the cars were found to the center of the intersection was exactly thirty-one feet. That distance seems just about right to you, does it?"

"Just about."

"It's the exact distance, Mrs. Cool. I think Counsel on the other side will agree with me."

Mysgart looked at Glimson and Glimson said nothing.

"Now then, Mrs. Cool, when you first saw

this Lidfield car, it was some distance back of the intersection?"

"Well, it hadn't reached the center of the intersection yet."

"Exactly. So the car had to reach the center of the intersection, make a turn on the far side of the center of the intersection, and then go thirty-one feet before it hit the Witson car."

"I guess so, yes."

"A distance, in all, perhaps of about fifty feet?"

"Well, somewhere around there, yes."

"So that you would say the Lidfield car had to travel at least fifty feet from the time you first saw it before the time of the collision?"

"I'd say so, yes."

"And you have stated positively, Mrs. Cool, that you saw the car just one second before the collision."

"That's right," Bertha said.

Mysgart said, "Has it ever occurred to you, Mrs. Cool, that a car which travels fifty feet in a second is traveling at the rate of three thousand feet a minute. And three thousand feet a minute is faster than thirty-four miles per hour?"

Bertha blinked her eyes.

"So then," Mysgart said, "by your own figures, Mrs. Cool—now I don't want to trap you, but by your own figures, this Lidfield car was whirling around that intersection at a speed in excess of thirty-four miles per hour. Is that about right?"

Bertha said, "I don't think it was going that fast."

"Then your other testimony must have been wrong. Do you think it was more than fifty feet from the intersection?"

"Well, not more."

"But at least fifty feet from the scene of the accident?"

"Yes."

"Then your time must have been wrong. You think it was more than a second?"

"Perhaps."

"But you have already stated positively that it was just one second, Mrs. Cool. Do you want to change that testimony?"

Bertha was sweating all over her forehead now. She said, "I don't know how fast the car was going. I just looked up and saw it and then there was a crash."

"Oh, you looked up and saw it!"

"Yes."

"Then you must have been looking down before the crash."

"Well, I don't know where I was looking."

"I see. You don't know whether your car was moving or whether it was stopped. You don't know whether you were looking to one side or looking to the other?"

"I was looking down," Bertha said.

"Then you weren't looking to one side."

"No."

"Then you couldn't have been looking at Esther Witson."

"I was looking at her."

"Make up your mind," Mysgart said.

Bertha remained doggedly silent.

Mysgart smiled triumphantly. "I think," he announced, "that is all."

The man who was taking down the record closed his shorthand notebook. Esther Witson smirked at Bertha and walked out. Mysgart scratched his nose with his mustache.

Swiftly the people thinned out until Bertha and I were alone once more in an office that seemed something like a prize ring after the contestants had left.

CHAPTER XV



HE carefully closed the door. She said, "You got me into that. Why didn't you tell me what I was going up against?"

"I tried to, but you told me that no lawyer could rattle you."

Bertha just glared at me, reached for a cigarette.

I took one from my pocket and settled down into the client's chair.

Bertha said, "How can anyone remember all those little things? You can't remember what you were doing and just how many seconds lapsed and all that sort of stuff."

I said, "I'm interested in Esther Witson. She'd been tagging along for eight or ten blocks. Now you remember she . . ."

There was a timid knock at the door.

I said, "If that happens to be Mysgart, don't lose your temper."

Bertha looked at me helplessly. "If it's that lawyer," she said, "you . . . you do the talking, lover."

I opened the door.

Mysgart said, "May I come in?"

"Come on in," I told him, and indicated the client's chair.

Mysgart smiled at Bertha Cool. "I trust there are no hard feelings, Mrs. Cool."

I answered for Bertha. "No hard feelings," I told him. "It's all a matter of business."

"Thank you, Mr. Lam. I'm glad you appreciate my position. My client is a little impulsive—as so many women are."

Bertha simply glared at him, and blew smoke out through her nostrils.

"Cigarette?" I asked Mysgart.

"Thank you."

I passed over the humidior. He took one and lit it.

"Is Mrs. Lidfield badly injured?" I asked. He made a little grimace and said, "You know how those things go. If she gets a settlement she'll be running around sly as can be. If she doesn't she'll be in bed for a year. Glimson is a shrewd one. He specializes in this sort of stuff."

"You're no slouch, yourself," I told him.

He grinned.

Bertha said, "Of all the . . ."

I said to Glimson, "Excuse me. If you're going to handle it, I'll go out."

I started for the door.

"Don't go, Donald."

I hesitated a moment, looked meaningly at her.

"I'll keep quiet," Bertha promised.

"I took my hand off the knob of the door.

Mysgart said hastily, "Mrs. Cool said something about being willing to effect a settlement in the case so she wouldn't have to be a witness."

"She's been a witness now," I said.

Mysgart opened his brief case, fumbled around, brought out some papers and started looking at them very studiously. He said, "I think it might be possible to settle the case. I think that's the reason Glimson wanted to rush ahead with these depositions. I think he wanted to get some kind of a settlement."

"Well," I said, "anything you want to make."

He looked at me in surprise. "You mean that you don't want to make any settlement now?"

"Not particularly."

"Why, Mr. Lam! I don't want to precipitate an argument, and I trust we can handle this in a business spirit and in a friendly way, but the evidence now shows that Mrs. Cool was quite negligent according to her own testimony. She was stopping at an illegal place, at an illegal time, in an illegal manner, and giving conflicting signals for two illegal maneuvers as well as this waving signal."

I said, "How about your own client? If Lidfield was driving his car fast then, he must have been in the intersection before Esther Witson entered the intersection. So then it was up to her to look out for him."

Mysgart said, "I will admit that there are some puzzling aspects to the case."

"They aren't puzzling Glimson any."

Mysgart sighed. "I was hoping," he said, "that a way would present itself by which we could get the entire matter satisfactorily cleared up."

"How much does Glimson want?"

"Oh, I haven't the faintest idea."

I kept on smoking.

"If you folks would make some contribution," Mysgart said, "my client might be prepared to make some contribution and be-

tween us we might get the situation straightened up."

I said, "Why don't you quit beating around the bush?"

MYSGART scratched his nose with the red mustache. "The situation," he said, "has some unfortunate aspects."

I said, "All right. I'll break the ice. We'll give you five hundred dollars."

He looked at me reproachfully. "Five hundred dollars! Is that intended to be a joke—or an insult?"

I said, "You can take it either way. If you don't want it I'll withdraw it."

"No, no. No, no," he said. "Now don't be hasty, Mr. Lam. After all, you and I are businessmen, and we can keep our tempers. Can't we?"

"I don't know," I told him.

Mysgart jumped up, shoving papers back in his brief case. "Now just keep calm," he said. "Just keep cool, Mr. Lam. After all you and I are businessmen. We'll see what we can do. Glimson and his client are waiting out by the elevator. I'll talk with him."

Mysgart went out the door.

"Why didn't you offer him fifteen hundred bucks?" Bertha asked. "He'd have jumped at that."

I said, "Wait and see."

Bertha said, "The whole damn thing is screwy to me. Damn lawyers, anyway. The questions that man asked me! Why, if a man jumped on you like that, you couldn't tell what you'd had for breakfast."

I grinned at her.

"Go on and grin like a Cheshire cat," Bertha said. "I'd just like to see you get up there on the witness stand once and let those birds start asking you questions."

The telephone rang.

Bertha pounced on the receiver, said, "Hello," and then made her voice all honey and syrup. "Oh yes, Miss Rushe. No indeed, we haven't forgotten you. Just a moment and I'll let you talk with Donald. He's around the office somewhere. It may take me a minute to get him. Just hold the line."

Bertha clapped her palm over the mouthpiece of the telephone and said, "It's Georgia Rushe and damned if I hadn't forgotten all about her. What are we supposed to be doing for her—oh yes, that investigation of Mrs. Crail. It's up to you to talk to her, lover. You're good at making things up on the spur of the moment. Thank Heavens I had sense enough to stall her along and tell her you weren't immediately available. Start thinking and I'll tell her that you're busy dictating and she'll have to wait a minute."

"I'll talk to her," I said.

"Well, think up something good," Bertha told me.

Bertha took her hand off the mouthpiece and said, "He's dictating, Miss Rushe, but he'll be here right away. He . . . Here he is now . . . What? What's that?"

Bertha scowled portentously into the mouthpiece. "Say that over again," she said. "Say it slow."

Bertha listened for as much as thirty seconds, then said, "You're sure that's what you want? Well, if that's the way you feel about it. Poor child, you're crying! Now listen. You better talk with Donald. He's here. He wants to talk with you."

Bertha once more clapped her palm over the mouthpiece.

"Take it, Donald. She's nuts, too!"

I took the telephone, said, "Lam talking, Miss Rushe."

Georgia Rushe poured words into the telephone with such rapidity that it was difficult to understand them. It was a steady stream of almost hysterical sound.

"I want you to call everything off, Mr. Lam. I want you to stop it. Don't do another thing. Let it go just as it is. I'm sorry I ever started it. I didn't realize what it would lead to or I wouldn't have done so. And don't worry about the two hundred dollars. Simply keep that and forget about the whole thing. Only don't—don't under any circumstances ever let on that I employed you to do anything. And please, please stop everything right now. Don't do another bit of work. Just stop whatever you're doing. Quit the whole business."

"May I ask why you've reached this decision, Miss Rushe?"

"I can't tell you. I can't tell you a thing in the world about it. I don't have time to discuss things. I don't want to. Just let it go, please."

I said, "Perhaps you'd better come into the office personally and confirm these instructions."

"You don't need them confirmed. They're all right. You do just as I tell you. Surely it doesn't need any signature before a notary public to tell you to quit work. What's the matter with you people! What are you trying to do, anyway? Just quit it. I tell you I want you to stop. Don't do another thing. Just forget the whole business. Keep the money. Stop right there."

She was keying herself up to an hysterical pitch.

"But, Miss Rushe, we're just beginning to get some really valuable information. We're getting . . ."

"That's what I was afraid of. That's why I want you to stop. Stop right now. I don't want anything more. I'm . . . I'm going away. I'm . . . I'm not going to be here. You won't see me again—ever."

I heard the sound of a choking sob at the

other end of the line, and then abruptly the receiver was hung up.

I dropped my receiver back into the cradle.

"What do you make of it?" Bertha asked.

I looked at Bertha gravely and said, "As nearly as I can make anything of it, she wants us to quit working on the case."

Red blood flushed into Bertha's face. "Damn it! Don't you think I can understand the English language? I know what she said. I was asking you what you made of it. At times you're the most despicable little . . ."

A timid knock sounded on the door.

"Mysgart," I said.

BERTHA gave me a final glare, then put on her best receiving-a-client smile and said, "After all, the son-of-a-gun is making money for us. Come in."

Mysgart opened the door almost apologetically. The way he moved into the room was an indication of the pussy-footing tactics in which he was indulging. The feet unconsciously adjusted themselves to the man's mental processes. He all but tiptoed over the client's chair. "Mr. Lam," he said, "I think that if you could make that one thousand dollars we could effect a settlement."

I looked at my watch and grinned at him. "You're just two minutes too late."

"What do you mean?"

I said, "I mean, Mrs. Cool and I have just received a very unpleasant jolt. A very important case on which we were working has been canceled."

"A big case?" he asked.

"It was a small case," I said, "as cases start. But it was leading to something big, very big."

Mysgart scratched his nose with his mustache.

I said, "Under the circumstances, I don't see how we can even contribute five hundred dollars toward a settlement. I'm afraid we'll have to just let the thing take its course."

"Oh, but you can't do that! You can't do that! I've already made the settlement!"

"On the basis of a thousand dollars?" I asked.

"Just a minute," he said. He came up out of the client's chair with a rush. "Just a minute now. Don't go away! Just a minute now!"

He was out through the door like a fleeting shadow.

Bertha looked at me and said, "Whatever Georgia Rushe said over the telephone doesn't affect the job we are doing for Mr. Crail."

I said breezily, "Well, let's not be narrow-minded about it—particularly when we're dealing with an automobile lawyer."

Bertha batted her eyes at me, said suddenly, "I love you, you little beast. I have the greatest admiration for the thinking machine that's back of your eyes—and you make me so goddam mad I could kill you a dozen times a day. You . . ."

Mysgart's timid little knock sounded on the door, and this time he didn't wait for an invitation to enter, but having made the knock as a matter of formality, he twisted the knob, opened the door just far enough to accommodate his pudgy body, and slipped into the room, closing the door silently behind him. He was nodding his head. His lips were smiling, but his eyes were dubiously apprehensive.

"It's all right. I've got it fixed. It's all settled. My congratulations to both of you. You've worked out a very fine settlement. You've extricated yourselves from a very precarious position. It's all right. Five hundred dollars will do it. I've explained to the parties that the cash will be immediately forthcoming."

I said, "Mrs. Cool will want releases signed by Mr. Lidfield, Mrs. Lidfield, and Esther Witson."

"She shall have them. I've taken the liberty of asking your secretary to type out a release from Esther Witson, Mrs. Cool; and Mr. Glimson has the releases all signed by Mrs. Lidfield and Mr. Lidfield."

"Where did he get Mrs. Lidfield's signature?" Bertha asked suspiciously.

"Glimson had a signed release with him, the consideration, of course, being blank."

Bertha pushed back her chair an inch or two. "Do you mean he came up here and put on that act for the sole purpose of black-mailing me into a settlement? You mean that he had the signed release in his brief case all the time he . . ."

Mysgart held up a pudgy hand. "Just a moment, Mrs. Cool. Just a moment. Calm yourself, please! I beg of you, don't get all excited. It's not entirely an unusual situation. An attorney secures a written Power of Attorney from a client to effect a settlement, then has the client sign a release, the attorney being given a certain leeway, a certain discretion. That's so that when all of the parties are together and are in a mood for settlement, a prompt settlement can be put through without the necessity of a lot of delay which sometimes leads to complications. I can assure you that it's not at all unusual, Mrs. Cool. I've even done it myself!"

I said to Bertha Cool, "Make out a check to John Carver Mysgart, attorney for Esther Witson; and Cosgate & Glimson, attorneys for Mr. and Mrs. Rolland Lidfield, in an amount of five hundred dollars."

"What are you talking about?" Bertha said. "I make out a check to the Lidfields and to

Esther Witson, and I turn it over when I get the release and not before."

Mysgart coughed.

I SAID to Bertha, "No soap, Bertha. You're dealing with a couple of automobile lawyers."

"What the hell do you mean?" Bertha asked.

I said, "It's a matter of professional courtesy to make the check payable to the lawyer rather than the client."

"Then what protects me?"

"The release of the client," Mysgart interposed, smiling gratefully at me. "You have the signed release of the client, a release which will be ample in form, Mrs. Cool, releasing you from all claims of any sort, nature, or description from the beginning of the world to the date hereof."

"From the beginning of the world?" Bertha said.

Mysgart's bald head reflected the light as he nodded vehemently. "A legal form, Mrs. Cool, a safeguard."

"You're so good to me," Bertha said sarcastically and then added, "fifty thousand years would be all right."

"The beginning of the world is a legal standard. It's a form, Mrs. Cool. Apparently Mr. Lam has some familiarity with the procedure in such cases, and I think he can assure you that it's a customary form and it would be well for you to take advantage of its protection."

"Oh nuts!" Bertha said disgustedly. "Have I got to write all that stuff in a check?"

I said, "Elsie can type it. Give me a check and I'll go out and get her to fill it in."

"Don't give up the check until you get the releases," Bertha said.

Mysgart coughed again.

I said to Mysgart, "The bank's right downstairs. It's after hours, but we can get in the side door and they'll cash a check given for a settlement like this. You and Glimson can go down to the bank with me. When the cashier shoves the cash through the window you and Glimson can hand me the signed releases, and . . ."

Mysgart's head was bobbing enthusiastically up and down. "You and I are businessmen, Mr. Lam! That's excellent."

Bertha jerked open the drawer of the desk, pulled out a checkbook, and ripped out a blank check which she fairly shoved into my hand.

"Donald," she said, "if you love me get those goddam lawyers out of my office."

Mysgart turned and started to say something conciliatory.

I slipped my hand through his arm and gently led him out of the office.

Elsie Brand had to crowd the lines in order

to get all of that in the check, but she managed it.

I said to Mysgart, "Wait here. I'll go and get Bertha's signature on the check, then we'll go downstairs. Now there's a couple of things we'll want in connection with the settlement."

"What are those?"

I said, "Esther Witson was a busy little woman getting names and license numbers of witnesses at the time of the accident, and I think Mr. Lidfield did a little prowling around on his own. My partner is a little suspicious. She'll want to get all of the data that both parties had, the names of witnesses and license numbers."

"Oh, yes," Mysgart said, nodding enthusiastically once more. "I can appreciate her attitude. She confuses my professional attitude with my personal relations. She shall have all the data, Lam, all of it. We won't hold out a thing. No, indeed!"

He beamed at me.

I took the check in and put it on Bertha's desk.

She looked at me suspiciously, said, "When these lawyers start pussyfooting around the office and smirking at each other, damned if you don't join in the procession and pussy-foot and smirk right along with the rest of them."

Bertha grabbed up the desk pen and all but jabbed the point through the paper as she signed the check.

I went out gently closing the door.

The little group was clustered around the elevator. Lidfield came over and thrust out a rather timid hand. "I haven't had a chance to meet you, Mr. Lam. I'm glad we're getting this thing settled. Rather a nasty case."

"I only hope your wife will get better," I said.

A look of ineffable sadness crossed his face. "I hope so. Poor girl!"

We all went down to the bank.

"Now just a moment," I said, "before the money is passed over. You'll remember that I was to get a complete list of the witnesses."

Mysgart smiled at Esther Witson and said, "That was the understanding, Miss Witson. I think you have a notebook there . . ."

Esther Witson pulled a notebook out of her pocket, said, "You can copy these or . . ."

I said, "Just take the original pages out of the notebook. It's a loose-leaf notebook and . . ."

Esther Witson jerked the pages out of the notebook and handed them to me.

"These are all?" I asked.

"All," she said.

"Now then," Glimson said, "there's a consideration to be paid by Miss Witson herself, and . . ."

"We can do that between us," Mysgart in-

terposed hurriedly. "Miss Witson's bank is down the street four or five blocks, and if we hurry, we'll be able to get in the side door. They know Miss Witson very well down there, and . . ."

Glimson said to Lidfield, "Give me a list of your witnesses."

Lidfield was rather apologetic. He said, "I just wrote the license number of every car that was around there that I could see."

I said to Glimson, "Of course after your client gave you the license numbers of these automobiles, you had them investigated and have the names of the owners?"

Glimson sighed reluctantly, opened his brief case and took out a typewritten sheet of paper which he handed to me without a word.

The teller looked at me inquiringly.

I nodded.

They grabbed the money and started for the door of the bank, anxious to get down to Esther Witson's bank while they could still get in.

CHAPTER XVI



ROSSING over to a phone booth, I telephoned the office.

Elsie Brand answered the telephone.

"Hello, Elsie." I asked, "How's the blood pressure?"

"Pretty high."

"Okay. I've got a little thinking to do. If there'll be a rise in blood pressure in the office I'll go over and sit in the car while I

think things out."

"Personally," Elsie said, "I'd recommend the car. The open air will be restful. There still seems to be the question of where you were last night."

"Okay. Thanks. Be a good girl."

"It seems almost compulsory," she said, and hung up before I could ask her what she meant by that crack.

I went across to the parking lot, sat in the agency car and took out the loose-leaf notebook pages I'd received from Esther Witson in connection with the settlement.

The name of Mrs. Crail wasn't on there. The name of Rufus Stanberry wasn't on there. The name of Boskovitch wasn't on there. That whole page of the notebook was missing. There were half a dozen other names and license numbers. I put them to one side for a minute and looked at the list I'd got from Lidfield.

These were just license numbers, but on the typewritten sheet which Glimson had passed over, these license numbers were

listed against names of registered owners.

There was the license number of Bertha Cool's car. Bertha Cool's name and address; the license number of a car listed as belonging to Mrs. Ellery Crail, 1013 Scarabia Boulevard; a license number of a car listed as a Packard Sedan registered to Rufus Stanberry, 3271 Fulrose Avenue; three or four license numbers that checked with those on the Esther Witson list; a couple of license numbers that Esther Witson didn't have; then a license number, *Miss Georgia Rushe, 207 West Orleans Avenue.*"

I folded the list, put it in my wallet, crossed over to a telephone and rang the Crail Venetian Blind Company. "May I speak with Miss Georgia Rushe?" I asked the switchboard operator.

"Who wants to speak with her? You'll have to give your name."

"Tell her Donald wants to talk with her."

"Just a moment."

I heard the plugging of connections, the distant echoes of a ghostly voice, then the professionally cordial voice characteristic of a high class switchboard operator said, "She went home early tonight."

I looked at my watch. It was four thirty-five.

"Thank you," I said and hung up.

I tried Georgia Rushe at the phone number she'd left with us when she'd employed us. There was no answer.

I went back to the agency car and warmed up the motor while I was making a mental check of times and places, getting the sequence of events straightened out in my own mind.

Then I drove to the Crail Venetian Blind Company.

The building was a big three story brick structure down on the fringe of the commercial district. The sign over the door was old, and grimy. Gilt letters that had been on there for a long time said: *CRAIL VENETIAN BLIND COMPANY.*

I parked the car near the entrance. It was past quitting time and a straggling stream of workers was filing out—older men carrying lunch pails, slim attractive girls gushing with the healthy vitality of youth, chatting gaily as they moved down the stairs.

I walked in and tried the inner door. It was locked with a spring lock. I stood by it waiting until a girl, hurrying to catch up with a group down the street, flung it open. She hardly noticed me as I caught the door and prevented the latch from clicking.

A sign said: *OFFICES UPSTAIRS*, and I climbed the stairs into a little reception room where there was a counter, a few chairs and a little arched opening in a partition bearing the word: *INFORMATION*. Below this was a glass door which could be swung open and

shut so that a person standing on the other side of the counter couldn't hear confidential communications which took place over the inside phone.

There seemed to be no one back of the arched opening, so I walked around to a gate in the partition, found one of those trick catches which are released by an electro magnet from the inside or a pressure of the fingers in the right place, pushed up the catch, opened the gate and went in.

There was a long hallway with half-glassed partitions bearing signs in gilt letters: *SALES MANAGER, CREDIT MANAGER, ACCOUNTING OFFICE*, and down at the far end a door marked: *PRESIDENT*. Up here in this corridor there was no sound save the noises of occasional activity from the floor below—steps, the banging of a door, the sound of a voice. The second floor itself was silent as a deserted courtroom after the defendant has been sentenced to death and the judge has gathered his papers and gone out to play golf.

I pushed open the door marked, *PRESIDENT.*

ELLERY CRAIL sat at his desk, his chin over on his chest, his big competent hairy hands clenched so tightly that the afternoon light which filtered in from the big window touched the taut skin over the knuckles into high lights.

He didn't hear the door open, and he didn't look up. He was staring with steady-eyed concentration, his face dark with tortured thought. He might have been hypnotized, sitting there in the rigid immobility of a trance.

I walked across the thick carpet. And it wasn't until I was seating myself in the chair opposite the desk that he saw me, looked up with a frown of annoyance and then as recognition flooded his features said with sudden irritation, "You!"

I nodded.

"How did you get in?"

"Walked in."

"That door's supposed to be locked."

I said, "Let's get in touch with Georgia Rushe."

"She isn't here. She left early. She's gone home."

I said, "She's taking a powder."

It took a moment or two for the full effect of my words to dawn on him. Then he said, "Powder! Good Heavens, Lam, not that!"

I said, "I was using a slang expression of the underworld. It means skipping out—taking what is known as a runout powder."

"Good God, I thought you meant . . ."

"What?"

"I didn't know what you meant."

"Poison?"

"Perhaps."

I said, "Let's go have a talk with her. In

case you don't know the address, it's two-o-seven West Orleans Avenue. I have my car downstairs."

He looked at me for a second or two, his eyes hitting me with a hard flinty impact. "How much," he asked, "do you know?"

"So much you don't have to say anything you don't want to."

Without a word, he pushed back his chair. "All right," he said, "let's go."

We went down the wide stairs and out through the locked door. A watchman was now on duty, and he said mechanically, "Good night, Mr. Crail."

"Good night, Tom," Crail said.

The door closed behind us and the lock clicked into place. I indicated the agency car with a jerk of my thumb and said, "That's it."

I went around to the driver's seat and Crail climbed in the front seat beside me. We encountered quite a bit of traffic at that hour, but I was taking chances on a ticket and was less than ten minutes getting to 207 West Orleans Avenue.

It was an old-fashioned apartment house with no attempt at the white stucco exterior which is so frequently used to hide the grime of drab age. A few straggling green vines grew up the front of the building. The narrow windows told their own stories of insufficient light and ventilation. One look at the place and you could smell the psychic stench of dejected spirits, the physical odors of ancient cooking, the irritating fumes of defective gas heaters.

I held back slightly and Crail led the way.

His finger found the button opposite a piece that had been cut from a calling card printed in Old English lettering, *Georgia Rushe*.

Nothing happened.

The lock on the outer door was a little better than most of them. I had a passkey I thought would fit it, but I didn't want to show my hand just then. I pressed two or three buttons at random and, after a moment, there was the distinctive buzz from the inside which indicated that someone was pressing a button which controlled the electric catch on the door.

I pushed the entrance door open.

The number on Georgia Rushe's mailbox showed that her apartment was 243. There may have been an elevator in the back part of the hall, but I didn't wait for it. I started climbing the stairs and Crail, climbing with the effort of a heavily muscled man, came lunging along behind me. I took the stairs two at a time.

No one answered when I knocked on apartment 243.

I looked at Crail. His face was drawn and haggard. Even in the dim light of the stuffy,

smelly hallway, I could see the dead white pallor of his skin and the deep lines that etched themselves down from his nostrils to the corners of his mouth.

I saw no reason for being nabby-pabby about it. I took a leather key container from my pocket, slid back the zipper and shook out my skeleton keys.

THE first one did the trick. The lock clicked back and we went in.

It was near the back of the building on the north side. A little single apartment that had two narrow windows that furnished a small amount of ventilation. The only cross ventilation was through an adjustable transom over the top of the door.

A light was on in the apartment, and the globe was powerful enough to make the room seem rather bright. It was a conventional single apartment with a disappearing wall bed behind a glass-knobbed gray painted door. The overstuffed chair had seen better days and the upholstery had been pounded down with use until it was hard and lumpy. The davenport had probably been refinished a couple of times and was in need of a third treatment. The faded carpet was worn almost through to the floor by the table, and two deep circles marked where the foot of the bed would rest when it was lowered. A drawer was open in a little all-purpose table which would, at night, be by the side of the bed. A pine table stained a dark mahogany was in the center of the room. On it were a few magazines.

A woman's hat and coat lay on a chair. The door of what had once been a closet was wide open to disclose a little sink and a two-burner gas stove over which was a small-sized electric refrigerator and a shelf containing a few dishes and glasses. A door which had a built-in full-length mirror was evidently the door to the bathroom.

On a straight-backed chair was a suitcase about half packed, the lid being raised to disclose the feminine garments on the interior.

Crail heaved a deep sigh of relief. "She hasn't left yet," he said.

I looked the place over and said, "Whenever the management goes to the extent of putting in brilliant light globes, you know the place is dark as hell in the daytime," and switched out the lights.

Instantly the place became dark, gloomy and depressing. What afternoon light filtered in through the window was so badly dispersed that it gave the place an atmosphere of gloomy unreality.

I noticed a knifelike ribbon of light coming from under the door of the bathroom.

Crail said, "For God's sake switch that light back on."

I clicked the switch.

"Well," Crail said, "she's probably gone out to get something. She's packing. I guess we . . ."

"What do we do?"

"Wait."

I said, "Okay, sit down."

Crail took the lumpy overstuffed chair and tried to fidget himself into a position that was comfortable.

I walked over to the occasional table which would be by the head of the bed when the bed was let down, and looked in the open drawer.

There was a small bottle in there with the cap unscrewed. The bottle was empty. The label said, "Luminal."

I thought for a moment, looked at my watch, then said to Crail, "What time did she leave the office?"

"About four-ten," Crail said. "She said she wasn't feeling well and wanted to go home. I told her to go ahead."

I said, "Did you notice anything peculiar?"

"About what?"

"About the way she said good-by."

He looked at me with tortured eyes, then nodded his head slowly.

I didn't ask him what it was, but he volunteered the information. "There was a certain feeling in the way she said it. Something of finality. I guess she read my mind."

I looked at my watch. It was five-fifteen.

I sat down in a chair opposite Crail and took out a package of cigarettes. "Want one?" I asked.

He shook his head.

I lit a cigarette, and Crail sat watching me. The hundred watt light in the ceiling showed small, almost microscopic beads of perspiration on his forehead.

"How," Crail asked, "did you happen to know—that she was going, I mean?"

I looked at him and said, "How did you happen to know that your wife had been driving behind Rufus Stanberry?"

His eyes shifted for a moment, then came back to mine. "She told me."

I grinned at him.

His face flushed. "You don't believe it?"

"No."

His mouth tightened. "I'm not accustomed to having my word questioned."

"I know," I said sympathetically. "Lying comes hard to you. Was Georgia driving her car, or did you borrow it?"

He couldn't keep the consternation out of his eyes.

I settled down in my chair.

"How did you know Georgia's car was there?" he asked.

"One of the parties to the automobile accident took down the license numbers of a whole flock of automobiles."

HE SAID, "They must have got the wrong license number."

I smiled and said nothing.

"All right," Crail blurted, "I borrowed her car. She didn't know anything about it. I—I mean what I wanted it for. I—damn it, Lam, I was such a despicable cad that I followed my wife. I wanted to know—well, I thought she had an engagement to meet someone, and I wondered—well, you know, that Stanberry Building."

"I know," I said.

He didn't say anything for a while.

I said, "When you realized your wife was in trouble, you decided that it didn't make any difference what it was, you were going to stand by her. But you knew that Esther Witson had got her name and address as well as the license number of the car in connection with that automobile accident, so you wanted it settled."

He didn't say anything.

I said, "Life is a peculiar phenomenon, or rather a whole series of phenomena. Lots of times it's hard to do something without hurting someone."

I saw him look at me searchingly, but I kept my profile to him and kept on talking abstractly. "Lots of times in affairs of the heart, you have to hurt either one person or another no matter which you do. Sometimes you hurt several people. But when you have to choose the person you don't want to hurt, you sometimes get hypnotized into choosing the person who doesn't want to be hurt. Do you get what I mean?"

"I don't see what this had to do with it," he said.

I said, "Sometimes a woman who really loves you will remain in the background so that you don't realize the full extent to which you are hurting her. On the other hand, there are lots of women who are adept at putting it up to you in terms of 'I don't want to be hurt.'"

"What are you talking about?" Crail asked.

"Your wife," I said, and stopped talking.

There was a long ten seconds of silence.

"By God!" Crail said in a choking voice, and got to his feet.

I didn't say anything.

"I should hit you," he said.

"Don't do it," I told him. "Go look in the bathroom instead."

Crail gave me one tortured, anguished look.

Then he got to the bathroom door in three steps and jerked it open.

Georgia Rushe was lying in the bathtub, fully clothed. Her eyes were closed. Her face was slightly pallid and her jaw dropped.

I crossed over to the telephone, dialed Police Headquarters and said, "Connect me with Frank Sellers of Homicide—quick!"

It was only a couple of seconds before I had Sellers on the line.

"Frank," I said, "this is Donald Lam. Send an ambulance to two-o-seven West Orleans Avenue. The party you want is in apartment two-forty-three. She's tried to commit suicide by taking Luminal. It hasn't been over forty-five minutes since she took the dose and a stomach pump and stimulant should fix her up."

"What's her name?" Sellers asked.

"Georgia Rushe."

"Why do I bother with it?"

I said, "Ellery Crail is here and he'll have a story to tell you if you talk to him about it."

"I get you."

I said, "And have one of your men get hold of Frank L. Glimson of Cosgate & Glimson. They're lawyers. Tell Glimson that Irma Begley, who was the plaintiff in a case against Philip E. Cullindon, has confessed to fraud and has made statements that implicate Cosgate & Glimson. Ask them if they care to make any statements. And keep them away from the telephone."

"This Georgia Rushe," Sellers said, "will she talk?"

"No. The party you want is Ellery Crail."

Crail, just emerging from the bathroom, said, "What's that? Who's mentioning my name?"

I said, "I was trying to get some hot coffee sent up. We'd better get her out of the bathtub and see if we can put some cold water on her."

I hung up.

Crail and I lifted her out of the bathtub.

"She's drugged!" Crail said. "We've got to do something!"

I said, "Put some cold towels on her forehead and on her chest. I tried to get some hot coffee sent up, but they won't send it. I'm going down and bring up some black coffee."

Crail looked desperately at the kitchen and said, "Perhaps we can make some coffee here."

"We haven't time. There's a restaurant down the street," I said, and bolted out of the door, leaving Crail behind with Georgia Rushe.

CHAPTER XVII



RIVING the agency car fast, I took chances on a speeding ticket. It would have been a good plan to have parked it a block or two away from Billy Prue's apartment, but I didn't have the time. I drove right up to the apartment house, parked the car in front of the door, ran up the steps and rang Billy Prue's bell.

It was one chance in ten—one chance in a hundred. If she was there at all, she would be packing up, but . . . I rang the bell again.

Nothing happened.

The lock on the outer door was pretty well worn. Any key that would fit the grooves would work the lock. I didn't even have to bother with my skeleton keys. The key to my own apartment worked the lock on the outer door.

I went up to Billy Prue's apartment. I knocked on the door twice. There was no sound from the interior. The place was thick with silence.

I took out my skeleton keys and tried one in the lock. It didn't work.

Before I could take it out, the door was jerked open from the inside.

Billy Prue said sarcastically, "Make yourself right at home! Walk right in . . . Oh, it's you!"

"Why don't you answer a knock on your door?" I asked her.

Her hand went up to her throat. She said, "You scared the living daylight out of me."

"You didn't act like it."

"I didn't dare to. Why didn't you say who it was?"

"How could I?"

"You could have called through the door."

I carefully closed the door behind me and made sure that the spring lock clicked into place. I said, "That would have been nice—stand out in the hall and yell 'Yoo-hoo, Billy, this is Donald Lam, the private detective. I want to see you on business. Open up!'"

"Oh," she said, "on business, is it?"

I looked around the room. The door to the bedroom was open. The bed was pretty well covered with folded clothes. There were two big suitcases and a steamer trunk on the floor, also a couple of hat boxes.

"Going somewhere?" I asked.

"You wouldn't expect me to stay here, would you?"

"Not if you could find some other place."

"I've found another place."

"Where?"

"With a friend."



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I said, "Sit down for a minute. We've got to talk."

"I want to get out of here, Donald. It's terribly depressing and—I'm afraid!"

"What are you afraid of?"

She hastily averted her eyes. "Nothing."

"Delightfully logical," I said.

"Shut up. You don't have to be logical when you're afraid."

"Perhaps not."

I stretched out in a comfortable chair, lit a cigarette and said, "Let's talk some sense."

"What about?"

"About the murder."

"Do we have to talk about it?"

"Yes."

"What about it?"

"You're absolutely certain his watch was an hour fast when you left?"

"Yes."

"And you set it back an hour when you returned?"

"Yes."

"You're sure you didn't set it back an hour before?"

"No, and I should have. That bothered me because I was supposed to have done so."

I said, "All right. Let's use our heads. Two people tampered with that watch. You were one of them. Now then, how many people knew about the plan to set the watch ahead?"

"Just Pittman Rimley and I."

"And the boy in the washroom."

"Yes, I forgot about him."

I got out of the chair and paced the floor for a minute or so. She sat perfectly still watching me, not saying a word.

I walked over to the windows and stood looking down at the street below.

"What are you looking at?"

"The agency car parked down there in front of the place."

She came to stand at my side. "What about it?"

I said, "Somebody put the murder weapon in there yesterday. I don't know when it was put in, so I've got to start figuring *why* it was put in, because that may give me a clue to *when*."

SHE said, "What do you mean *why*? You mean someone was trying to frame you?"

I said, "Either someone wanted to frame me, or someone didn't."

"That's elemental."

I said, "We have to begin with elemental facts. There's one explanation that's so damn simple that I've overlooked it."

"What?"

I said, "Either someone put that weapon in my car because he wanted to frame me, or he didn't. Naturally, I've acted on the assumption that whoever put it in there

wanted to frame me. I'm beginning to think about the simple explanation now."

"What?"

I said, "Let's make another division. Whoever put that weapon in the car either knew it was my car, or didn't."

"Good Heavens, Donald, you don't think there's the slightest possibility anyone put it in your car simply by accident?"

"Not by accident. That's taxing credulity altogether too much."

She said, "I don't get you. You seem to be contradicting yourself."

"No, there's one other explanation."

"What?"

I said, "The weapon was put in my car because my car happened to be the most convenient place to hide the thing."

"Oh, no!" she said as the full implication of that dawned on her.

"So," I said, "I keep thinking back where my car was. Where would it have been parked sufficiently soon after the murder so that someone would find it the most convenient place to dispose of the murder weapon?"

She said eagerly, "Donald, you *may* have something there."

I said, "How about Pittman Rimley, can you trust him?"

"So far he's always been on the square—with me."

"There were two persons who knew about the watch business—Rimley and the man in the washroom. Then there was a third person who could have known."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Crail. Stanberry might have commented on the time to her. That's logical, isn't it?"

"It is when you put it that way."

I said, "And I'm wondering why the handle of the hand ax had been sawed off. You've used a meat saw?"

"Yes—of course."

"One here in the apartment?"

"I guess so, yes."

"Let's get it out and take a look at it."

She regarded me thoughtfully for a moment, then went to the kitchenette. I followed her. The meat saw was under the sink. She handed it to me.

There was some grease on the blade and embedded between the handle and the blade a few grains of sawdust.

"That does it," I said.

"Does what?"

"Clinches the case."

"I don't see why."

I looked at her steadily. "You had a hand ax here, didn't you?"

Her eyes shifted.

I said, "Whoever did the job didn't expect to find Stanberry unconscious. When she

did, and found a hand ax—well, that was it.”

“She?”

“Yes. It was a woman.”

I kept looking at her. “She didn’t want to leave the murder weapon here. She had only one way of taking it out—in her hand-bag. She had to saw a piece off the handle to make it fit.”

“Donald!”

I turned to look down at the street. For several seconds the apartment was silent. Then I said, “I’m still toying with the explanation that the murder weapon was ditched in my car simply because my car happened to be the most convenient place for the murderer to put the weapon. Now then, if we’re going to work on that hypothesis, we suddenly find ourselves right up against . . .”

I broke off.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“See that car?” I said.

She looked where I was pointing. “It’s a police car,” I said. “See the red spotlight . . . ?”

Sergeant Frank Sellers got out of the car, gallantly walked around the car to the right side, opened the door and held out his hand.

Bertha Cool put her hand on Frank Sellers’ and got out of the car about as gracefully as a sack of sugar tumbling down off the top shelf in the pantry.

I said, “Quick! Get out of here and . . . ! No, it’s too late.”

Bertha had spotted the agency car. I saw her tap Sellers on the shoulder and point. Sellers went over and looked at the license number. They talked together earnestly for a minute, then moved toward the door of the apartment house.

A moment later Billy Prue’s bell made noise.

“What do I do?” she asked.

She was looking at me with eyes that were wells of dismay.

“Sit down in that chair,” I said. “Don’t move! Don’t make a sound no matter what happens. Do you promise?”

“If you want me to.”

“No matter what happens! Understand?”

“Yes. Anything you say, Donald.”

The bell didn’t make any more noise.

I OPENED the door to the corridor, made certain the spring lock was working. “No matter what happens, don’t make a sound. Understand?”

She nodded.

I pulled the door closed, dropped down on my hands and knees and put my ear to the crack along the floor.

I was in that position when I heard faint steps down the corridor. I moved slightly, and the steps suddenly stopped.

I got to one knee, felt in my pocket for my collection of skeleton keys, took them out and tried one on the lock.

The steps sounded again.

I whirled with the guilty start of someone who has been detected in an unlawful activity.

Sergeant Sellers was right on top of me.

“So,” he said, “got a key to the joint, have you?”

I tried to whip the keys back into my pocket.

Sergeant Sellers’ fingers clamped my wrist. “Well, well, well,” Sellers said as his other hand snapped the key container out of my nerveless grasp. “So your agency plays around with skeleton keys, does it, Bertha?”

Bertha said, “Damn you, Donald, I told you a long while ago to get rid of those. They’ll get you in trouble.”

I didn’t say anything.

“What,” Sellers asked, “is the big idea?”

I said, “I wanted to get in for a look around.”

“I gathered you did. How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know—four or five minutes, maybe.”

“That long?”

I said, “I rang the bell three or four times to make sure there was no answer, then I—well, I got in through the outer door.”

“Then what?”

“Then I came up here and knocked. Then I listened for quite a while. I didn’t want to take chances on going in until I was sure the place was empty.”

“It’s empty?” Sellers asked.

“Yes. I think she moved out.”

“Then why did you want in?”

“I wanted to check something about the position of the bathtub.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to see where two people would have to stand if they lifted the body into the bathtub. It would take two men to . . .”

“Don’t kid yourself,” Sellers interrupted.

“I’ve busted the case wide open.”

“You have!”

“Yes. I want that jane.”

“Why?”

“We’ve identified the hand ax. She bought it at a hardware store three blocks down the street.”

I tried to make my voice sound unconcerned. “She’s probably at the Rendezvous now. You didn’t go out on that ambulance case?”

He grinned, “I thought that could have been a red herring, Donald. I wanted this Prue girl.”

“But someone went out to that Orleans address?”

“Sure.”

"And they won't let Crail get away?"

"No, sweetheart, and you won't get away, either. Come on. We're going places."

"Do I get my keys back?"

"Naughty, naughty."

"Take the damn things and throw them away," Bertha said angrily. "I've warned the little devil about that."

Sellers said, "Come on, quit stalling."

I followed them down to the street. I said, "I'll take the agency car and . . ."

"The hell you will!" Sellers said. "You'll stay right here, my lad, until I've put the bracelets on that little girl's wrists. You won't pull any slick little job of getting in to a telephone and tipping her off . . ."

"The bracelets on her wrists!"

"Sure. What did you think?"

"Don't let him stall you," Bertha said. "He knows. He was going to tip her off. My God, how he falls for women! That's the trouble with him."

Sellers said, "Listen, Donald, she's the one who did the killing. Don't get tangled up in it."

I looked at him and laughed. "Anyone could have picked up the hand ax," I said.

Sellers rose to the bait. "I've got the deadwood on her. Under an assumed name she rented an apartment in the Fulrose Apartments. She's had it for a month, always being careful never to go in except when Rufus Stanberry was out. She's been searching his apartment. The day of the murder, just after Stanberry had been bumped off, she showed up and made a good job of it. She went through the safe that time."

"How do you know?"

"Archie Stanberry tells me some things are missing from the safe."

"But how do you know *she* did it?"

HE LAUGHED and said, "She was smart when it came to going through Stanberry's apartment. She didn't leave any fingerprints. But she wasn't smart when she lived in that apartment under an assumed name. Hell, it wouldn't have done her any good anyway. She couldn't have lived there for a month without leaving fingerprints."

"You mean you've found her fingerprints in that apartment?"

"Sure. The one she rented under an assumed name. What's more, the manager and one of the clerks identify her photograph absolutely."

"Gosh!" I said.

"Don't let it get you, lover," Bertha said cheerfully. "She never was anything but a little gold digger with pretty legs."

"How do you get wise?" I asked Sellers.

"Shucks, there was nothing to it. You went out to see this man Cullington. She went out to see Cullington. Your cars were parked

side by side, or end to end—whichever you want to call it. She knew where your car was. She knew whose car it was. You let her drive you away. After you left her, she had ample time to drive out and ditch the murder weapon in your car. She thought she was being smart as hell when she did it. It was one of those things that looked good at the time, but it stuck her head in the noose."

Bertha said suddenly, "Listen, Frank, I don't want to go back with you after you've made the pinch and have Donald in the car with that little tart. Suppose Donald and I take the agency car and follow right along behind you. I'll see that he doesn't telephone."

Sellers thought that over for a moment and said, "Okay."

He walked over to the agency car with me.

I reached in my pocket for the keys. A sinking feeling developed in the pit of my stomach. I'd left the car keys and my driving gloves on the table in Billy Prue's apartment.

"Well?" Bertha said.

I know now how people feel when they get stage fright. There probably wasn't anything I could have said then that would have stalled the thing off, but if there had been, I couldn't have said it. I was absolutely tongue-tied. I just stood there fumbling through my pockets.

"Where are they?" Bertha said.

"I must have dropped them there on the carpet when I took these other keys out of my pocket."

Bertha looked at Frank Sellers.

Frank Sellers said softly under his breath, "Why you dirty double-crosser!"

The next second I felt his left hand grab my wrist. I saw the flash of steel and heard the ratchet of handcuffs. Steel bit into my wrists.

"All right, wise guy," Sellers said. "I gave you a chance and you couldn't take it the easy way. You have to do it the hard way. All right, that's the way we're going to play from now on. Come on, Buddy, you're going back upstairs."

I said indignantly, "What's eating you? Those keys are somewhere there on the carpet in front of that door and . . ."

"And I've just noticed," Sellers said, "that you aren't wearing your driving gloves. A sweet detective I am. Come on, Buddy, we're going back."

We went back. There was nothing else to do.

Sellers got down on his knees in front of the door to Billy Prue's apartment. He felt along the carpet. It was only a perfunctory gesture. Then he took my own skeleton keys and fitted one into the lock.

I made one last desperate attempt.

"Are you going in there without a search warrant?" I asked.

Frank Sellers isn't a guy you can bluff that easy. "You're damn right I'm going in there without a warrant," he said.

The key clicked the lock back.

Billy Prue was sitting just as I had left her in the chair, her face might have been molded in pastry dough and daubed with make-up.

Sellers took in the situation with a practiced eye, walked over to the table and said, "Those your gloves, Lam?"

I said, "I'm not answering any questions."

Sellers picked up the car keys, said, "The gloves and the keys will be evidence. Get your things on, Billy. You're going places. Let me see your hand a minute."

He picked up her hand.

There was nothing I could do about it even if I had warned her.

A half second later she jerked back and screamed as the cold steel touched her wrists, then the ratchet bit into pressure and Billy Prue and I were handcuffed one to the other.

"All right, Little Miss Murderess and Mr. Accessory-After-the-Fact," Frank Sellers said grimly. "We're going to teach you little lovebirds something."

Bertha looked from me to Frank Sellers. "Listen, Frank," she said, "suppose . . ."

"Nothing doing," Sellers said roughly.

"But Frank . . ."

"Shut up," he said. "And this time, we all ride in my car."

CHAPTER XVIII



SELLERS only stopped long enough to fit my keys to the lock on the agency car to make sure they worked. Then he loaded us into the police automobile, turned on the motor and kicked in the siren.

It was a tough place in which to have to think, but I knew that I had to think, and think fast. By the time we reached Headquarters, it

would be too late to do any good.

The siren was screaming for the right of way and the car was building into speed. We flashed past a street intersection. My eyes noticed the name of the street we were on. It was Mantica Street.

Ahead of us and on the left was a rather swanky apartment hotel. A couple of taxicabs were parked in front. One of the drivers looked up curiously as the siren went screaming by. I had a glimpse of a twisted, broken nose.

The next street was Garden Vista Boulevard and Frank Sellers was bracing his car for a screaming turn.

"Frank!" I yelled at him.

He didn't even turn his head.

The tires screamed the car around the turn.

"Frank, for God's sake stop!"

Something in my voice caught his ears, made him ease his foot on the throttle.

"What is it this time, a stall?"

"The murderer of Rufus Stanberry," I said.

"I've got her right here."

"No, no, Frank. For God's sake—at least pull in to the curb and let me talk to you before he gets away."

He hesitated.

Bertha said, "Please, Frank."

"The hell with him," Frank said. "It's just a stall and you know it as well as I do. He's quick witted enough to have thought up some lie and . . ."

"Goddammit!" Bertha screamed at him.

"Pull this car in to the curb!"

Sellers looked at her in surprise.

Bertha leaned forward, twisted the ignition key in the lock, jerked it out and held her hand out of the window.

The motor went dead. The momentum carried us in to the curb as Sellers turned the steering wheel.

Sellers sat perfectly still. His face was white with rage.

After a half second, he said in a choked voice, "It's all right with me. I take in the three of you."

Bertha looked back at me and said, "And don't kid yourself he isn't man enough to do it. If you've got anything to say, say it—and I hope to hell you've got something."

I leaned forward to put my left hand on Frank Sellers' shoulders. The right was handcuffed to Billy Prue.

"Listen, Frank," I said, "I'm coming clean. I've wondered how that murder weapon got in my car. I've thought back over every step of the way. It couldn't, simply couldn't have been put in my car by someone who knew whose car it was and was framing things on me unless Billy Prue double-crossed me, and I don't think she double-crossed me. There's only one other way it could have got in my car."

Sellers was listening now.

I said, "Listen, Frank, I'm doing this for you as much as anybody. For the love of Mike, don't pull us in and get a splash in the newspapers and then have to hide your face."

"Don't worry about my face," Sellers said. "Tell me about that murder weapon."

I said, "The only way it could have been put in the car was by someone who didn't know what car it was—who it belonged to."

"Nuts!" Sellers said.

"And," I went on, "there was only one way that could have happened and that was that my car happened to be the most convenient and the most accessible place for the murderer to have put it, and there's only one way that could have happened, and that was when my car was parked at the Rimley Rendezvous and I tried to be a smart Aleck and squeeze in in front of the car behind me on the hope that it wouldn't go out before I did.

"But the guy in the car behind me wasn't that sort of an egg. He simply stuck his car in low gear and pushed mine out into the taxi zone and went on his way. And a taxi driver damn near beat me up over it when I came out—and that taxi driver was sitting in a cab at that hotel a couple of blocks back on Mantica Street. That's probably his regular stand. And the handle of that hand ax had been sawed off so it would fit in a woman's handbag."

"And what's all that got to do with this pinch?" Sellers asked.

"Don't you see?" I said. "Don't you get the sketch? Remember that accident at Mantica Street and Garden Vista Boulevard? Figure out the time element. Now then, if you want to be a smart dick—be smart, and if you want to be dumb—be dumb. I've said everything I'm going to say. Put the keys back in the ignition, Bertha."

BERTHA said, "But I don't get it, lover. What has the taxicab got to do with . . ."

"Put the keys back in the lock," I said. "Sellers has a chance now to either cover himself with glory, or make himself the prize fool of the force."

Sellers said, "I'm not making myself a prize fool of anything—not with the stuff I've got on this Billy Prue."

"You haven't got a thing on her except coincidence," I went on. "Billy and I were having an affair before I left. She knew I was coming back. I couldn't be with her in the apartment where she was living without having Pittman Rimley blow my pump out. She got this apartment in the Fulrose Apartments so we could be together. It was a love nest. That's where I was last night, and why Bertha couldn't find me."

"You son-of-a-gun," Bertha said half under her breath, and put the keys back in the ignition.

Frank Sellers sat there for as much as thirty seconds without saying a word. Then he pressed his foot on the starter button, slammed the car into gear and made a U turn in the middle of the block. The siren started wailing again and the red spotlight blinked on and off.

We swung around the turn from Garden

Vista Boulevard into Mantica Street and the broken-nosed cab driver was still at the wheel of his car.

Sellers braked the car to a stop alongside the taxi driver.

Shifty little eyes glittered out from either side of the broken nose.

"What's eating yuh?" the cab driver asked.

Sellers said, "Yesterday afternoon there was a smashup on Mantica Street and Garden Vista Boulevard. Know anything about it?"

"I heard it."

"Pick up a fare right afterwards?"

Broken nose frowned, then said, "Yes. What's it to you?"

"Man or woman?"

"Woman."

"What did she want?"

The glittering little eyes met Sellers' for a moment, then shifted.

Sellers suddenly threw open the door of the car, walked around and stood with his broad shoulders hulking against the side of the taxicab. He whipped open the door of the cab. "Come out of that," he said to the driver.

Broken nose sized him up, hesitated.

Sellers' hand shot forward, took a good grip on the necktie and shirt of the cab driver. He gave a jerk. "I said come out!"

The cab driver came out and was suddenly respectful. "What is it you want?" he asked.

"Your fare. What about it? Who was it?"

"A woman," he said. "She wanted me to shadow a couple of cars that she said would be coming around the corner."

"Keep talking," Sellers said.

"When the car came around the corner on Mantica Street, we followed along. Then I noticed a second car was tagging after the first. I told my fare about it. She said never mind the second car, to stay with the first one. It was only about three blocks. They stopped down here at an apartment house. A man went in. The woman in the other car drove away. My fare told me to wait. We waited for about ten minutes."

"Go ahead."

"Then a jame came out of the apartment, jumped in a car and drove away. My fare got excited. She got out, handed me a five dollar bill and said, 'That's for security on the fare.' She walked into the apartment house and was gone about ten minutes in all. Then she came back, got in the cab and said, 'Drive to the Rimley Rendezvous.'"

"We drove up to the Rimley Rendezvous. Some buzzard had parked a car where it took up most of the cab space. I said, 'Wait a minute and I'll bust this car out of here!' But she didn't wait. She got out. She had to walk clean around the parked car. She walked around it and on into the Rimley Rendezvous. A guy came out and climbed

into the parked car. I tried to shake him down for a buck. He wouldn't shake. I had five bucks for a sixty cent ride, so I let him pull the old stall about having been shoved ahead into the cab space."

"Notice anything peculiar about this woman's handbag?" Sellers asked.

The cabbie looked at him with a certain dawning respect in his eyes. "She had something pretty heavy in her handbag. It stuck out. I thought it might have been..."

"A rod?" Sellers asked as the man hesitated.

"Uh huh. Only it wasn't a rod."

"Perhaps a hammer or a small hand ax?" Sudden realization showed in the little eyes. "Hell," the cabbie said disgustedly, "that's what it was—and me wondering if it was a rod!"

"What did this woman look like?" Sellers asked.

"Not bad looking," the driver said appreciatively. "Nice legs, swell hips, nice complexion. Teeth a little too big, that's all. Horsetoothed when she smiled."

"Fry me for an oyster!" Bertha exclaimed under her breath.

CHAPTER XIX



ELLERY Crail was pacing back and forth in front of our office when Bertha and I came up in the elevator.

His face lit with relief when he saw us. He came running forward and gripped my hand. "I was hoping you'd be here," he said. "The elevator operator said you folks frequently came in at night, although you didn't keep the office open after five o'clock."

Bertha said belligerently, "Well, we got you a settlement, and..."

"Let's go inside where we can talk," Crail said.

Bertha latchkeyed the door and we went into the private office.

Bertha went on, "Just like I told you over the telephone. You owe us three hundred dollars more and..."

Crail looked at her as though she might have been talking a foreign language, then he looked at me.

I shook my head and said, "I didn't tell her anything."

"What are you two talking about?" Bertha asked.

Crail took a checkbook from his pocket, pulled out a fountain pen.

"Three hundred dollars," Bertha said.

Crail looked up at her and said, "Mrs. Cool,

I want to thank you people for the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me, and I think I owe every bit of my happiness to Donald Lam."

Bertha's jaw dropped.

Crail said, "I guess you know what happened—Lam seems to, anyway. I was suspicious of my wife and Stanberry. I wondered why she was so eager to have me buy the Stanberry Building at a price that my banker said was about three times too high. When she went out yesterday afternoon I—well, I decided to follow her. It was a decision I reached all at once. My car wasn't there, but I knew that it would be all right with Georgia Rushe if I borrowed her car. I borrowed it.

"I'm not going to tell you all that happened. Lam knows, anyway. I followed my wife. I saw the accident, I saw enough to know that she was deliberately following Stanberry. I went back to the office. Georgia didn't even know I'd borrowed her car—and then I read about Stanberry being murdered and... well, I put it up to my wife.

"She admitted that Stanberry had been blackmailing her. She wouldn't tell me what it was about. Well, you know—I wanted to be a strong silent man. I wanted to be an understanding husband. I didn't ask any questions. I decided to back my wife to the limit. I knew that she'd be called as a witness in that automobile accident. I decided to have the case settled so that it could never be shown that her car was trailing Stanberry's. I came to you to get the case settled.

"And then Lam showed me how life can't be lived that way. You can't sacrifice yourself to keep from hurting someone if by doing so, you're hurting someone else a great deal more. And... well, I had a talk with her, and this time I wasn't just a big sucker. I had in the back of my mind the knowledge of Georgia lying unconscious in a hospital, knowing that she had tried to take her life because of me, and I saw a lot of things in a slightly different light. And then Irma started talking about property settlement and was quite businesslike about the whole thing, and I realized that I'd been trapped into marriage simply as a financial investment. I was never so relieved in my life. I gave her a settlement that made her eyes bulge out and told her to get reservations for Reno, and came up here to find Donald Lam."

Crail took a deep breath and started writing on the check. He picked up a piece of blotting paper, blotted the check, tore it out and tossed it on the desk. He got up and looked at me and there were tears in his eyes. He pushed out his hand and shook hands. Then he walked around the desk and hugged Bertha, leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

I said, "I'm glad you had your showdown, Crail. Your wife didn't murder Stanberry. It was another woman Stanberry had been blackmailing over the telephone. And if she hadn't noticed Stanberry's wrist watch was an hour fast and set it back the whole case might have been simplified—which doesn't mean your wife wasn't playing you for a sucker. She was."

"Esther Witson was being blackmailed and was tired of it. She followed Stanberry from the Rimley Rendezvous, determined to have a showdown. She may even have contemplated murder. She saw Stanberry go to this apartment house. She knew Billy Prue lived there. She put two and two together and waited. Then Billy Prue came out. Stanberry didn't. That made Miss Witson decide to investigate. She went up to Billy Prue's apartment. The door was open."

"She went in and saw a wonderful opportunity to get free of Stanberry once and for all. There was a note in his hand saying Billy had gone to a drugstore. She knew that was a lie. She'd seen Billy drive off, paying no attention to the drugstore on the corner. She saw a wonderful opportunity to free herself of Stanberry once and for all. She looked around for a weapon, found a hand ax and hit Stanberry on the head once, hard."

"Then she got frightened and in a panic wanted to conceal the murder weapon. She

sawed off some of the handle so it would fit into her purse, then ditched it in the first car she came to when she got out of the cab. The police found the short piece, she'd sawed off the handle still in her purse."

Crail listened attentively. "Miss Witson, eh? I was afraid she'd bring my wife into it. And I was afraid someone might—oh well, that's all finished now. I want to get back to the hospital. Good-by and bless you both. I've tried to express some of my gratitude in that check. You'll never know how deeply I am indebted to you."

Bertha watched him out the door, then grabbed up the check. I saw her greedy little eyes get big and round. "Fry me for an oyster!" she said in an awed voice. "Can me for a sardine!"

I WAS halfway across the outer office before Bertha came down to earth.

I heard her scream at me. "Goddamn you, Donald Lam! If you're headed for the Rimley Rendezvous, remember you can't charge any more cigarettes on the expense account. The case is closed."

I paused with my hand on the door. I couldn't resist a parting shot. "And if I'm not home tonight, don't worry about it," I said.

I whipped the door shut before Bertha could think of the answer to that one.

NEXT ISSUE'S FEATURED MYSTERY NOVEL

YOU ONLY HANG ONCE, by H. W. RODEN





Logan lunged for Barrett,
caught the wrist that held
the gun

THE BRASS POMERANIAN

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

*A phony amnesia victim, a finely wrought metal dog, and
a puzzling corpse make things interesting for Ray Logan!*

DETECTIVE-sergeant Ray Logan was tired as he sat in his office in the Missing Persons Bureau. The enigma of the unidentified corpse he had been working on for more than a week bothered him. A body had been fished out of the river, without discernible features and with the fingertips of one hand badly crushed as if an attempt had been made to obliterate fingerprints. There were no records of the dead man's prints. It was murder without a doubt—the victim's neck had been broken.

This morning Logan had still another

problem to tackle. He looked keenly at the young man who was seated across the desk from him.

"You're sure you can't remember anything about your past?" Logan demanded.

"Nothing." The young man shook his head. "I can't remember a thing."

He was slim, with narrow features, coal black hair and dark eyes. Decidedly different from Logan who was Irish, red-headed, with a sturdy pair of shoulders, and a wide, rather unhandsome face.

Both of them were studying the small, ex-

quisitely wrought object on the sergeant's desk. It was a tiny brass pomeranian, every outline of the dog beautifully clear-cut, even to the shaggy hair over the animal's face.

"This is the only thing you had in your pockets, except a small penknife," Logan went on. "It's an unusual object. Doesn't it bring anything back to you?"

"Nothing, Sergeant." The young man waved his hand wearily. "All I know is that I was suddenly aware of walking through Central Park. I haven't the vaguest notion of how I got there or who I am. Yet my brain feels perfectly clear and sound."

"Amnesia, of course," Logan stated. "We have many cases like yours. Or almost like it. What I can't figure out is why in the world every last label has been clipped from your clothing. There isn't even a laundry mark. You haven't a dime, but you claim that you aren't hungry, which indicates you had money enough to eat on not too long ago."

"It's very exasperating," the young man agreed. "I try to think and my mind goes back as far as Central Park and no further. It's like an asbestos curtain at a theater. My past is behind that curtain and I can't make it rise."

"Looks like some kind of a luck piece," Logan hefted the small brass image. "I'd say it was valuable because the thing seems to be hand carved out of a chunk of brass. The Chinese used to manufacture these sort of things before the Japs started them making guns." The sergeant frowned and put the brass pomeranian back on the desk. "Oh, well, there are ways to bring your memory back."

"What are you going to do with me?" The young man smiled wanly. "I'll agree to anything, of course."

"You're going to a hospital first," Logan said. "They'll try to restore your memory there. Meanwhile, I'll put the newspapers to work. I've a hunch that if we publicize this brass pomeranian, someone will recognize it and come forward to claim you." He stood up. "Let's get started."

"Thanks very much, Sergeant." The young man rose to his feet. In the sunlight streaming through the windows he looked older and his thin face seemed hard. "I never realized how helpful the police can be."

Logan took the man to a hospital, checked him in and then waited until an orderly brought out the amnesia victim's clothes. Logan folded these over his arm, thrust a shoe into each side coat pocket and went back to his car.

He wasn't especially worried about identifying the young man. The doctors had radically new methods. Hypnosis was one of them. The patient would be hypnotized and

under this influence, sometimes the cloudy brain became clear.

But Detective-Sergeant Logan had more important things to worry about. The murder victim fished out of the river, the nameless corpse whose neck had been so mercilessly broken.

BACK at his office the sergeant carefully studied the amnesiac's clothes. They were well cared for and of good quality, he noted, yet every means of tracing their maker had been removed. That angle gave Logan a real headache. Someone didn't want the young man identified and the whole thing smacked of being criminal.

Gently, Logan pulled a small strand of an oddly purple-colored thread from inside the coat. It had once held the maker's label in place. He finished examining the coat and listing a description of the rest of the clothing before he glanced at the penknife.

He opened one blade, and his thick, expressive eyebrows went up. Beneath the blade of the knife was a strand of thread exactly like the one which had adhered to the coat.

"Odd," he thought. "It looks like the man's own knife was used to remove those labels. That means he might have done it himself. Or it was done after his mind went blank, and he might recall who did it. Men don't submit to having all identification removed and then fall obligingly into an amnesia condition. This just doesn't make sense."

He was still trying to puzzle it out when one of the doctors at the hospital phoned. They had lost no time in going to work on the young amnesia victim.

"This man fights hypnosis and you know it's impossible to put him under if he does that," the doctor reported. "We gave him a mild dose of drugs, but that didn't work either. There are no marks of a blow, or other mental aberrations. Quite frankly, Sergeant, we have come to the conclusion that he hasn't lost his memory at all."

"You think he is faking then?" Logan growled.

"Precisely. We could be wrong, of course, but our experience with amnesia tells us we aren't."

"Does he know you suspect he's stalling?" Logan asked.

"No. We've given him no hint."

"Good! Keep him there under observation, but don't let him know you suspect anything. There's something cockeyed about this and I want to get to the bottom of it. Holding him there will be a help."

His mind buzzing with questions, Logan hung up, and then phoned the press room. Presently several reporters came into his

office. The sergeant asked them to run the story of the amnesia victim on the front pages without any pictures of the man but describing the brass pomeranian in detail.

"We'll give you all we can on it, Sergeant," said one of the newspapermen. "After all a young man who has lost his memory isn't exactly spot news—not with a War going on. The brass poodle is a novel angle so we'll play that up. We've all got something on it in the early afternoon editions. No description of the amnesia victim though, because we didn't see him."

"Thanks, boys," said Logan. "That will do nicely."

They all filed out, as Logan next asked Captain Blane, in charge of the Missing Persons Bureau, to step into the office. Blane was gray-haired, clever and resourceful. He listened closely as Logan gave him the details of the amnesia case.

"I think this man is a fake," Logan finished. "He's after something. Obviously trying to contact someone whose whereabouts he isn't sure of, by means of that brass pomeranian. If my hunch is right, someone will come here to identify him because he carried that dog." "And if they do?" asked Captain Blane. "Then what?"

"If this matter has something criminal behind it I might get a line on the thing by taking the place of the amnesia victim."

"Oh, sure," Blane grinned. "I've seen the young man and I'd hardly call you his double."

"I know we don't look at all alike," said Logan. "But if they really know the young man they'll claim I'm not the person they are seeking. But if these people don't know him by sight and are just contacting him because of the brass pooch we might get somewhere."

"Not a bad idea," Blane mused. "It's worth trying anyway. You go over to the hospital and wait there. If someone calls, I'll handle this thing myself."

Two hours later Logan was waiting at the hospital when a phone call from Captain Blane came through.

"A man and a woman are here," said the captain. "Give their names as Vincent and Edith Barrett. Seem like nice people, but you never can tell. They claim a nephew of theirs carried a brass pomeranian with him all the time. I showed them the dog and they are sure you must be their nephew."

"Not so good," Logan said over the wire. "If they're looking for a real nephew they'll never accept me as the missing man. But we might as well go through with it anyway."

"I'm bringing them over. If they identify you as their nephew you'll know there is something crooked about Mr. and Mrs. Barrett," Blane said. "Watch it now."

Logan hung up, then immediately proceeded to empty his pockets of everything that might identify him as a policeman. When the door opened a little later he was slumped in a chair, staring into space like a man wholly absorbed in trying to find himself.

"This is the man," Captain Blane said, nodding to Logan. "Do you recognize him?"

MR. and Mrs. Barrett appeared to be in their fifties, carefully dressed and intelligent-looking. Logan thought he caught a fleeting expression of disappointment sweep over the woman's face as she gazed at him. She glanced quickly at her husband. Vincent Barrett frowned and nodded. Apparently it was a signal, for Mrs. Barrett gave a little cry of distress and hurried toward Logan.

"Arthur," she said, her voice filled with emotion. "Oh, Arthur, what has happened to you?"

"Do you know me?" Logan asked blankly, feeling quite proud of his performance. "Honest, I never saw either of you before. At least I don't think so. I—I can't remember anything. Is Arthur really my name?"

"Of course," said Barrett. "I'm your Uncle Vincent."

"Take him home," Captain Blane suggested. "Familiar things may restore his memory. He's free to go any time at all."

"We'll take good care of him," Vincent Barrett promised. "He was working too hard. I'm not at all surprised that something like this happened. Come along with us, Arthur."

Logan went docilely, giving a perfect imitation of a man whose mind was still shadowed by a black curtain. There was a big car outside the hospital, chauffeur-driven by a wide-faced, ugly-looking man whose eyes narrowed when he saw Logan.

The detective sergeant settled himself in the middle of the back seat with Mrs. Barrett and her husband on either side of him. The car rolled quietly along the street. What would happen next was quite impossible for Logan to predict, but he was startled when Vincent Barrett poked a gun against his ribs.

"All right," Barrett said harshly. "What do you want? Where is Arthur? What have you done with him?"

"I don't get you," Logan looked blank. "You said I was your nephew and I believe you. Why the gun?"

"Stop that nonsense," snapped Barrett. "You know as well as we do that you are not Arthur Barrett. You took that brass pomeranian from Arthur. Possibly he told you there are only three of them in existence and that my wife and I have the only other two. Pretending to have lost your memory

and getting those stories in the papers about the little brass dog being the only thing in your possession was clever."

"What do you mean?" demanded Logan cagily. "I still don't understand."

"You knew that when we read about the amnesia victim with the brass pomeranian we would be sure it was Arthur," explained Mrs. Barrett sharply. "We're willing to bargain with you to get our nephew back. What are your terms?"

"But suppose I don't know what you are talking about?" Logan said cautiously. "What then?"

"You know." Barrett's voice was cold. "And you'll talk if we have to beat it out of you."

"I think I'd like that job," volunteered the chauffeur without turning his head.

"Be quiet, Hackett," snapped Mrs. Barrett.

"Don't forget you were supposed to be Arthur's bodyguard as well as our chauffeur. That's why we hired you—and you failed us in protecting our nephew."

Hackett slumped into sullen silence. The car was proceeding at a good clip along an express highway, apparently heading for the suburbs. It was quite dark now, for night had come quickly.

Logan too, preferred silence. The Barrett's puzzled him. For he couldn't be sure whether these people were being victimized in some manner or if they really were a pair of clever crooks. They talked as though their nephew had been kidnaped, and Logan, it would seem, had some connection with the gang.

He wondered about the unidentified man in the hospital who was still posing as an amnesiac. Logan suspected that it was he who was the real crook and the pivotal figure in this puzzle that seemed to revolve around a brass pooch.

As the car sped across town, Logan glanced toward the river. The sight of the water brought back the memory of the case he had been working on for the past week or so. The murder victim who had been pulled out of the river—he still had that headache to solve, he remembered.

Logan had been constantly aware of the pair of headlights behind them from the moment they had hit the express highway. One light was slightly out of focus and this had served to identify the trailing car. He wondered if it could be some of Captain Blane's men or if, somehow, the amnesia victim's friends had guessed the ruse the sergeant was pulling.

After about forty minutes of driving, with the out-of-focus headlight always present in the rear view mirror, Vincent Barrett's car turned off onto a narrower macadam road. Two miles of traveling over this route

brought them to a large house, apparently the dominating feature of a big estate.

The car rolled along a winding drive and stopped in front of the door. Vincent Barrett got out first, openly displaying the gun, but holding it carelessly so that the barrel was aimed at the ground. Barrett evidently wasn't accustomed to packing a weapon.

"Come on," he snapped to Logan. "Get out."

Slowly, Logan climbed out, and as his feet touched the ground he lunged for Barrett. He caught the wrist that held the gun, and twisted. The gun dropped from Barrett's grasp, but a pile driver blow unexpectedly struck Logan. He didn't know until afterward that the burly chauffeur had administered a knockout rabbit punch, scientifically delivered.

Detective-sergeant Logan passed into a black fog that did not lift for what seemed like an eternity. When he became conscious he found himself in a lavishly furnished room, seated in a chair, with the burly chauffeur standing near him. Barrett was pacing the floor. His wife was not present. As he saw the sergeant's eyes open, Barrett stalked before Logan's chair.

"Now see here," he thundered. "I don't intend fooling around. I want the whole truth. If you refuse to talk, so help me, I'll make you suffer. Where is my nephew? What happened to him?"

"I don't know," answered Logan truthfully.

"Take him upstairs, Hackett," Barrett ordered curtly. "He'll either talk or die!"

"Come on, you." The chauffeur grabbed Logan by the arm, and pulled him up out of the chair. "Get moving."

Still groggy, Logan made no attempt to resist. He wondered idly what would happen if he proclaimed himself a detective sergeant.

They pushed him up to the second floor, then up a second flight which led to what were apparently little used quarters just under the eaves of the house. Here they locked him in the darkness of a small room.

"You can't get out," Barrett called from outside the door. "You'll remain there until you starve or thirst to death. Once an hour someone will knock. If you wish to tell the truth you'll be allowed to come out. Otherwise you can just rot!"

LOGAN heard the sound of retreating footsteps and then black silence engulfed him. He had no matches so he examined the room by sense of touch alone. It was hardly more than a closet, he discovered. There were no windows and the door seemed much too strong to be broken down. Logan hunched himself into a sitting position with

his back against the wall and wondered just what he should do now.

He was beginning to suspect that Barrett might actually be the uncle of the missing Arthur Barrett, but still Logan was not quite sure. Barrett's display of a gun and his threats indicated desperation brought about by possible criminal intent, as did his holding Logan a prisoner.

Hackett, the chauffeur, looked more like a thug than a servant. Though Mrs. Barrett had explained that when she had said the man had been hired as a bodyguard for her nephew. But why had the nephew needed a bodyguard?

Logan was certain not more than fifteen or twenty minutes had passed when someone tapped on the door.

"Cleath?" an unfamiliar voice whispered.
"Are you in there?"

"Yes," Logan answered gruffly. "Get me out."

The key grated in the lock, and Logan moved swiftly to flatten himself beside the door. When it opened, a flashlight's ray swept the cubicle. Logan snatched the flashlight from the man's hand and switched it off.

"No lights," he snapped. "Who are you?"

"Grady and Lang," came the answer out of the darkness. "You all right, boss?"

"Yes," Logan growled. "How did you get here?"

"Easy," said a second hard voice. "I was planted inside Headquarters pretending I had lost my two kids and wanted to wait until there was some word. Lang was waiting down the block with the car. I heard these people ask about the amnesia victim so we trailed them to the hospital and then here."

"Excellent," Logan said.

So long as no lights were turned on, he felt he might get away with this. These two men obviously worked for Cleath, who must be the phony amnesia victim. He'd fooled them so far into being accepted as Cleath.

"But what happened here?" Grady asked. "We thought you'd have the stuff by now. Instead, we find you locked up. Never would have spotted you if we hadn't seen the chauffeur listening outside the door of that room like there was someone inside. What happened?"

"They worked too fast," Logan said. "The stuff is here though. It must be, and we'd better search for it. We'll separate to do the job quicker. And no lights. They're suspicious already and might call the cops."

"What?" Lang gasped. "After they delayed this long? I don't think so." There was a scornful note in his tone. "You getting nervous, Cleath?"

"Not John Cleath," said Grady softly before Logan could speak. "He never gets

rattled. Why, he's the best front I've ever seen for our racket."

"No time to talk," Logan snapped. "Let's get started looking. You take this floor of the house, Lang, and you the floor below, Grady. I'll work downstairs."

He didn't dare query them about the object of their search. All he could hope was that one of them would find it, and he would learn what it was in that way. Logan still could not be certain that the Barretts were not criminally involved somehow. The fact that Lang had derided the idea the Barretts would call in the police indicated this.

Leaving the two men to the tasks he had given them, Logan made his way down to the first floor of the house. Cautiously peering in, he discovered that Vincent Barrett and his wife were in the big living room, a radio playing softly. Certainly the elderly couple did not act as if they suspected two strange men were in the house. Logan tiptoed to the back door, walked out and looked around.

He had not gone more than a few steps before he was ducking for cover as he saw Hackett emerge from the garage and walk toward the house. Logan watched the massive figure close the door behind him before he made his way toward the garage. A few steps beyond, he stumbled over a rock garden, and almost fell headlong. He recovered his balance just in time, and presently was entering the garage.

Swiftly he began searching. Hackett lived in two rooms on the second floor. There was nothing of interest in them except a pair of rubber boots, the surface of which were crusted with a white powdery substance. They were stuffed with paper, evidently to keep them in shape. Nothing else here.

Quickly, Logan made his way back into the house. He knew he had to work fast. Any time now Barrett might decide it was time to question the prisoner supposedly locked in his cubicle. The sergeant rapidly investigated several rooms before he found one with a telephone. Closing the door carefully behind him, he dialed Police Headquarters, and contacted Captain Blane.

"We started something," he reported, speaking in a whisper. "But I'm not quite sure what it is. I'm at the home of Vincent Barrett on Long Island. Don't send any help for two hours. But if you don't hear from me by then, come flying."

"Maybe we'd better cut that time down," Blane said. "The amnesia victim blew out of the hospital in some stolen clothes. Seemed he had a visitor who must have told him how things stand."

"Bad, but I still think I can take care of things," Logan commented. "Maybe Cleath

—that's the amnesiac's name—doesn't know who the Barretts are or where they live. That's what he wanted to find out. So how can he get here? Two hours, Captain. I can handle it that long."

IN THE dark room, Logan was in the act of switching off the flash he had used to dial the phone when the door opened suddenly, and the lights flashed on. There was a single sharp scream. For a moment Mrs. Barrett stood in the doorway gazing at Logan in horror. Then she turned abruptly and fled.

Logan turned to find Vincent Barrett now standing outside the doorway, covering him with a gun. Hackett was advancing, maneuvering for another of his rabbit punches. Mrs. Barrett was standing behind the two men.

"Wait—we're not alone here," Logan said sharply. "There are other men in the house."

"Listen to him try and scare us," the chauffeur muttered. "Well, we don't fall for that bluff."

"But he must have had help in getting out of the room upstairs," Mrs. Barrett added quickly. "He may be telling the truth."

"Then if he is," Hackett grumbled, "he's working with these other men and we better take care of him right now."

The chauffeur was easing in for the kill, and Barrett, no longer able to cover Logan, lowered his gun. But Hackett was too certain of himself; he hadn't paused to size up his opponent. Instead of getting close in to deliver his fatal punch, he suddenly found himself at the end of a fist that knew how to deal out punishment.

Logan's first blow flattened even more the already flat nose. His next flew to the heart and sent the chauffeur gorilla reeling back. He tried to seize a chair for support, and then slowly he was sinking to the floor, completely out. Flashlike, Logan started forward, only to be stopped once more as he saw Barrett again had him covered with the gun. The sergeant glanced toward the stairs and frowned.

"Put that gun away, Barrett," Logan ordered crisply. "You're covered. Ask your wife if you don't believe me."

Already the two men who had freed Logan were halfway down the staircase with their guns trained on Barrett. He turned about, saw them and then dropped his own weapon, just as Hackett, rubbing his eyes, rose weakly to his feet.

"Quite a party," said one of the men, and Logan recognized the voice of Grady. "Line up against the wall, all of you."

Grady came down into the hall and picked up Barrett's gun. Lang remained on the stairs ready to shoot. In the bright light from the overhead chandelier, Logan could

now see that they were well-dressed, sharp-looking men. Not in the thug class, Logan decided, but definitely ten times more dangerous.

Grady stepped up to Logan.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What happened to Cleath?"

"He never got here." For the present Logan was going to try and bluff it through. "I came in his place. Look—Cleath is a dope. I can handle this much better than he, and I'm amenable to talking business with a couple of smart boys like yourselves. Cleath wouldn't surrender more than twenty-five percent. I'm ready to talk business at fifty."

"Sure—only we like to know just whom we're talking business with." Grady smiled thinly. "How'd you get in on this lay-out?"

"Cleath talked too much," explained Logan easily. "I'm the smarter man because I'm here and he isn't. That proves it. If you boys hadn't shown up, I'd have put the whole thing across. I owe you a lot for getting me out of that room upstairs and so—fifty percent."

"Maybe you already found what we were looking for and this is just a stall," Grady countered. "I'll find out later. Now all of you march upstairs into the big bedroom. You'll be locked in and one of us will be watching the window. I wouldn't try to get out if I were you. Meanwhile, we'll keep on looking around." He nodded to Lang who had come down the stairs and joined him. "Search that man who thinks he can horn in, Joe."

Later, they obeyed orders and the bedroom door was closed and locked with the three men and the woman inside. Logan turned to the others.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you all the truth sooner," he said. "I'm Detective-sergeant Logan attached to the Missing Persons Bureau. I took the place of the man who carried that brass pomeranian because we suspected he was a crook, and we wanted to learn more about him."

"I don't believe you," Barrett snapped. "Those two crooks recognize a fellow criminal when they see one and they all but accepted you. We heard you try and make a deal with them."

"Of course—I was trying to find out what those men are after. That's why I pretended to be one of their own kind," explained Logan. "I am a police officer. Listen, when you interviewed Captain Blane at Headquarters, he excused himself for a moment and left the room, didn't he?"

"He did." Barrett nodded. "What of it?"

"That was so Blane could phone me at the hospital where I was waiting and tip me off to take the place of this man Cleath who was pretending amnesia." Logan frowned. "I

was phoning Captain Blane — had just finished talking to him when Mrs. Barrett discovered me in the den a little while ago. The captain told me that Cleath has escaped from the hospital. If he gets here somehow—we're all sunk."

"Vincent," Mrs. Barrett said slowly. "I think he's telling the truth."

"I don't know whether he is or not," Barrett snapped. "I'm still not going to tell him anything and that goes for you, too, Edith. If he is an officer, we'll find it out eventually."

"Eventually will be too late," Logan protested. "Tell me what Cleath and these men are after. Give me a chance to plan something that may save all our lives."

"Vincent, I know he's telling the truth." Mrs. Barrett, her face pale, grasped her husband's arm with desperation. "You've got to trust him."

"All right," Barrett sat down wearily. "What difference does it make, anyway? Our nephew, Arthur Barrett, my brother's son, was being blackmailed—"

"How and why?" interrupted Logan curtly.

"He didn't give us the details," replied Barrett. "But I received the impression that a clever gang of crooks were blackmailing certain people in the New York night clubs crowd. Arthur was hot-headed, unpredictable. He paid the blackmailers for a while and then he got on their trail."

"Arthur found out where their headquarters were and he—stole all the papers concerning his own derelictions and those of many other people. Original documents those blackmailers needed to carry on their work."

LOGAN whistled between his teeth. So it was blackmail. This case was at last beginning to make some sense.

"So Arthur brought those papers here and hid them," Logan supplied. "Later Cleath located Arthur and took him prisoner."

"That's right—they got him even though we had hired Hackett as Arthur's body-guard," said Barrett bitterly.

"Aw, how could I guard him when he was in New York and I was out here?" protested the flatnosed chauffeur.

"This all happened a week ago," Barrett continued, ignoring Hackett completely. "Arthur suddenly disappeared. He had written us a letter saying we were to do nothing—say nothing. That he'd try to contact us later. The week went by without us hearing anything more from him. Then we read about the amnesia victim who carried the brass pomeranian and we hoped it would be Arthur. If it wasn't we planned to falsely

identify the man and bring him here. That way he might be forced to tell what happened to our nephew."

"Evidently they caught Arthur," Logan remarked thoughtfully. "They knew he had hidden the papers somewhere, but probably could not force him to tell them the location. If Cleath and the rest of the gang had suspected they might find what they were looking for here, then he wouldn't have bothered with the amnesia set-up."

"I suppose you are right," volunteered Mrs. Barrett. "But where is Arthur?"

"What did he look like?" asked Logan quickly.

"Twenty-seven, five feet ten, weighs about one forty-five," said Barrett. "His hair is light brown, his eyes blue—and he has an L-shaped scar on his left wrist."

"An L-shaped scar," Logan repeated slowly.

Suddenly he found himself remembering that other case he had been working on. The body that had been fished up out of the river. There had been a scar like that on the left wrist of the corpse.

"I see," he said softly.

Logan was about to tell the Barretts that he was quite sure their nephew was dead—that Arthur had been murdered—but he remained silent as he heard someone at the door of the bedroom. The key turned in the lock—and there was John Cleath walking toward them. Behind him were his two accomplices. With icy calm, Cleath nodded casually to Logan.

"Neat trick, Sergeant," he said suavely. "It almost worked, too, but I have a habit of foreseeing things. I was pretty careful to park one of my men in Headquarters so the word would be passed when anyone came to identify me."

"Yes, I know," Logan acknowledged dryly. "I was told about that."

"A third man followed when you took me to the hospital," Cleath continued coolly. "When Grady and Lang followed you as you left with the Barretts this third man reported to me. I decided it was high time for me to get out of there."

"You've never been here before," Logan observed cautiously. "How'd you find the place?"

"I don't mind answering that," Cleath laughed. "It was easy. Barrett's car license number was taken down by the man who watched you leave the hospital. I checked and here I am. Now let's get down to business." He looked probingly at Logan. "Stay out of it, Sergeant, and you won't be harmed. None of you will if you co-operate. I want to know what Arthur did with those papers."

"We don't know," Barrett said tautly. "And you can torture us to death before we'll tell

any other story, because that's true."

"We haven't the least intention of torturing you." Cleath shrugged. "The papers are here and I intend to locate them. You will all remain prisoners in this room, of course. Don't try to escape or we shall be compelled to shoot."

The three men left, locking the door behind them. Barrett wiped perspiration off his face and patted his wife's hand comfortingly. Hackett was growling under his breath. It was a long, speculative moment before Logan spoke.

"Is there anything on the premises in which those papers could be hidden?" he finally asked. "Probably out on the grounds, for if Arthur had returned to the house you would have seen him with the documents. The spot may have a door or a trap equipped with a very powerful spring."

"Nothing that I can recall," said Barrett, glancing at the chauffeur. "Do you, Hackett?"

"No, sir," Hackett said promptly.

"But there is," Mrs. Barrett cried loudly. "The well near the rock garden. It's only used now to water the lawn and we had it covered several years ago. Children were apt to fall into it, but sometimes the water pumping mechanism didn't work and mechanics had to go into the well to repair it. So they made a trap door with so strong a spring that no child could open it."

"That's right," Barrett added. "I'd forgotten. How on earth did you know there'd be such a trap door here, Sergeant?"

"I guessed," Logan said softly. "And you talked too loud, Mrs. Barrett. Someone was probably listening outside and Cleath will be down that well in a matter of minutes. Not much that we can do about it."

Logan strode to the window. Yes, already the flashlights were streaking the darkness. Cleath was losing no time.

"Somehow we've got to keep those men here a little longer even after they find the papers," Logan said decisively. "When I talked to Captain Blane over the phone tonight he agreed to send someone here within two hours."

"They won't find the papers in the well," Hackett remarked. "They'll stick around."

"Probably not," Logan looked thoughtful. "There are only three of those men—and there are three of us. If we could use the element of surprise to overcome their superiority in weapons, we might have a chance."

"I'll tear 'em to bits," Hackett growled.

"Get all the paper you can find," Logan said suddenly. "We'll burn it in the bedroom fireplace. They'll think they were hidden in this room and we are destroying the documents they want. Nothing will bring them any faster."

RAPIDLY they collected all the paper they could find in the room and the closets and placed it in the fireplace. Logan stood at the window watching until the flashlights began moving about down below. His fingers trembling, Barrett lit the papers. Soot and sparks would fly out of the chimney and the man on guard would certainly see them. After a few anxious moments they heard an excited shout and Logan smiled grimly. Cleath was going to fall for it.

Under Logan's orders, Barrett and Hackett had armed themselves with the legs of a chair they had broken apart. They heard the key being inserted in the door, and then Cleath was barging in, followed by his two men, their attention fixed upon the fireplace.

Hackett leaped first, swinging his club and bringing Grady down with one hard blow. Logan dived for Cleath's legs and tumbled him to the floor. He wrested the gun from Cleath's hand and leaped up. Barrett was fighting hard with Lang and getting the worst of it until Logan fired a single shot into the wall.

Lang stepped back, released the gun he was using as a club, and raised his arms. In a matter of minutes all three men were firmly bound with their own belts and neckties.

Detective-sergeant Logan looked keenly at Cleath's trouser legs. He had been in the well and the water had come up above his knees. It was already drying, for Cleath had been close to the hot fireplace. At the water line, his trousers were covered with fine white powder.

"The well contains a lot of lime to keep the water pure, doesn't it, Hackett?" Logan was facing the chauffeur, the gun in his hand.

"So what?" Hackett growled.

"So you're under arrest," Logan snapped. "Don't move, Hackett."

"I don't understand, Sergeant," said Barrett in bewilderment. "Why are you arresting Hackett?"

"Because he was in that well not very long ago. He wore boots. I saw them in his quarters and they're covered with lime just as are Cleath's trouser legs." Logan glared at the chauffeur. "Where are those papers, Hackett?"

"Suppose I do have them?" Hackett smirked. "Maybe I read them, too, and could make a lot of trouble for Barrett's nephew and some other people. They paid Cleath plenty of dough to keep things quiet. I don't think they'll want me arrested because I'll spill the whole business. Mr. and Mrs. Barrett wouldn't like that!"

"It's rather ghastly, Sergeant," Barrett winced. "If Hackett does have those papers perhaps it would be best to keep this quiet."

"Those papers won't harm your nephew," Logan said tersely. "Not any more. Arthur

is dead. He was fished out of the river a week ago. He'd been murdered."

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Barrett sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

"I didn't kill him," shouted Cleath. "On my honor, I didn't kill him. I took that brass dog away from him, made it part of my blackmail price because I fancied it. He told me its history and when we couldn't find him or the papers I thought of the amnesia gag. Hoped it would lead me to Arthur through his family. On my honor, I didn't kill him."

"You haven't any honor," Logan corrected grimly, "but I know you didn't murder him. He died of a broken neck, brought about by a rabbit punch. And Hackett delivered that blow."

"Hackett!" Barrett looked dazedly at the big chauffeur. "The man we hired to protect Arthur? But why?"

"Arthur probably came here one night with the papers," explained Logan. "He decided to hide them in the well before he told you he had arrived. Hackett saw Arthur hiding the papers. Perhaps Arthur aroused him because Arthur's fingers got caught in that trap door and they were smashed pretty badly. He may have called out in pain. When I saw that smashed hand on the corpse I thought someone had done it to try and hide fingerprints. But only smashing one hand didn't make sense in that case."

"What else?" asked Barrett bleakly as Logan paused.

"Perhaps Arthur told Hackett that he had hidden the papers in the well," Logan con-

tinued. "Hackett saw a chance to cut himself in on a nice racket if he could contact the blackmailers, so he killed Arthur with one of those characteristic blows, tied stones to his body. They were calcimined rocks that came from the rock garden near the garage. We can prove they came from this estate."

"But how did Hackett expect to contact the blackmailers?" demanded Barrett.

"I don't know," said Logan, "but when you read about the brass pomeranian in the papers and went looking for your nephew Hackett was probably delighted. It would give him a chance to talk to the blackmailers—and either make them pay him for the papers or perhaps let him join them in their racket."

Outside, headlights gleamed, and they could hear two cars roll into the drive. Captain Blane and his men were arriving. Hackett made a wild dive for Mrs. Barrett, intending to get behind her and use her as a human shield. Purposely aiming low, Logan fired once, and Hackett went down groaning, his kneecap shattered.

"The police are arriving," Logan announced. "And we have quite a collection to turn over to Captain Blane."

"But the papers," exclaimed Barrett, still distraught. "Where are they?"

"In Hackett's boots out in his living quarters in the garage," said Logan. "I noticed that the boots were stuffed with paper and I thought that was just to keep them in shape. You see I didn't know what I was looking for then!"

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Blinking, not quite believing his eyes, Judge Wright saw a short, stout woman fling up her arms and fall to the ground

The Pouter Pigeon Murder

By TED COUGHLAN

Judge Wayne Wright, Southern jurist, shows the detectives what a little bird can tell him about a mysterious killer!

JUDGE WAYNE WRIGHT, oldest jurist of the Criminal Court, walked out of the courthouse into the blinding winter sunshine of Flagler Street. His deep-set blue eyes squinted as he looked undecidedly up and down the crowded thoroughfare. Then, ignoring the heavy traffic, he crossed in the middle of the block, to the accompaniment of protesting automobile horns and squeals of overtired brakes.

He was about to continue his walk, when a

bluff, hearty voice stopped him.

"Good morning, Your Honor. Jaywalking again, I see."

The Judge looked up at the speaker. He rubbed his eyes with his veined hand, and his thin lips pursed.

"Oh, it's you, Inspector Holland," he said. "And how is crime this fine morning?"

Inspector Holland smiled wryly.

"Too early for the local crooks to be stirring yet. Where are you bound?"

The Judge felt in his pocket and took out a bag of peanuts.

"I'm going down to the Park to feed the pigeons."

"You're headed in the wrong direction. I thought you knew your way around by now."

Inspector Holland wrinkled his snub nose. "Come along with me. I'll drive you down to Biscayne Boulevard."

The Judge looked up again at the Inspector. Holland, in his well-cut gray sport suit, matching his deep-set gray eyes, and with his high forehead and ready smile, looked more like an amiable business man than a police officer.

"All right, if you're going that way," the Judge sighed. "But I don't want to get mixed up in any more crimes. I get enough of them in the courtroom."

"There's nothing stirring—just some kind of a rally in the Park. I'm making a routine trip, to check up on pickpockets who might be out early."

Holland cruised his police sedan leisurely down Flagler Street, then parked in a restricted spot on the palm-lined Boulevard, near the Moorish band shell. A small crowd gaped at the several people grouped on the outdoor stage. The loud-speaker blared for an instant, then trailed off, as the engineer's monotonous voice chanted:

"Testing . . . One, two, three."

"What's it about this time?" the Judge asked, with faint interest in his well-modulated voice.

"Oh, a routine meeting of the League for Something or Other." Holland waved a hand disparagingly. "A few social climbers trying to get their names in the papers. They're against something—the anti-jaywalking ordinance, or closing the Park early. Go ahead and feed your pigeons. I'll pick you up in about half an hour."

"Thank you, Inspector. But you needn't come looking for me if you happen to run into trouble."

THE Judge smiled, dug out his bag of peanuts, and headed for the nearest waterfront bench.

He was quickly surrounded by the ever-hungry birds. They perched on his hat, shoulders, knees and arms, and snatched the peanuts from him as fast as he could crack the shells. A sudden blare of music from the band shell startled them, and they flew off with an angry whirr of wings.

Startled himself by the sudden sound, the Judge put on his thick-lensed pince-nez and looked in the direction of the offending noise. A small band of musicians was seated in the back of the platform. Several people in front of them faced the now well-filled seats. They

were too far off for the Judge to see them clearly.

Still staring toward the band shell with slight resentment, his nerves were jarred again, this time by a sharp discordant note which suddenly broke into the music.

Blinking, not quite believing his eyes, Judge Wright saw a stout, short woman fling up her arms and fall flat on her face near the edge of the platform.

He sighed, exasperated, and slipped the remaining nuts back into his pocket. His shoulders hunched, he reluctantly made his way toward the band shell.

The first person he saw, as he mounted the short flight of steps, was Inspector Holland.

"As soon as I met you," the detective growled gruffly, "I should have known something would happen."

Judge Wright's thick, stubby fingers fumbled with his glasses.

"What's the matter with the lady?" he asked. "Nervous prostration?"

"No," Holland informed him almost savagely. "She's been shot. There's going to be the devil to pay! Wait until the reporters hear that. Mrs. Jefferson Redfern, prominent Miami clubwoman, chairman of umpteen different clubs, was shot to death during rally in Bayfront Park! You know her family well enough to guess the rest."

"Oh, my!" Judge Wright sighed. "I must hurry back to the office, before I get mixed up in this. I hope you can clear it up quickly, Inspector. Good-by."

"Now, now—wait a minute, Your Honor," Holland remonstrated. "You can't leave me in the middle of this mess. You know how much I depend on you."

The Judge who, as a matter of fact, enjoyed being mixed up in criminal cases, sighed again in mock exasperation. His peevishness was a trick to get the Inspector to invite him to stay.

"All right, if you insist," he grudgingly agreed. "But you'll have to telephone Margaret. I can't think clearly without her around."

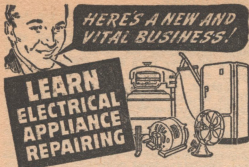
Holland knew how the old Judge depended on his efficient secretary, Margaret Sinclair. He liked the tall, slender blonde himself, and admired her smartness. He detailed a patrolman to call her, then led the Judge to the already screened-off body of Mrs. Redfern.

"She was shot in the back, from close quarters. With this mob"—the Inspector indicated the milling crowd—"it's going to be a job to find out anything."

Readjusting his pince-nez, the Judge looked down on the slumped body. Then his mild eyes scanned the band shell.

"But it is obvious that she was shot by

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someone up here," he remarked. "You can disperse the entire audience. With her facing them, no one of them could have shot her in the back. Just detain everybody who was on the platform."

"I've done that already," Holland grunted.

"I'm just letting them stew for a while, until the M.E. gets here and takes the body away."

"Let's see what we can find out."

Judge Wright walked over to the speaker's rostrum, where two men and two women sat glumly. He addressed one of the men.

"Good morning, Mr. Gates. Who was in charge of the rally?"

Gates stood up. He towered above the short, stocky Judge. His slight body swayed, his liver-spotted hands clenched the edge of the speaker's table. His thin lips hardly opened when he spoke.

"Well, I was," he said, "although Mrs. Redfern was the president of the League. Who could have done such a dreadful thing?"

"Who are your friends?" The Judge waved a hand at the others.

"Oh, excuse me. I'm so rattled, I forgot the introductions. Mrs. Cameron." He indicated a small, birdlike woman in a stiff black dress, with a ridiculous excuse for a hat perched high on her graying hair. "Mrs. Andrews." Gates presented a huge woman, dressed in pastel pink which only accentuated her bulk. "And our dear friend, Henry Parsons, Mrs. Redfern's cousin." He bowed toward a small, chubby-faced man in striped trousers and morning coat.

HENRY PARSONS stood up and bowed stiffly.

"May I escort the ladies home, Your Honor?" he suggested in a thin, squeaky voice. "I'm sure you don't need them here. This tragedy has been a profound shock to all of us, but as my dear friend Rev. Smiley would say, 'We never know what the morrow holds in store for us.'"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Parsons," Holland answered loudly, suppressing a snicker. "We'll have to detain all of you for a while longer."

Judge Wright sat down wearily. Again his dimmed eyes took in the band shell.

"I believe," he informed Holland then, "if you have a short talk with the musicians, you can let them go, after taking their names and addresses."

He looked around, as he heard the tapping of high heels mounting the steps. With a sigh of relief, he saw his secretary coming toward him. Her long blond curls were flying in the light breeze, and the skirt of her pongee suit swished as she stepped quickly toward him, opening her bag. The Judge drew back involuntarily. He knew what was coming.

She forced him to accept a pill from the

bottle taken out of her capacious bag.

"Can't I leave you out of my sight without you getting mixed up with the police?" she scolded him good-naturedly. "I hope you remember you're due to address the convention of Florida attorneys tonight."

"Oh, tush, that bunch of old fogies! Call it off!" Judge Wright spoke peremptorily.

Margaret shook her head and dropped the subject.

"I'm not very well posted on social affairs, Mr. Gates," the Judge said to the chairman. "Suppose you tell me a little more about Mrs. Redfern's background."

Gates sputtered. There was an expression of pained disappointment on his long, cadaverous face.

"Surely, Judge, you know about her activities. Why, she was the president of many clubs and societies. Mrs. Redfern was perhaps one of the most important clubwomen in Miami. Her death is a great loss to the community."

"Granted," the Judge grunted, unimpressed. "Was she well-liked by the members of her different clubs?"

"Naturally," Gates answered sourly. "Otherwise she wouldn't have been president of so many clubs."

"Not necessarily."

The Judge switched away from Gates. "Would you say she was popular as a club leader?" he asked the "stylish stout" Mrs. Andrews.

"Why, Your Honor, such a question!" Mrs. Andrews' triple chins wagged. "Dear Mrs. Redfern was charming!"

"Somebody around here didn't think so."

The Judge's voice held a definite note of sarcasm. He was about to ask another question, but a call from Holland stopped him.

"Here's the gun! One shell fired. Where do you think I found it? It had been tossed into the tuba. It fell out when the musician started to pack his instrument."

"Hmm . . . Interesting. But it rather complicates things. Now we'll have to hold the orchestra. Which one of them played the tuba?"

"That fellow there." Holland pointed to a heavy-set, dark-haired musician who was wrestling with the cover of his heavy wind instrument. "Come here, Michelson!"

"You talk to him, Inspector." The Judge waved him away. "I have a few things I want Margaret to take care of. I'll be back shortly. Come, child."

He crooked his finger at the girl. She followed him off the band shell, and back to the Park bench where the Judge started feeding the pigeons again.

They sat in silence until the peanuts were gone. Then the Judge sighed, and wiped his

[Turn page]



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face with his large handkerchief.

"You know, Margaret," he said, "none of those people are going to tell the whole truth. I think you can give me more information as to why Mrs. Redfern was killed than they will."

Margaret was surprised.

"What would I know about it, Your Honor?"

"Nothing about the actual killing, my dear. But probably a great deal about the victim."

"Why, I hardly knew her, except by reputation."

MARGARET'S gold-flecked hazel eyes were puzzled. A slight frown corrugated her smooth, high brow.

"Exactly, my dear. Her reputation may have some bearing on her death. Tell me what you know about her, and those others up there." The Judge's stubby, gnarled finger pointed toward the band shell.

"Well," Margaret began reluctantly, "I met Mrs. Redfern a few times. Once or twice I've had to ward her off, when she insisted on trying to rope you in on some committee or other. I would say that she was rather domineering, with a passion for parliamentary laws. The routine of club work was probably more important to her than the aims of the clubs. She usually became either president or vice-president shortly after joining any organization."

"Do you think she was sincere in her desire for social reforms?" The Judge stroked the neck of a small white pigeon which insisted on remaining perched on his finger.

Margaret shook her head.

"Honestly, Judge," she said, "I don't like being catty, but I think she got a bigger kick out of drafting new rules and regulations for all her clubs than in any good they might do."

"Hmm. . . I was wondering how many people's toes she stepped on, to get what she wanted."

"Too many," Margaret answered succinctly.

"I seem to remember she was a wealthy woman. Her late husband made a vast fortune in real estate."

Margaret nodded, staring at the Judge uncomprehendingly.

"Your Honor, you should know all about her financial affairs. Your firm was executor for Mr. Redfern's estate. We even drew up his wife's will. Your law partner took care of the details. If you think it might help you, I'll take a cab to the office and get you a copy of her will."

"No, my dear, we won't need it. I remember now. Thank you just the same."

"Do you know who killed her?" Margaret's excited eyes searched the Judge's impassive,

well-lined face.

"Not for certain, child," Judge Wright shooed the pigeon off his finger and stood up. "We'd better go back and see how the Inspector is making out."

"Let him finish his own case," the girl objected. "It's time for your lunch and nap."

"Margaret, how many times must I tell you that I hired you as a secretary, and not as a nursemaid?" the Judge reprimanded her with feigned severity.

"If I don't look after you, who will?" Margaret pouted, but obediently walked along with him to the band shell.

Back on the platform, the Judge sat down wearily. He took out his glasses, wiped them, put them on his nose, then almost immediately removed them and put them away. Margaret recognized the symptoms.

"What are you trying to remember, your Honor?" she asked.

He smiled a slow, reminiscent smile, passed his hand over his forehead, and looked at Holland.

"For the life of me, Inspector," he said, "I can't remember the name of that kind of pigeons I always feed."

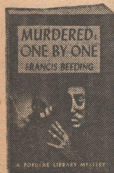
Margaret suppressed a smile.

"Pouter pigeons, Your Honor."

"Pouter pigeons—yes. It's peculiar how
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much, in some ways, they resemble certain humans. Or perhaps I should say how much certain humans resemble them. Thank you, my dear. Now it is all clear."

"What's clear?" Holland demanded, turning from the musician he had been questioning.

Judge Wright smiled sympathetically at the harassed young tuba player.

"If you're through talking to him," he suggested to Holland, "send him home. We should take a trip out to Mrs. Redfern's house."

Holland waved the musician away.

"Who do you mean by we?" he asked gruffly.

"All of us here. Perhaps you should ride with the others. Margaret and I can take your car. Now don't worry, she's an expert driver."

Squelching protests from Gates, Parsons, and the two clubwomen, Holland herded them off the band shell toward the lot across the street where Parsons' car was parked.

Margaret and the Judge drove out Brickell Avenue. About a mile from town he indicated an avenue of royal palms. Margaret turned in, and presently they came to a huge pseudo-Colonial house, incongruous in the setting of such a profusion of tropical shrubbery. Flame vine and bougainvillea twined up the imposing columns supporting the front porch.

INSPECTOR HOLLAND was waiting for them in the large, high living room. Someone had put a match to the logs in the huge open fireplace, and the flames threw draft-twisted shadows on the highly polished native mahogany furniture.

With his back to the warming fire, the Judge listened to Holland questioning a new member of the group—a young woman in a ready-made tailored suit. Her mousey hair, with wisps escaping from a disarrayed snood, was in need of a new permanent. Her eyes were red-rimmed from tears.

"Miss Dalton," the detective asked sharply, "why did you leave the Park without my permission?"

The girl's long fingers played with the frilled front of her blouse, her eyes on the floor.

"I hate crowds!" she blurted.

"But you knew that Mrs. Redfern had been shot. You should have stayed."

"I didn't know that she—she was dead." The girl wiped her eyes.

"What's your job here?" Holland's questions were still blunt.

"I'm—I was Mrs. Redfern's social secretary. I'm really her niece, but took the position with her because I had to work."

"I see. Poor relation. Sorry to be so brusque . . . Do you own a gun?"

The girl nodded unhappily.
 "Yes, sir. I have a revolver upstairs. It was my father's, and I hated to part with it. But," she added vehemently, "I have never used it!"

"Is this it?" Holland took out the gun he had found in the tuba.

Again the girl nodded, petrified.

The Judge, who had been poking around the room, stopped at an elaborately carved desk, rummaging through a heap of papers, while listening to the witness and Holland.

"So you shot your benefactor," the Inspector was accusing, "hid the gun in Michel-son's tuba, then came back here to pack a bag and leave in a hurry. Isn't that so?"

"I did not!" The girl's full lips trembled. "I was going to leave, yes, but not for any reason like that!"

With a sheaf of papers in his hand, the Judge walked over to the table where Holland was questioning the witnesses. He sat down at the head of it and put on his glasses.

"Don't be too hasty, Inspector," he advised. "Things look bad for the young lady, but there appears to be a different angle to the whole thing. Look over those letters, while I have a talk with the others."

He handed the papers to Holland, then rubbed his blunt chin reflectively, and turned to Mrs. Cameron.

"Could you tell me over how many clubs Mrs. Redfern presided?" he asked her.

Mrs. Cameron's chirping voice matched her birdlike appearance. She waved her black gloved hands vaguely and straightened her rimless glasses.

"Oh, goodness me," she twittered. "I'll have to consult my note-book."

She opened an enormous black bag and started hunting through it. It seemed fully five minutes before she withdrew a small address book. She adjusted her glasses again, opened the note-book and studied it, her hands fluttering.

"It doesn't seem possible," she piped up, "but it says so here." She held up the book.

"Dear Mrs. Redfern was the president of eleven different clubs, and vice-president of three benevolent societies. Does that help you, sir?"

The Judge didn't answer her, his eyes glued to the strained chubby face of Henry Parsons, while he held out his hand to Mrs. Cameron, indicating her address book. She handed it to him in silence. All watched as the Judge put on his glasses and examined the dog-eared pages.

"It says here that you used to be the president of the Club for Social Progress, Mrs. Andrews."

Mrs. Andrews' triple chins trembled as she answered:

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"I see," the Judge interrupted her. "Mr. Gates, you resigned as president of the Miami Literary Club in Mrs. Redfern's favor. No doubt you had a legitimate reason for doing so."

As Gates stood up and opened his mouth, the Judge stopped him before he could speak.

"Don't bother answering. I'm just trying to figure out in what kind of blackmail Mrs. Redfern indulged."

"Your Honor!" Mrs. Cameron piped up.

THE Judge disregarded the reproof.

"Do you agree with me that she was killed probably to stop her continued attempts at social blackmail?" he asked Inspector Holland.

Holland grunted, and handed the papers back to the Judge. Cupping his chin in his hands, and leaning his elbows on the table, Judge Wright turned to Julie Dalton.

"Do you agree with people who say that Mrs. Redfern was popular in all her clubs?" he asked.

The girl stood up, and when she answered him her voice was firm.

"About as popular as a mouse in the Ladies' Aid. They"—she pointed to Gates, Parsons, and the two clubwomen—"despised her. They were afraid of her. She was so—so domineering."

"I resent that!" Mrs. Andrews' chins wagged in outraged dignity. "I had no reason to be afraid of her. Of course, she was a forceful woman. She had to be, in her position."

"I believe you mean that she acquired such a position because she was so forceful." The Judge's bluish lips curved in a semblance of a smile.

"I'm under the impression that you think you know who killed her, and why," Holland said, brushing the thinning hair back off his forehead. "Why don't you tell me?"

Pausing long enough to drink a glass of water which Margaret had brought him, the Judge spoke in an impassioned monotone.

"I don't like blackmailers. Especially when they use blackmail to further their social ambitions."

"I'm sure we don't understand what you are talking about, Your Honor," Mrs. Cameron said complacently.

"Well then, I'll put it this way," the Judge continued. "I resent social climbers. They trample on other people's feelings. They even resort to social blackmail, just as Mrs. Redfern did."

"I resent the implication," Gates said promptly.

"I know." The Judge waved Gates down. "Mrs. Redfern was as puffed up in her own estimation as a pouter pigeon—though I have an idea a pouter pigeon would resent being compared to some humans. Mrs. Redfern was filled with a burning ambition to be the leader of any group into which she could worm her way."

"Why don't you save all this for the trial, and tell me now who killed her?" Inspector Holland asked bluntly.

"It was one of the group," Judge Wright waved at the five people present. "The motive you should know—outraged social vanity which finally egged an otherwise peaceful citizen into murdering the woman, hoping to regain lost prestige, and save the others from being trampled on. All five of you"—he waved his fingers impersonally at the entire group—"had the motive to a certain extent. You all had the opportunity. Of course, the gun points most strongly to only one person. In the hands of the police, it will eventually convict that person."

"But, I didn't shoot her, I tell you!" Julie Dalton burst out crying. "I never fired that gun in my life!"

"Those letters which I extracted from Mrs. Redfern's desk," the Judge went on, ignoring her outburst, "and Mrs. Cameron's little black book tell a rather sordid story of both frustrated and realized human ambitions. The ambitions were petty, yet the frustration led to murder. It's all so—"

His voice trailed off and he let his head slump to the desk momentarily. Then he straightened up.

"Surely, you can carry on from here," he said to the Inspector. "I don't want to have a hand in turning this particular murderer over to justice."

"If you will answer one question," Holland agreed. "Who else besides Miss Dalton had any opportunity to get hold of the gun?"

"It obviously had to be someone who was familiar with the household. There's one other person here who knew Mrs. Redfern's house as well as Miss Dalton does. Of course, if he is willing to let the girl he loves suffer for his crime, it may go hard with her. But, honestly, even though he killed Mrs. Redfern, I don't believe Mr. Parsons would stand by and see an innocent girl go to jail. Would you, Mr. Parsons?"

The Judge fixed his mild blue eyes on the strained face of Henry Parsons.

"It will certainly go much easier with you, if you admit the truth."

HENRY PARSONS stood up. Now he looked like a much deflated pouter pigeon. The squeak in his voice was a rasp.

"Yes, I killed her," he admitted. "I may

[Turn page]

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not be a hero, but I would never let any harm come to Julie. You have the complete records in those letters of hers. You know she has been forcing me to resign from club after club in her favor. I know no other work. I was entirely dependent on her for financial support." He paused, looked hopelessly at Julie Dalton, licked his lips, and went on, "If she hadn't bribed me by making me the beneficiary of a trust fund, I don't suppose I should ever have done her any real harm."

"Why did she make out a trust fund for you?" Holland demanded, surprised.

"When she became president of the last club in which I had held office, she was satisfied that I no longer stood in her way, so. . . Oh, what's the use? Nobody will ever understand my feelings."

Parsons slumped down in his chair and buried his face in his hands. His body shook, but he finally controlled himself.

"I'm sorry to have placed you all in such an embarrassing position," he apologized, bowed to Gates, Mrs. Cameron and Mrs. Andrews, and stood up.

Followed by Inspector Holland, he walked firmly out of the room. The Judge watched him go with deprecating pity.

"Don't ever let me muddle through crimes any more, my dear," he told Margaret. "And now, if I must address those old fogies to-night, we'd better get some rest."

Margaret stood up with a look of amazement on her bright face.

"You don't mean to tell me that you're getting some sense at last!"

She opened her bag, took a capsule from the familiar dark bottle and popped it into the Judge's mouth, when he opened it to answer her.

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(Continued from page 8)

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Nashville Banner: "Here is one of those fast-moving, sizzling murder mysteries. In addition to being a first rate thriller, perhaps the most significant thing about the book is that it is a first novel."

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which greeted the appearance of **YOU ONLY HANG ONCE**. Take a hint and make sure you're on hand for an exciting fiction feast next issue! As usual there will be several exciting short stories in addition to the featured novel.

From Our Readers

THE mail has been pouring in from loyal fans all over the country these last few months, and we're mighty pleased to learn that our \$2.00 mystery novels are meeting with such favor. Here's a boost for Cornell Woolrich's suspense-filled yarn, **THE BLACK PATH OF FEAR**, from Dan Roberts out in Seattle:

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We agree with you one hundred percent, Dan. Woolrich was in there pitching all the way and he had plenty on the ball. See if you don't think H. W. Roden tosses some fancy mystery curves, too! Now for Bill Smith of South Bend:

THE DEADLY TRUTH by Helen McCloy was a mighty smooth number. A slick job if there ever was one. Since you've been featuring the best of the \$2.00 mystery books in your magazine you've made me very choosy in my detective story reading habits. It's a good thing, I guess, and I'll admit I haven't been disappointed yet in **DETECTIVE NOVEL MAGAZINE**.

Thanks, Bill. We'll continue to do our best to keep you entertained. We have some other top-notch yarns lined up for future issues, but you'll hear about that in good time in this department.

Our limited space prevents us from quoting more of the many fine letters we have been receiving—but you may be sure we appreciate each and every one of them! Keep them rolling in! Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, **DETECTIVE NOVEL MAGAZINE**, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. See you soon!

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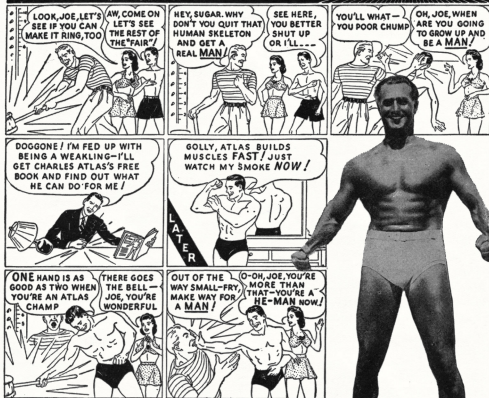
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