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DETECTIVE SHORT STORIES

THE BIGGEST DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

Vol. 2, No. 1



January, 1939

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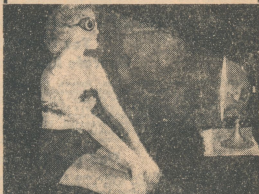
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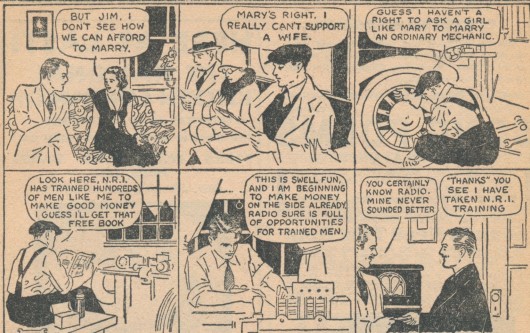
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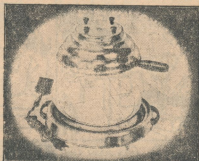
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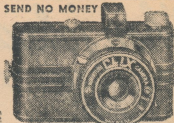
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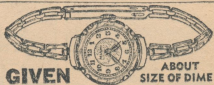
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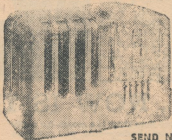
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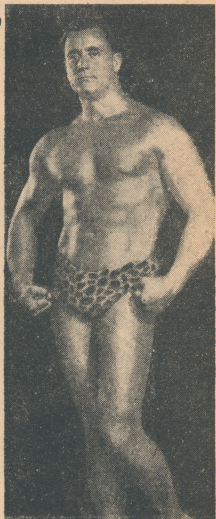
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Photo by Joel Feder



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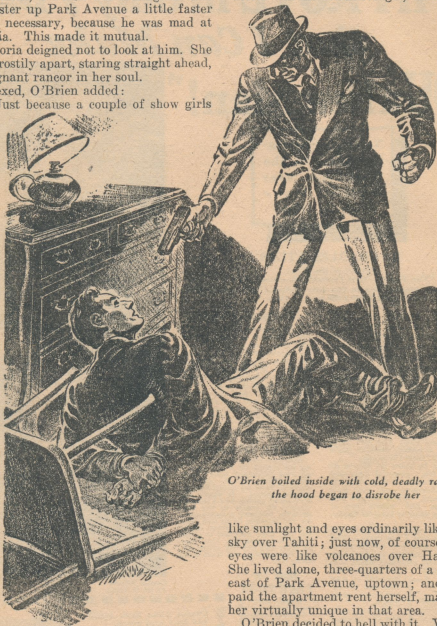
IN all my 29 years this side of the Heretofore, I don't recall a judy as suspicious of me as you are, babe," Detective O. B. O'Brien said to his girl Gloria. At the time of statement, O'Brien was tooling his blue roadster up Park Avenue a little faster than necessary, because he was mad at Gloria. This made it mutual.

Gloria deigned not to look at him. She sat frostily apart, staring straight ahead, indignant rancor in her soul.

Vexed, O'Brien added:

"Just because a couple of show girls

lower than a snake's belly at the bottom of the Grand Canyon," Gloria answered icily, seething at the way this shamus fiancé had responded to the caresses of those showgirls a short ten minutes ago. Gloria was an attractive gal, with hair



O'Brien boiled inside with cold, deadly rage, as the hood began to disrobe her

come up to my table in a night spot and sit in my lap and plant their fevered lips against my brow is no reason for you to get ideas I'm carrying on with'm as a sideline. I clamped a lug who was trying to rough 'em up, once. They just show appreciation when they see me. Show girls're like that."

"If you were as good *all* through as you are at making alibis, you'd still be

like sunlight and eyes ordinarily like the sky over Tahiti; just now, of course, the eyes were like volcanoes over Hawaii. She lived alone, three-quarters of a block east of Park Avenue, uptown; and she paid the apartment rent herself, making her virtually unique in that area.

O'Brien decided to hell with it. When she was sore at him, it was like arguing with a refrigerated buzzsaw. Eight more blocks, a turn to the right, a chill goodnight, but no blue heaven. Maybe tomorrow she'd realize he and those showgirls were friends and acquaintances above the shoulders only. O'Brien glared at her out of the corner of his eye.

It was then that Gloria grabbed his

DEATH IN DISARRAY

By OMAR GWINN

Author of "Hell on Heels," etc.

Then his avid, gloating hands were on her warm flesh, moving with the slow caress of a connoisseur



Though Gloria seethed at the way her shamus fiance responded to showgirls' caresses, she was glad that Detective O'Brien was a philanderer . . . when that flesh connoisseur's blasphemous love ritual made O'Brien flirt with a killer's hell-hot roscoe!

arm and uttered a shrill frightened "eek!" She grabbed his arm, pointed ahead with her free hand. O'Brien looked, and blinked.

About a block and a quarter ahead of them something was falling, falling, in a grey shimmer. Falling eerily, pirouetting crazily in the half light like a Lucifer perdition-bent.

O'Brien shut his eyes as it hit the

sidewalk, heard Gloria "eek!" again. He opened his eyes and the roadster was nearly there, and he saw it was a guy who, judged by the speed at which he'd been descending, should be quite dead.

"It can't be another one of those ledge-walkers," O'Brien muttered, "because there's no crowd rubbering."

Gloria put her hand over her eyes and shuddered.

There was no crowd at all. There was nobody in sight. Park Avenue is the most melancholy and deserted of streets at two a. m., particularly in late summer, at which time most of the over-privileged are lamenting the New Deal in cooler climes.

O'Brien jarred his blue roadster to a stop, slammed out and ducked around the back of it to the fallen stiff. The big hardrock shamus knelt, took a quick gander at the guy.

He was dead, all right. He hadn't landed on his head, because it was still intact, but he'd fallen so hard he must be tangled up inside. He was the sort of a gent romantic novelists call *distingue*; silvery at the temples; lean and cultivated look about him. He was wearing a light-colored dressing-robe over dark pajamas, and near him on the sidewalk was a long black jade cigarette holder, the cigarette still burning in it.

O'Brien tilted his head back, took a gander above him. It was one of those massive block-long apartment buildings inhabited by people who have more money than contentment. It was maybe 20 stories high, and there weren't many lights in the windows; maybe half a dozen out of the scores. The entrance was half a block north.

The big dick knelt there staring upward, and he figured the guy must have come down from about the sixteenth story, as that was the only place a light was burning overhead.

Almost immediately this seemed a good diagnosis, because suddenly a dark-haired dame shoved her head out the window and wailed fit for a banshee. Even at that distance, O'Brien got the impression she was a good-looking young doll. She didn't have very powerful pipes, though. O'Brien couldn't make out what she was saying.

"What?" he yelled. "What goes on—suicide or charades?"

THE doll cried something, gestured with her hands, but it was pretty hysterical and incoherent. It was Gloria who put him hep to the transpiring of a different event. She yelled:

"Obie! Look! Duck back of the car and let the lead roll!"

O'Brien jerked his head around, startled—just in time to see his girl sliding down behind the dashboard and

pointing screwily up toward the building entrance.

O'Brien looked up that way then and he saw three lugs come out of the entrance at high gallop. The lugs were masked and they had rods in their hands. They took one look at O'Brien. He took one look at them and did a neat dive for the shelter of the rear end of his roadster, jerking his equalizer as he dived.

He saw the heisters were heading for a sedan parked just off the Avenue on the Eastbound sidestreet. The lug in the rear was carrying a black briefcase.

"Freeze, you monkeys, or I'll blast your guts loose!" O'Brien yelled.

Apparently they didn't value their viscera highly for, instead of obeying, the guy in the rear with the briefcase turned and let fly with a blast from his rod. It wasn't very loud, having a silencer on the end of it. But the lead pinged off the sidewalk uncomfortably close to O'Brien's handsome Irish kisser. He reached around the right rear tire and let loose a blast of his own. The guy with the brief case clutched his belly, spun around a couple times and crumpled on top of his swag.

The two other lugs had made the sedan and were inside it. O'Brien sent a couple of quick slugs at them, and they seemed to change their minds about coming back for the briefcase and its bearer. Their sedan glided out of there like sand from an hourglass.

The big harp detective got to his feet, peered around for a moment to make sure the lug on the sidewalk up there wasn't playing possum. Then he took a run at it. But he had to run nearly a block. By the time he got to the corner and peered around, the sedan was gone. He hadn't even had a gander at the license plates. Muttering under his breath, O'Brien came back to the monkey he'd shot. The guy was moaning a little. Then O'Brien looked up at the doll, who was still leaning out the window and yelling, though still not very strong. He made out a couple words: "Doctor—police!"

"Okay, sister!" he yelled up. "Keep your scanties on." He picked up the gutshot monkey's gat, took it over and tossed it in Gloria's lap, as she, somewhat disheveled, was sitting up in the seat again, wide-eyed and breathing hard. "I'm going into the lobby and

give the homies a rush buzz. Keep your eye on these two stiffies and don't let anybody touch 'em, see?"

Gloria nodded, picked up the gun and stared in wide-eyed fascination at the hood lying up there by the corner.

O'Brien ducked up the sidewalk and into the foyer. It was a long deep one, dimly lighted, richly decorated. The phone was on a table in an alcove at the back.

And the doorman, plus the elevator boy, were under that table neatly tied and gagged. They wiggled around somewhat in the manner of eels as O'Brien stepped on them. They said, "Ummmmff," very muffled. O'Brien gazed at them thoughtfully as he dialed for Lieutenant Buell of the homicide squad.

"This should teach you, boys, never to consort with the idle rich," O'Brien said, prodding them with his foot playfully. Into the phone he said: "Buell? O'Brien. It looks like rain in broken blossom lane. Raining corpses." He gave details and suggestions. It was nearing the end of this that he heard a female "eek!" It seemed to come from out front, and it worried O'Brien because it was just such an eek as his girl Gloria had acquired the habit of eeking so very recently. He hastily finished talking to Buell, hung up, started on a lope for the entrance, inadvertently stepping on the maltreated doorman's belly in the process and causing him to renew his wriggling and ummmffing.

It was that sedan again, with the two masked hoods. They reminded O'Brien of cockroaches, returning persistently to the feast after having been batted away by the cook's irate paw.

Their sedan was parked on the Avenue, headed north, near the corner where the gutshot hood was lying. Except he wasn't lying there anymore. He was about to be dragged into the back seat of the jalop by one of the other masked hoods who had him by the arms.

"Drop him!" O'Brien bawled. "Reach for high, and stay where you are!"

THE hood still didn't obey very well. He *did* drop the wounded sidekick, but he didn't stay where he was. He jumped into the rear seat, slammed the door shut, and they were off again, but

fast. O'Brien shot rapidly twice and the glass in the sedan took on little pretty jagged designs but no holes appeared, owing to the fact the glass was bullet-proof.

In addition, O'Brien at that moment saw his girl Gloria rear up in the back seat of the sedan on the other side of the hood. Her yell wasn't very clear, but it sounded like: "Obie! They—"

O'Brien stood there giggling, paralyzed. The last thing he'd ever expected was for those monkeys to come back around the block. Maybe they'd figured he'd reason like that; perhaps that was why they'd come; perhaps, too, there was something worthwhile in that black briefcase. He thought about this while he made a lunge for his roadster. He'd run those lugs down, he meditated grimly, if he had to shove the throttle clear through the floorboard.

But when he got behind the wheel he discovered, as rather a rough shock, that his roadster was no different from others. A guy couldn't very well start it without the ignition key. His key was undoubtedly in the keeping of those hoods, who were out of sight by now. He hadn't got the sedan's license number this time, either, as they'd thoughtfully draped dark cloth over the plates.

Muttering round black oaths, O'Brien got out of the roadster, plunged up the sidewalk, grabbed the wounded hood and dragged him back out of the street. He dashed inside, called headquarters, told the police radio operator to broadcast the rush call and description of the sedan, the hoods and Gloria, to all patrol cars. That done, he came back out, straining at duty's yoke.

A careful of gaping yahoos came along, stopped to look with open mouths. O'Brien flashed his badge, jerked his gun at them and snarled:

"Scram!"

They scrambled, hastily. O'Brien felt like biting the barrel off his gat. He was fit for a straitjacket. He seethed.

And that dark-haired dame up there was leaning out the window yammering at him again. Hands on hips, neck jutted forward, he glared up at her.

"Pipe down, you dizzy clunk! I can ride only one horse at a time on this merry-go-round!"

"We're—locked in!" she said, her pipes sounding a little stouter. "Please

hurry. Please call a policeman!"

"What the hell do you think I am—the milkman?" O'Brien yelled. "We'll all come up, but after the Lieutenant gets here. Pull in your neck. Take an aspirin! Try Christian Science!"

O'Brien filled in the wait by having another look at the two stiff. It helped take his mind off the turn of events. This thing had become personal now, with those monkeys having Gloria in snatch. The big shamus cursed himself for leaving her out here alone. But he'd have bet a thousand to one against those lugs driving right around the block and coming back the way they'd done. Just why they'd snatched Gloria and how, he didn't know. There could be several reasons and methods. The point was: they had her and it was his fault, mainly.

What was more, they had the black briefcase. Whatever was in it was valuable—otherwise would those hoods risked coming right back around the block for it? No, they wouldn't.

There still wasn't any crowd collected. In the first place, not many people had heard the shots, and likely most of those who had had taken them for cars backfiring; New Yorkers were nonchalant about such things and they were used to such sounds, armored against them.

When car occupants slowed to gape, O'Brien chased them on. The cop on the beat evidently was out of sight and earshot.

O'Brien stopped cussing himself and cursed the homis rule that no dick nor copper should touch or monkey with a corpse until they'd had a look at it. That was why O'Brien hadn't taken the black briefcase out from under the wounded hood; so now it was gone.

He pecked under the hood's mask, and it was nobody he knew. The hood was unconscious now, but not bleeding much externally.

He went down to the distinguished-looking gent and had another gander at him. He scrutinized the cigarette holder and the long, dead ash where it had gone out at the end of the holder. The gent was bleeding a little from the mouth, or had been. His eyes were open in a spooky death-stare. O'Brien saw then that the right side of the gent's jaw was swollen and that there was a small square dent in it; a deep dent, badly bruised.

O'Brien frowned. This was a screwy

case, all right.

It still was a screwy case when the English valet came walking across the parkway from the other side of the street. The valet landed about the same time Lieutenant Buell and his men did.

"I say, sir, if I may intrude," the Englishman began.

"You may if it's about this," O'Brien said, scowling and looking the bird over. About then, Lieutenant Buell and a couple other dicks popped out of their car onto the sidewalk. Buell was a short heavyset guy, and tough.

"Well," he asked O'Brien, arms akimbo, "how is it?"

"Wonderful," O'Brien said. "I got insomnia already."

"If I may say so, sir," the valet injected respectfully.

"You may," said O'Brien.

"Who're you?" Buell asked, jutting his jaw out.

"I have been an interested spectator to this unfortunate affair," the valet said. "I was taking my employer a drink and chancing to glance out the window," he pointed across the street, "I observed the now deceased gentleman struck by a man with a mask upon his face in the open window above. The gentleman toppled out the window."

"Yeh? Startling clue," O'Brien said sarcastically. "What about the monkeys who snatched my girl?"

"THEY came around the block, and when the young lady pointed her weapon at them, they took it away from her. She seemed unable to fire. They took her by force. They thrust her into the car at the point of their weapons. I assume you are cognizant of the remainder. I believed it my duty to inform you, in the event my testimony should be required."

"Okay!" Buell asked O'Brien.

"Yeh, I guess," O'Brien said.

Buell took the valet's name and address, told him to go home.

"Now," Buell muttered. He took a long look at each of the two stiff and jerked his thumb at O'Brien.

The dark doll was yelling out the window again. It was chronic with her and it frayed O'Brien's nerves. Buell looked up and then he told O'Brien:

"We go up, O.B. The rest of you rips stay down here with the stiff. When the

dead wagon comes, load 'em in."

"The hood isn't dead," O'Brien objected.

"He's the same as," Buell said. "I doubt if he comes around."

So they ducked into the foyer and O'Brien remembered the two ummfing eels.

"The release was detoured, I regret to state," said O'Brien, going around back of the desk to untie them. "I guess you never knew Houdini. Hold still!" he added. One started to wiggle frantically when O'Brien pulled his knife. "Last week was my one for slitting throats. This week I'm vegetarian."

After O'Brien had cut the cords from their wrists and ankles, they stood up and he ungagged them. They blinked, staring at him. They wore white summer uniforms.

"We're detectives," Buell told them, gravely. "You know—things which always triumph in the movies. Tell us about it."

"W-well," said the short lad, who had plenty of whites in his eyes, "they came in masked and they had rods. They tied us up."

"How long ago?"

"Maybe fifteen-twenty minutes."

"You run the elevator? Well, run us up to sixteen."

"Yes sir." The elevator boy walked unsteadily ahead of them.

"Wait a minute," O'Brien told Buell. "I'm going to buzz the radio sergeant again. You forgetting my girl is joyriding with those two lugs? I want every radio car in town on their tails. I want to go after them myself. I've stuck to duty three minutes too long already."

"Okay," Buell agreed. "But you stay here. No sense your running around in circles. Those hoods undoubtedly switched cars, by now. Needles in haystacks would be cinches compared to this. Later you can snoop for them. But it'll be blind alley. As the man on the scene, your place is *here* for awhile yet."

Growling, his nerves raw, O'Brien called headquarters again and was assured all radio cars were keeping their sights peeled. No, none had reported back yet.

O'Brien hung up and joined Buell. They got in the elevator and went up. They got out at the sixteenth and went to the southwest apartment. It was a

ritzy building, all right; plush.

The dark young doll hadn't been lying. She was locked in, sure enough. Not exactly locked: there was a wire around the doorknob; the wire ran through a stout staple which had been driven deeply into the jamb. O'Brien fenagled with it, unwound it, knocked.

"Yes?" It was the voice of the dark-haired babe. She came to the door, flung it open, gazed at them. "Are you the police?"

"We're not gigolos," Buell said, flashing his badge. He and O'Brien went in.

She was a beautiful doll. Raven-haired, good features, olive skin, and a sort of hard twist to her mouth—the kind so many jaded debutantes have. She was wearing a soft white silk summer dress which revealed her shapely contours pleasantly. There was distress in her dark eyes, she was nervous.

"It's—it's been dreadful," she murmured, her voice shaky, shivering a little. "It's been only a few minutes, but it's seemed hours—Uncle lying dead down there on the sidewalk, Joel tied up here, unconscious—the phone wires cut—locked in . . ."

SHE put a limp hand to her brow and gestured them in through the foyer. They went into the living-room, summery in whites and other light colors, and there was a handsome young guy lying on a divan moaning. He had brown wavy hair, the slightly dissipated features so typical of young men along this exclusive thoroughfare. He was expensively accoutred: palm beach suit, silk shirt, emerald glit, white shoes; and a facial expression which might ordinarily have been that of ennui, but was now that of pain. There was a towel, with ice cubes between layers, reclining on the lower part of his face.

"Here are the police at last, Joel," the girl said. "You rest, and I'll tell them what little we know."

"What's your names?" Buell asked.

"I'm Thora Bayard," the girl said. "He's Joel Sanderson, my fiancé. The dead gentleman is my uncle, Drexel Bayard. We, that is—Joel and I—drove down from Bar Harbor yesterday. We dropped in to visit Uncle late this evening and—" she paused, shivered slightly, distracted with grief and shock, "I—I was out in the kitchenette getting

some ice for highballs when I heard loud voices in here. I looked in cautiously through the door in the corridor down there," she pointed south, "I saw the three masked men in here, brandishing guns. They were making Uncle open his safe, where he kept the jewels which belong to his wife, who has been dead these two years past. Also I believe Uncle had considerable money in the safe."

"So then?" O'Brien asked, gandering around the room. There was a small old-fashioned safe in a corner, by the window, which was still open.

"Joel started to expostulate with them. One man knocked him unconscious and tied him up. Uncle protested at that, strongly. Then the hoodlum hit Uncle, who stumbled backwards, lost his balance and—" She broke off, trembling, covered her eyes with her hand, looked away from the window.

"So they scrambled," O'Brien said, gazing at the window sill. It was low, would catch a guy hardly above the knees; the window itself was broad and high.

"Yes, they left, after cutting the telephone wire. They didn't realize I was here. After they'd gone I came out, cut Joel free," there were some cords lying near the divan, "and tried to revive him. I looked out the window and saw—"

She was interrupted. The elevator boy knocked on the front door and came in.

"Telephone call for Detective O'Brien," the boy said. "The detectives downstairs told me he was up here."

"Telephone?" O'Brien scowled. Who would be calling him here—the radio operator?

"Better go," Buell told him.

So O'Brien went down. He picked up the phone and said: "Yeh?"

"You O'Brien?" It was a kind of sinister voice, male.

"Sure I'm O'Brien. So what?"

"It wasn't very smart to put all those radio cars after us. Just for that, I got a notion to play games with your girl," the voice stated, sneering like there was a whip hand under it.

"So it's you," O'Brien rasped, on edge. "You lay a hand on her and I'll run you down if it takes forty years!"

"It'd take you more than forty, because you don't know me," the voice said. "We took your twist along for a shield in case the going got hot, but she's

a nice playmate, too. You should have thought about that when you sneezed the dough and the rocks."

"What!" O'Brien bellowed. "What're you yapping? What dough? What rocks?"

"Innocent, ain't you? We'll give you a while to think it over—you hand us back our swag, we hand you back your twist. I guess you're kinda soft about her. But *we're* soft about the hundred Gs you sneezed from the briefcase. Of course, we probably couldn't liquidate the rocks for more than 30 Gs, but there was at least ten grand cash along with 'em in Bayard's safe."

"You're crazy!" O'Brien yelled. "What're you talking about?"

"Tsk! Baddy mans! Not so loud or some of the other dicks which must have gathered by now will hear you, O'Brien. From the way you're stalling, it seems maybe you value the hot swag more'n the hot dame. But that attitude won't get you any place, because if you don't come across, I might have to give your moral playmates a buzz telling them how wicked you are and how you're going to lam with all that take. And if I was to give them the buzz, they'd put the tweeze on you so fast your head'd shag."

"I never even saw inside the briefcase, you crackpot coot!" O'Brien yelled. "You're goofy as a bedbug!"

"Now, O'Brien, wicked, wicked to lie to smart mans!" the voice said, mocking, chiding tenderly. "And wicked to call nice mans names. The briefcase was very *empty*. I'll call you later there or at your rooms. Your twist gave me your number. Think it over, O'Brien. We want that stuff, and I doubt if you're cute enough to keep it long."

THE big shamus started to yell further denial, but the lug on the other end hung up. O'Brien snorted like a bull gazing at red hay. He stood there trembling, staring dazedly at the phone, seething inside. What was this? What kind of merry-go-round had he stumbled onto, anyway?

And whatever gave that hood the idea he, O'Brien, had looted the briefcase? It was screwy. It was driving him nuts.

He picked up the phone again, snarled orders to a calm operator to trace that call. She did, presently. It was a booth in a drugstore on the upper East Side.

O'Brien knew it was futile to try to do anything. By the time he got a cop there, the lug could be a mile away, and chances were nobody had noticed him phoning. Storekeepers seldom noticed people particularly. They'd say he was a middle-sized guy with brown eyes, or something equally useless.

Just on the chance, however, he called the precinct station nearest the drug-store and had the Captain send a dick around to make inquiry.

That done, O'Brien went out to the sidewalk for a smoke, to calm himself.

The cops and morgue-fillers were loading Bayard and the wounded, or dead, hood into the stiff-wagon. The big shamus stood there smoking, watching them absently for a time. Peculiar that hoods smart enough to pull a heist as big as this would knock the victim out the window, thereby adding murder to robbery. Eyes narrowed thoughtfully, O'Brien paced to and fro.

His thoughts kept straying back to Gloria. His lean belly quivered jumpily with nervousness. He managed to un-calm himself thoroughly again, just imagining what those hugs might be doing to her. A girl didn't stand a chance if a guy got ideas and had a gun to persuade her to let him carry them through.

Pacing, a tornado of futile rage welling up in him, O'Brien knew how lions felt in their cages at the zoo—pent-up, their strength wasted, plenty of weapon but no target.

The stiff-wagon drove off, leaving only Buell's two detective assistants. They strolled over to O'Brien, attempting to spray a little sunshine his way. He didn't want any of it. They went up to join Buell.

After awhile Buell and one of his men came down, accompanied by Thora Bayard and Joel Sanderson. The latter was still holding the iced towel to his jaw.

Buell told O'Brien that he was leaving a man on watch in Bayard's apartment, just in case. He'd awakened the building manager, who had agreed. Miss Bayard and Sanderson lived but a few blocks away, in adjacent buildings. They'd be on tap there. Buell had their addresses. O'Brien took the addresses, jotted them down. He looked at Sanderson and asked:

"By the way, did the three hoods rob you, too?"

"Yes," said Sanderson. "My wallet, containing a few hundred, and my watch."

"Hmmm," O'Brien mused. "Look: I'd like to have you take my phone number. If anything turns up, you call me. I might be in. Okay?"

"Certainly," Sanderson said calmly. "I shall be glad to be of any assistance." He borrowed an envelope and O'Brien's pencil and, as O'Brien gave him the number, wrote it lefthanded in a neat script, handed the pencil back. The hoods had missed that emerald on his left hand, evidently.

"About me, Lieutenant," O'Brien said, eyeing his superior questioningly.

"You have a roving commission, kid," Buell told him, slapping him on the shoulder. "That's what I'd want if my girl had been snatched in a case like this."

"Much obliged." O'Brien meant it. "I guess you didn't find any prints, eh? The monkeys wore gloves."

"No prints. Well, there's things to do. Keep your chin up, O'Brien, and remember the whole force is with you in this. We won't be sparing our hairy chests. See you this side of hell," Buell said, slapping him on his broad shoulders again.

They went.

O'Brien stared vacantly after them. Presently he ran his hand through his shock of dark wiry hair, stared imploringly at the roof of the foyer and desired to go home. There wasn't much he could do until that hood phoned him again—if he did. O'Brien sent for a garage guy, finally got a key to fit his roadster, and drove off.

"Goodnight, detective," the doorman said.

"Yeh," said O'Brien. "Sorry I stepped on your belly."

O'Brien lived in a small apartment off Fifth Avenue. It was a plain apartment, owing to the fact that O'Brien was an honest dick.

HE went up, had a stiff snort of rye and sat down. It was the wackiest case he'd ever tangled in, and doubly tough because of the personal element involving Gloria. And this business of the hoodlum's phoning him—it was beyond his understanding. The hood had been sincere enough, certain enough in

his tone beneath the mockery. That hood undoubtedly was convinced O'Brien had stolen the contents out of that briefcase in the several minutes interim while they were driving around the block. That hood thought O'Brien was pulling a fast one, that O'Brien had seen the contents. Come to think of it, a weak-souled dick might have done exactly that: his alibi could have been that the *thieves* had emptied the briefcase and had the swag. Then the dick could bide his time, resign, and live on the ritz for a good many years.

The catch was: O'Brien *hadn't* stolen the contents from the briefcase, hadn't even looked into it. But *somebody* evidently had looted it in that short space. *Who?* True, it had been out of O'Brien's sight for a minute or two, under the gut-shot hood, but Gloria had been watching it in the interval. Who the devil *could* have looted the briefcase? Gloria? Didn't seem very likely. She wouldn't have rolled the wounded hoodlum off the briefcase and filched the contents—unless she'd gone nuts.

Scowling fiercely, pacing like a caged tiger, O'Brien fretted about his girl. What were those monkeys doing with her about now? He boiled inwardly, conjuring up images not to his liking.

The image of Gloria recalled to O'Brien the gift she had bestowed last Christmas in a spirit of levity. He stopped suddenly, knelt in front of his bureau, opened the bottom drawer, found the gift, fondled it with a wry smile, rolled up his pant leg and slapped it around his right leg below the knee. Never could tell—it might be useful.

He was pacing again when his phone rang. He snatched it up.

"O'Brien. This you, lug?"

"Yes. Changed your mind?"

"Yeh. Thought it over, and I've decided I'd rather have the girl," O'Brien said, having planned his speech beforehand.

"You got the rocks and the dough?"

"Right on me," O'Brien said.

"Oke. Wait five minutes. Go out then and walk up to 88th Street. Turn right and keep on going to the corner of Lexington. And no tricks. You better have the rocks and the dough, and no cops. Any tricks, and too bad for your broad. You won't ever see her again. Just the fish will see her, deep in the

wet, undressed."

"Fair enough," O'Brien agreed, trying to sound casual.

He jammed the phone onto the hook, pondered a moment. He rummaged around among his effects, found some odds and ends of trinkets, took the bills out of his wallet, wrapped them around a roll of paper for bulk and put them all in a big chamois pouch. He stuck this in his coat pocket. . . .

He took his big gat out of his pocket and put it in the dresser. Then he went out.

O'Brien was eastbound on 88th Street, between Fifth and Madison, when a voice slid out from the darkness of a parked coupe.

"Right here, O'Brien, and don't reach for a rod, please, because I've already reached for mine and it's pointed."

O'Brien stopped abruptly in the dark, turned around and sauntered back to the coupe. He'd expected something like this.

"Get in," the hood said. His coupe was curtained and O'Brien couldn't see him very well, except that he wore goggles and a cap pulled low over his forehead. "I figured this was better than Lexington, just in case. I see there's no other dicks around, though. Maybe you are leveling."

"Why shouldn't I be leveling?" O'Brien asked. "Tricks wouldn't do me any good, unless I wanted my girl stashed."

"You got a rod?"

"No."

The hood patted all O'Brien's pockets, together with his upper anatomy and was satisfied O'Brien was unarmed, which further impressed him with O'Brien's sincerity.

"Let's see the rocks and the dough," the hood said.

"Right here," said O'Brien, pulling out the chamois skin for a brief moment before thrusting it back into his pocket.

"Let's have it."

"Nuts," said O'Brien. "You get it when I get the girl, safe and unscratched. If you want to get tough about it and shoot me, okay. But you've got away with one killing tonight. If you got me, it'd be too bad for you maybe. Just about every cop killer in the history of this town has been run down within 24 hours. It kinda irks us to have a mem-

ber of the force scragged. You made a bargain with me, you should be man enough to keep it. Anyway, if you think I'm pulling a fast one, it'll be easier to shoot me at the end of the ride than here on a public street. Besides, this is no good place to look at rocks. Somebody might see you."

ALL this logic seemed to convince the hood. He grumbled "okay," and got the coupe out of there. He kept the tonneau light doused, and with curtains all around, they weren't very visible from outside.

"You were damned fools to shove Bayard out the window," O'Brien said, as the hood piloted the coupe rapidly across town and up the East Side. "There was no need of that."

The guy, who was no dese an' dose type of hood, but rather a smarter type, seemed to start visibly, uncomfortably.

"No, there wasn't," said the hood, his voice a little dry. "That's why we didn't."

"The hell you didn't," O'Brien said. "The valet of some rich lug across the street happened to be looking out the window and saw one of you masked guys smack him so he fell out backwards."

The lug seemed to fidget again, started to say something, then clamped his lips tight together.

"Which one of you did it?" O'Brien asked conversationally.

"None of us, I said. I oughta know. I was there."

"Hmmm." O'Brien gazed at him, perplexed. The guy had something grim on his mind. He acted as if O'Brien's accusations were unjust. Something peculiar there. O'Brien mulled it over for the remainder of the journey, to keep from worrying about Gloria. He also mulled a little about what he was going to do when he got to this rendezvous. It didn't look too bright for him. But it was a chance he had to take. It was the only chance, and dangerous in proportion.

Their destination was an old brick building on an ill-lighted, deserted side street uptown. The hood parked the coupe a short distance beyond it, jabbed O'Brien with the rosecoe and said:

"Okay. Go ahead of me, casual and unconcerned."

They went into the mouldering old

building. It seemed deserted; the lower rooms were empty; it appeared to be a building recently condemned to wreckers and recently abandoned.

On the third floor back, there was light seeping out from under a door. The hood put his mask on, rapped, spoke in a low tone. The door opened, and the other masked hood stood there.

"Well, well," he said in sardonic greeting. "The nice mans came. The nice mans loves his itty bitty tweet-heart."

"Yeh," O'Brien muttered. That chatter got under his hide. He walked in.

There was a dim shaded light in one corner. In the other corner his girl Gloria was tied on a cot, hand and foot, and gagged. She twisted her head around at the sound of O'Brien's voice, and there was a glad, grateful look in her eyes. O'Brien managed a smile and he didn't like the way she was tied. Her yellow summery dress was rumpled and much too much of her pretty rounded thighs were showing. The shamus ground his teeth together. If these muggs had been fooling with her, by god, he'd . . .

Trouble was, they both had automatics in their hands, maybe because O'Brien was Irish and bigger and they had something on their consciences.

"Well, let's have the glit," said the mocking hood, coming nearer. He was slimmer, taller, than the other.

O'Brien knew he had to throw his weight around hard. And it had to be now. He reached into his pocket, slowly, produced the chamois sack containing the phony plunder. He had to beat them to the punch and it wasn't going to be easy. They were too far apart.

O'Brien held out the chamois sack and, fast as a striking mongoose, made a grab for the mocker's gun hand, intending to grab it and swing the lug around in front of him as a shield from the hood who had escorted him here.

The plans of mice and men go oft awry, as the Scotch poet stated so succinctly. O'Brien's plans went awry. Neither of these hoods was thick-witted or slothful. They were as much on edge as O'Brien; in addition they were smaller and faster.

As O'Brien reached for the gun, the mocker jerked it aside, leaped backward. The coupe pilot glided from behind him and brought his rod down hard against

the side of the big shamus' head.

O'Brien saw skyrocket against a black background and slumped to the floor. When he shook his head, opened his eyes, a minute later, they were tying his hands behind him and his ankles together. There was an ache in his head far worse than that of any hangover he'd ever had. The mocker was dumping the contents out of the chamois sack, and when he saw the junk in it, plus about \$40 wadded around the paper, he seemed to coil inside like a cobra.

"You must be a hell of an optimist, O'Brien, to try pulling a thin trick like this on guys like us," the mocker said. If cobras could talk, it would be the way he did. "You want the swag and the dame too—and maybe more. You're a fool, O'Brien. You've cheated us out of the stuff, you've cheated yourself out of the stuff, and you've signed your death warrant and the twist's. We all lose, nobody gains." He stopped, stared venomously through his mask.

"I never looted the briefcase, never even saw what was in it," O'Brien grated. "You just got that idea, so I had to take advantage of it to make a try at you."

"Yeh?" The mocker was acidulous. "We still have that idea. Who else could have sneezed the stuff in the briefcase except you—or your twist? It wasn't her. We searched her."

"It was a pleasant job too," the stocky hood leered. "She's certainly a nice number."

"So nice we're going to have some pleasure, while you watch. Then we're going to saw her legs off and maybe another part or two and dump her out the window. You too, O'Brien. Hear that gurgle under the window? That's the dirty, deep, and inscrutable East River. It hides a lot of guys like you, guys who didn't have sense enough to level. Some are in barrels of cement. You'll each be in a sack, with another sack of bricks tied around your necks."

"You crummy rats!" O'Brien snarled. He didn't struggle against his bonds, though. He lay there on his belly, glaring at them.

"Is nice mans angwy?" the mocker said. He jerked his head toward the other hood, who went over to a suitcase, opened it and brought out a carpenter's saw.

GLORIA wiggled frantically on the cot, her beautiful golden hair shimmering, her blue eyes wild with fear. She turned her head O'Brien's way, pleading, wordlessly imploring him to do something. O'Brien winked, tried hard to grin, tried to buoy her spirits up.

The hoods' backs were turned momentarily. O'Brien made an experimental reach backward, and was satisfied.

The stocky lug walked over toward Gloria with the saw. The mocker stood looking down at her with hot lustful eyes. He leered over his shoulder at O'Brien. Then he put his gat into his pocket and went closer to Gloria.

"Baby," he said, "you're wonderful. I regret I have to feed you to the fishes afterward, but it just wouldn't be safe to leave you alive. That's the way they break, sweetheart."

Then his avid, gloating hands were on her warm flesh, moving with the slow caress of a connoisseur.

O'Brien boiled inside in cold deadly rage, as the hood began to disrobe her, her lovely white flesh exposed to that rat's erotic hands and eyes. O'Brien watched, eyes narrowed to murderous slits. O'Brien himself, her fiancé, who had a right if anybody did, had never seen Gloria in déshabillé. It was like being boiled in hot oil to lie there watching those vermin feasting their eyes on her warm beauty, preparatory to the crushing ignominy. Her blue eyes raked them with flashes of contempt and hatred. She squirmed her body as best she could, but the gesture was futile; she was securely bound.

It was the very fact of Gloria's charms which gave O'Brien the chance he'd been awaiting. Those two lugs were lustful and she was as pretty a girl as they'd ever seen close up. They were feasting their eyes upon her so intently that they weren't watching O'Brien so closely as they should have been. He was tied up securely, couldn't harm them and this spectacle was a special torture for him before they killed him; he had it coming. That was the way they figured, O'Brien guessed.

Quietly, O'Brien bent his head back toward his heels, bent his knees. He'd managed to work a little slack into the cord which bound his wrists. His hands, at least, had free play. That was what counted. His hands touched his legs.

His right trouser leg dropped to his knee and O'Brien's hand grasped Gloria's Christmas gift grimly. He was glad now that he'd thought of it. The lug, when frisking him, hadn't, of course, felt below his knees.

Gloria was in a state as near to frenzy as a girl can be while bound and gagged, with the major items of her attire either removed or misplaced. She twisted, turned, panted, fought as best she could—which wasn't near good enough.

Then the little imported revolver, calibre .19, French make, was in O'Brien's hand out of its garter holster. The thing was a sort of freak, meant for females to strap around their thighs under their dresses. Gloria had gotten it for O'Brien as a gag, and it had been an amusing one to O'Brien. The nice part was, the little stasher could shoot. O'Brien had tested it on a trip to the country a couple months past. At short range it was deadly and accurate.

O'Brien edged his hands around, craned his neck back over his shoulder so he could see to aim. It was a damned awkward position, and didn't give him the best opportunity to aim; but he was one of the best shots on the detective force, and adaptable. . . .

He squeezed the little trigger twice, rapidly, toward the stocky hood who sat near Gloria's head with the saw and the automatic.

The little gun sounded like a couple of oversized hornets. The stocky hood dropped his saw, clutched at his chest, turned slowly toward O'Brien, brought the automatic up, pointed it, and squeezed the trigger as he toppled over onto the floor coughing blood.

The hood's shot plowed into the floor near O'Brien's head, but the big shamus didn't wait for that. When he'd planted the two slugs into the armed hood he turned his stasher on the other, whose rod was in his pocket. The latter straightened up, stiff in amazement, his hand glided for his automatic. It didn't get there because O'Brien, shooting coolly, carefully in his grim anger, put two more slugs into *him*, close to the heart. The mocker stiffened, gasped, and slowly toppled forward across Gloria.

O'Brien rolled over and over on the floor until he reached the cot. There he got to his knees and said: "Steady, baby! I'll untie your wrists and you

can untie me." O'Brien dropped his little gat, picked up the stocky hood's automatic. It was even more awkward to hold, but his target this time was only a quarter inch away. Neatly, he shot the cords away from each of her wrists.

Gloria sat up, shoved the dead or dying mocker off her body with a shudder, ungagged herself, untied O'Brien's wrists. When they'd untied their feet, O'Brien gathered her in his arms, unmindful of her disattire, and crushed her to him. "Babe!"

"Obie!" she sobbed. "Oh, Obie, Obie! . . ."

WHEN they'd finished with that, she put her clothes back on, shaky and wan. O'Brien beetled, felt the pulses of the two lugs. The mocker was done for, but the stocky one was still alive. He opened his eyes feebly, tried to talk, coughing claret.

"Sorry, guy," O'Brien said. "It was you or us, and you're pretty ratty, at that. You won't last long. Better sing. Which one of you knocked Bayard out the window? Just for the record."

"N-none of us. We were—hired—" The hood's voice trailed off.

"What? Hired—by who?" O'Brien shook him.

The guy muttered a sibilant word, and his head slumped down on his chest.

O'Brien stood up, stared at Gloria, who gazed back, shivering.

"Babe, it looks as if it's been a case of mutual misunderstanding between these monkeys and O'Brien, all night," O'Brien said, looking baffled, trying to click things into place. "You didn't swipe the jewelry and the dough out of that briefcase, did you?"

"Of course I didn't," Gloria gasped. "I've been trying to puzzle this out myself. They seemed to think *you'd* stolen the contents from the briefcase. That's why I told 'em your name and phone number. It'd give you a chance to contact them and do something."

"I didn't have much time to spare, about doing something," O'Brien said. "If they'd gone any farther with you than they did, I'd—I'd have busted some blood vessels. I never realized how fond of you I am until I saw that monkey's hand . . ."

"Don't think about it," Gloria said.

"Well, I got to get these rats to a doc and myself to a phone. There's still screwy angles to this. Here we go."

O'Brien was unhurt save for a blasting headache. He carried the lugs down one at a time and dumped them into the coupe's rumble seat. He and Gloria got in and drove three blocks to the nearest all night hash joint. There he went in and called headquarters, told Buell what had happened.

"Fine," Buell said. "Patrol car found the sedan, abandoned. They'd stolen it. We expected that. We uncovered something else that we didn't expect."

"Yeh? What?"

"That hood you gutshot in front of Bayard's apartment building. When they took his shirt off for autopsy, they found a set of phony jewels under his shirt. But they also found the *real* jewels, and the dough, which had been stolen from Bayard. Also in his shirt. Looks as if he was crossing his two companions. Going to switch the phonies onto his assistants and keep all the swag for himself, proving there's not always honor among thieves. We checked through the files for prints and mug—and he's Pete Dunn, a safe-yegg from up Boston way."

"Hmmm." O'Brien scowled, scratched his head. Something was trying to click into place. Boston. Bar Harbor. The sincere protestations of the two hoods that none of the three of them had knocked Bayard out the window. Come to think of it, there was no reason why they should have done that. Professional jewel heisters don't commit murder unless they're forced to. Hmmm. That cigarette holder, lying beside Bayard. The dent in his jaw. . . .

It began to click now.

"Call you later," O'Brien told Buell, somewhat excitedly. "Got something in mind." O'Brien hung up, called the nearest precinct station for a stiff-wagon, hung up, and called Bayard's apartment building. He got on the line with the detective whom Buell had left behind to watch Bayard's apartment.

O'Brien talked to the other detective for a few moments, told him what to do, said: "I'll meet you in 15 minutes," and hung up.

He went out, rejoined Gloria and waited for the stiff-wagon. It came

along shortly, the hoods were loaded in, O'Brien and Gloria were off.

"Where to?" Gloria asked.

"To straighten something screwy, my little iceberg."

O'Brien pulled up in front of the Park Avenue apartment, went in, grinned at the doorman and the elevator boy, who were slightly surprised to see him. He went up in the elevator, went into Bayard's just as the other detective, named Frick, was coming out.

"You find it?" O'Brien asked.

"Yeh," Frick said nonchalantly, showing it. "Under the divan."

"Fine. Come along. May need you," said O'Brien.

They went down, got into the coupe, and were off.

"Where to?" Gloria asked, some of her pertness returning.

"Business, little iceberg," O'Brien said.

They got out in front of the apartment building, not quite so ultra-ritzy as Bayard's. O'Brien and Frick went in, leaving Gloria with the coupe. They had the doorman phone up. Sanderson was in. He said, "Tell them to come up."

O'Brien and Frick went up. Sanderson met them at the door, wearing a light dressing gown. His face was wan, lined, haggard. His wavy brown hair was rumpled.

"Hello," O'Brien said, as he and Frick entered.

"Yes!" Sanderson asked, showing them into the living-room. "Have a chair."

"We'll stand," O'Brien said. The room was blue with smoke, ash trays were overflowing. The beautiful Thora was sitting in a chair and she looked as if she'd been crying, looked a little mussed.

THE room was in blue and white velvet, over oak paneling. Not bad. O'Brien and Frick looked around it casually, taking their time, deliberately creating a tension. After about three minutes of this, Sanderson's hand was shaking as he lighted a fresh cigarette off the end of the last. He looked nervously up from under lowered lashes, something peculiar in his eyes. Then Thora, sitting there nervously twitching her hands, suddenly said, sharply:

"Well? Have you something to tell us?"

"No," O'Brien said. "Something to ask you."

"What?"

"Why," O'Brien asked casually, pulling the automatic and turning to Joel Sanderson, "did you knock Drexel Bayard out that window? Was it because you *had* to murder him, and it could be adroitly shoved off onto the three masked hoods, who robbed Bayard because you hired them to?"

The cigarette slipped out of Sanderson's nerveless fingers, the fingers of his *left* hand. His eyes seemed frozen open, his face was chalk white. He stood there motionless, the cigarette burning a hole in the blue rug, unnoticed. Presently Sanderson, staring at O'Brien as if he were a ghost, wet his lips and murmured hoarsely:

"No. It isn't so. No! The thieves—"

"The three thieves didn't do it. *You* did it, Sanderson." O'Brien was calm for the first time this night. His eyes bore into Sanderson's. "You hired Pete Dunn and those other two yeggs up Boston way. You told them about the jewelry and the money in Bayard's safe. You planned it with them to come up there and steal the stuff. After they'd stolen it and got outside, were going down in the elevator in fact, you slipped a mask over your *own* face—after getting Bayard near the window—and let him have it. You hit him hard, with your left hand, knocked him out the window. You wore the mask as precaution. If somebody happened to be looking, he'd see the mask on your face and you could alibi it was one of the yeggs. Pretty smart—having Pete cut the phone wire and lock you in."

"It's a lie!" Sanderson whispered hoarsely, his hands stiff, clawed like an eagle's, against the wall.

"No lie. It was your tough luck that I quarreled with my girl and was taking her home early, at the time you socked Bayard for a 16-floor drop. Because I shot and wounded Pete—and Pete just a minute ago broke down and spilled the story, because he's going to die." This was an adroit falsehood. Neither Pete Dunn nor the other two hoods had spilled anything. The stocky hood *had* gasped, "—hired," and added a sibilant sound that was much like the word "San-

derson." O'Brien had pieced it together, *knew* it was Sanderson, *now*—but he wanted to break him. It'd save the State time and money involved in a trial.

"No!" Sanderson gasped, licking his lips.

"Yes. My chum here just found the mask where you hid it under the divan," O'Brien said, jerking the mask out of his pocket. "You didn't figure on Buell's leaving a detective there, so you didn't have a chance to get rid of the mask. It clinches you." It didn't, of course, but O'Brien saw the man was breaking fast. He'd *think* it clinched him.

There was a cringing, fearful light in Sanderson's eyes now. He stood there, spread stiff against the wall, staring, staring at O'Brien.

Suddenly the beauteous Thora jumped up out of her chair, tore her hands through her hair and screamed hysterically, her nerves haywire: "I can't stand this! I can't, Joel! They've got you. Tell them! Tell them, for god sake! Jail's better than this!"

Her voice cut startlingly through the blue smoke. O'Brien turned to stare at her. And as he turned he saw at the corner of his eye, saw Sanderson reach into his dressing-robe pocket. O'Brien whirled, made two fast bounds and got Sanderson around the throat—just as Sanderson popped the capsule into his mouth.

"Suicide's too easy!" O'Brien snorted. He throttled Sanderson hard, so the latter couldn't swallow. Frick leaped to his assistance. Between them they got the capsule and Frick slapped the cuffs on Sanderson.

"Now give!" O'Brien said, holding his rod in Sanderson's ribs.

"All right—I killed Bayard. I—I planned it—but I had good reason—Bayard was—a snake," Sanderson gasped, trembling with emotion. The dark girl threw herself on a settee, sobbed hysterically. Sanderson talked, shaky, hardly audible:

Drexel Bayard, in addition to being Thora's uncle, was also her broker, and Sanderson's. Bayard had lost in the market, or stolen for himself (Sanderson and Thora suspected the latter) nearly all of a quarter-million trust fund he controlled for the girl. And he'd lost, or stolen, nearly a hundred grand of Sanderson's money, too. It was about

all Sanderson had. He hadn't realized he was broke until Bayard had told him callously a month ago. Sanderson had been brooding about it since, aching for revenge.

THREE nights past, up in Bar Harbor, he'd evolved his plan. He'd caught Pete Dunn trying to open his safe, had got the drop on Pete with a gun. He got to talking with Pete and the plan sprang into being. Pete could have the jewelry and the money, Sanderson would knock Bayard out the window, killing him. Thora, then, being Bayard's nearest kin, would stand to inherit Bayard's money and they would thus regain what Bayard had filched from them.

"Hmmm," O'Brien mused. "I suppose you think you were justified. Most murderers do. But the law seldom agrees. Too bad. Now you've sung, I may as well tell you I lied about the hoods' singing. I got only a hint from one of them, but I already had that. What really put me hep, Sanderson, were little things: Bayard's cigarette holder lying beside him on the sidewalk. He wasn't expecting to be hit, obviously. He'd have dropped the holder and defended himself with both hands. That seemed odd, but I didn't pay much attention at first, being busy with other things. Later I realized it was fishy, that holder—it meant Bayard had been hit unexpectedly, something a hood wouldn't be apt to do. And it didn't seem likely professional heisters would murder anybody; it isn't their style.

"Another thing: there was that little square dent in the right side of Bayard's jaw—you're lefthanded and you neglected to have the boys deprive you of that square emerald glit, which made the dent. I wouldn't have attached suspicion to any one of these, probably—but when the hoods starting objecting over the phone and in person that they

hadn't killed Bayard, I began to add things up. That valet seeing you in the *mask* put me clear off—so I didn't suspect you at all. I naturally assumed one of the *hoods* had done it, until they started doing and saying screwy things.

"I'm really glad Pete Dunn was a dishonorable thief, though," O'Brien concluded. "He'd laid in some phony jewelry, had it planted inside his shirt to substitute for the real things—so he could keep it all for *himself* and tell his hired men they'd hit a bum job. That it?"

Sanderson nodded. "Pete hired the two other hoodlums himself. Rooking them was his own idea. I—I guess he slipped. They were watching him too closely. He intended, I suppose, to put the fake jewelry into the briefcase when they got inside the automobile, in the dark."

"Likely enough," said O'Brien. "I'm glad he did. If he hadn't, well, my girl would likely be at the bottom of the East River now. Call a patrol, Frick. We've hit a five-pile jackpot."

It was a wan O'Brien, complete with headache, who deposited his girl Gloria in front of her apartment near dawn.

"Been a kind of detour, hasn't it, little iceberg?" O'Brien said. "And we wind up in a stolen coupe, at that."

"You call me iceberg again and I'll call a policeman and have you run in for stealing the coupe from the nice hoodlum," Gloria told him, in mock primness. Then she smiled pertly, said, "I forgive you about the showgirls, Obie. Oh, Obie! ...". And then, woman-like, she was crying in his arms.

So O'Brien kissed her, gazed into her blue eyes, and grinned.

"I apologize for calling you an iceberg, babe," O'Brien said. "Your lips are certainly a hundred-and-ten in the shade."

Guard My Flaming Body.....Robert W. Thompson
Satan L.L.D.T. K. Hawley
Too Mean for the Morgue.....Eric Howard
The Walking Clue.....Omar Gwin
Masquerade of the Corpse.....G. T. Fleming-Roberts
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DAME NATURE, DETECTIVE

By JAMES H. MARTIN

When Dame Nature alibied him in that ruthless cop kill, Tony Kinsella knew he'd master-minded the perfect crime—yet he couldn't sidestep the morgue!



"Yuh want a break—an' I'm givin' it to yuh. Like this—copper!" Big Mike's body jerked convulsively

FOR three months Tony Kinsella had patiently waited for the weather that fit in with his scheme to square accounts with "Big Mike" Lafferty. And now, with a driving March wind and rain beating its way down the shadowy length of Sixth Avenue . . .

Carefully Tony thumbed the safety off his heavy automatic and edged out of the black shadows of the old warehouse doorway. Eyes glittering malevolently,

his thin lips twisted hatefully, he crept up the glistening gray length of wet sidewalk, toward where the burly patrolman stood under a corner street light.

Hunched low in the cold wind and rain, Tony grinned sardonically as he recalled the many hours' thought he had given his perfect murder scheme. Long hours they had been, seemingly endless; throughout the whole of the five years he had just served in prison—where Big Mike's testimony had sent him.

Tony's thoughts pleased him. His thin-lipped smile widened as he reviewed how he had broken the lock on every nearby warehouse door, and visualized what the homicide dicks would think when they found those locks broken. . . .

Big Mike's body would be found bullet-ridden. Then there would be a general search, for some clue that would lead to the identity of his killer. Some investigating detective would discover that several warehouses had been broken into. That nothing had been taken wouldn't matter—the verdict would be the same: Big Mike would be credited with having stumbled upon a prowl-gang. In trying to make a pinch he had been bumped off.

It was a perfect plan—especially with this wild black night to cover the killing, and with the clever plan he had for ditching the gun he'd bought from Blackie Fischer, a right guy he'd met in stir . . .

Unmindful of the heavy rain beating down against his gaunt face, Tony brought up the yawning black muzzle of his heavy gun, lined his sights on the policeman's middle . . .

Then: "Okay, Mike!" Tony rasped suddenly. "I'm right behind yuh! Here, copper!—*behind yuh!*"

Big Mike whirled to meet the challenge. His hands dug at the clasps of his regulation slicker as he tried to get at his hip-holstered pistol.

Three hollow-sounding explosions fought against the rain-lashed night. Then Tony triggered his heavy gun again, to throw a fourth bullet into Big Mike's staggering bulk.

The old patrolman's broad shoulders were thrown back. His large feet were skidding on the wet pavement. Galantly Big Mike was trying to stay on his feet, his pain-ridden eyes staring into the shadows in front of him.

Grinning malevolently, knowing he couldn't be seen, Tony crouched down and watched, waiting expectantly.

"I—I can't see you—fella," Big Mike gasped. "But if—"

"Sure, Mike," Tony cut in softly. "I know what yuh want. Yuh want a break—an' I'm givin' it to yuh. Like this—copper!"

Another shot boomed, and again Big Mike's body jerked convulsively.

"I don't—don't think I'm gonna

make it—" the old man faltered, his fingers still fumbling with the clasps of his slicker.

His heavy jaws clamped, he lurched forward. Pain showed in his narrowed eyes—pain, grim determination, and a despairing hopelessness. Then, like a length of heavy chain, his body folded and dropped to the pavement.

KNOWING that Big Mike was dead, Tony Kinsella hurriedly turned and darted into an alleyway separating two warehouses. Running its full length he turned and sped to where he had parked his coupe on a nearby street corner some minutes before.

Quickly Tony started the motor, wheeled away from the curb, to drive north to Huron Avenue, where he turned west and headed toward the Huron Avenue Bridge.

At the bridge approach, he wheeled the car out of the regular traffic lane and parked it in the shadow of the first arch. Just a minute more, two at the most; it was all the time Tony wanted. Then . . .

Hurriedly Tony eased out from under the wheel into the driving wind. Quickly, with head lowered and one gloved hand lifted to guard his face from the stinging rain, he ran to the exact center of the bridge.

"An' this does it!" he husked, breathing heavily as he dropped his heavy gun over the iron railing of the bridge. "Even if the dicks don't go for the way I busted them locks, even if they don't figure Mike got himself bumped off when he tried to put the pinch on a prowl-gang, with the roscoe in the river I'm clear."

It was sound reasoning. Without this weapon no ballistic expert could get far with the bullets found in Big Mike's body . . .

Tony Kinsella was still smiling contentedly when, some fifteen minutes later, he climbed on a stool in the Elite Cafe where he had been doing his eating ever since he had been released from prison. He was still smiling when, after a snack of steak and onions, he turned in for the night at the cheap little hotel where he had a room.

And the next morning, having slept soundly until noon, Tony grinned as he opened a window and called to a news-

boy on the street.

Big Mike's murder had made the headlines; but Tony had expected that. He knew that Mike had always been a straight cop; that he had a lot of friends. And even though he had planned on it and expected it, Tony was surprised at the way the police had fallen for the broken doorlocks they had found near where Big Mike had been killed. The cops and the newspaper reporters all agreed that Big Mike had been killed by some gunman in a prowl-mob. The investigating detectives had "suspicions," no clues; and that was all.

Tony saw no reason why he shouldn't be in circulation, so he dressed and walked down to the Elite Cafe for his regular combination breakfast and lunch. He was enjoying a generous order when broadshouldered Detective Sergeant Dean Bonnal entered.

Brazenly Tony nodded to the grim-faced detective, to get a short nod in return, and a keen once-over from eyes that were icy grey.

But Tony didn't feel the slightest twinge of alarm as the dick sat down on a stool once removed from the one he himself occupied. He didn't give more than a passing thought to the fact that Dean Bonnal and Big Mike used to pound the pavements together.

Hell! Hadn't the cops and the reporters admitted that no clue had been found? Hadn't the murder gun been dropped off the Huron Avenue Bridge, into the raging river below?

It was at that moment that Dean Bonnal dipped one of his large hands into a coat pocket, to bring out a heavy automatic and place it on the counter beside his cup of black coffee.

"Blackie Fischer tells me you bought this rod from him a couple weeks ago," Dean Bonnal started talking, his voice toned soft, tantalizing, his grey eyes drilling coldly into Tony's. "Blackie's a right guy all right, just like you figured—he wasn't going to stool on you. But it got too tough for him—when I told him that this gun was the one that killed Big Mike Lafferty."

STARING at the gun on the counter, wide-eyed, Tony Kinsella pushed to his feet. That the gun on the counter

was the one he threw off the Huron Avenue Bridge the night before, Tony didn't doubt for an instant. But how in hell—

"I just happened to remember," Bonnal's voice was droning on, "how Blackie Fischer was a nut for heavy guns, so I thought I'd go have a little talk with him. When they brought this rod in this morning I asked the chief to let me take it—because Big Mike was an old pal of mine . . ."

Trembling with the realization that his murder scheme had gone haywire, Tony's smug complacency had changed to fear and panic. He suddenly snarled, darting a look in the direction of the front door of the cafe as he snatched at a catsup bottle.

Dean Bonnal seemed to move slowly; but even as Tony swung the bottle, the big detective's right hand moved in a blur, to disappear under his coat. Then Tony saw that hand again, a snub-nosed police special in its grip.

To the counterman, it seemed as though the catsup bottle broke against Dean Bonnal's head long before the police special let go with a roar. But when the big detective reared to his feet, to stagger dizzily and clutch at his shoulder with a still smoking gun in his hand, the counterman knew his eyes and ears had deceived him. He was certain of that when, leaning over the counter, he saw the large black-rimmed hole in the center of Tony Kinsella's forehead.

"Dame Nature put the finger on that boy," Dean Bonnal said softly as he sipped at his coffee. They were waiting for the wagon. The counterman pulled out of his staring at the killer's body.

"Dame Nature?"

Detective Sergeant Dean Bonnal nodded.

"Raining and blowing like hell, last night," he said. "A perfect night for a perfect murder—the way this rat had it planned. The only thing was, the bad weather and the black night made him a little careless. You see, he figured he'd ditch his rod by tossing it off the Huron Avenue Bridge. But a gang of PWA painters are working on the Bridge, and this morning they turned this gun in at headquarters—told us they found it in the safety net they'd hung under the catwalk."

THE GATMAN BEYOND DISGUISE

By RICHARD HUGHES

A gatman's arm-shattering bullet meant the violinist kid's genius was lost—unless Detective Sam Jones could pay for a surgical wizard—by shooting five grand from the head of chair-shadowed Al Manders!

Manders' automatic roared, and the light globes exploded the place into darkness!



WHEN the three men came in Sam Jones reacted characteristically. Any other detective on the force would have produced a .45 and have cut those three guys down as fast as possible. There were only two other people eating and the one waitress had gone into the kitchen, so it would have been safe enough. And there was simply no mistaking Manders' long nose. But Sam Jones just reached into a side pocket

and took out his little booklet.

Sam always had that little chewed booklet in his side pocket. It was an essential part of his make-up. It had played an important part in Sam's career. It had been largely responsible for Sam's rapid promotion from patrolman to detective. And its contents was simply a motley variety of ideas and facts.

Recently, though, the little booklet had almost got Sam demoted again. Some-

one had heard shots and Sam had been sent to investigate. He'd found a man with three bullet holes in his forehead and he'd noticed at once an oddly shaped charm lying beside the body. He'd put down his gun, picked up the charm, and had got out his booklet to look up something about the charm. And the murderer had come up behind Sam and dropped him with a blow on the back of the head—and had escaped.

They found Sam lying there, his booklet in his hand. The charm was gone. The murderer made a clean getaway. And the murderer had never since been caught.

The chief had told Sam in none too pleasant tones that Sam would have got that guy if he hadn't stopped to "do library work," if he'd gone after the guy with "his gun instead of his booklet."

Yet it was doing "library work" first that had boosted Sam in the ranks, so he hadn't considered abandoning the booklet. He was very glad, in fact, that he had it with him now. He didn't like to take the least chance of mowing down an innocent man.

The kid across the table from Sam hadn't noticed the three men or the booklet. He had been looking at the detective's face. There was amusement in the kid's eyes but there was more affection than amusement.

"Sam," the boy said, "you don't by any chance like to eat, do you? We usually come here for dinner about 5:30, and you're always ready to leave by 9:30 easy."

Sam showed no expression. He was turning the pages of the booklet. He wasn't turning them fast nor was he turning them slowly.

"Oh, I like to eat," Sam murmured. He glanced up at the three men once and noted that they sat in one of the booths along the opposite wall. The one that looked like Manders sat with his back to Sam, the other two faced him. Sam thought their faces were somehow familiar, too. Without expression Sam continued to turn pages. He did it openly, on top of the table, to give the act a completely careless, offhand appearance.

"Why don't we start coming at 4:30, Sam? That way you'd have an extra hour to eat in."

SAM seemed to be studying the booklet indifferently. But behind his blank mien his mind was working coolly, clearly. He was hoping now that Manders would turn his face soon so he could get a comprehensive look at it . . .

And then, as though in response to Sam's thoughts, the famous killer abruptly turned his face and gazed across the room at the blonde waitress.

It was Al Manders all right. Long nose . . . S-shaped scar on right cheek . . . lips a thin line . . . small ears with strangely large lobes . . . low forehead—all the points checked exactly.

A little muscle played along Sam's jaw but beyond that he showed nothing in his face. He put the booklet back into his pocket and gazed at the kid. He had to get him out of there without rousing his, or the gangsters', suspicion.

Then that muscle playing along Sam's jaw suddenly locked in a tight knot. For the kid was frowning quizzically at the detective. As though he'd sensed something—

"Sam," the boy said slowly and quietly, "you haven't been eating those long dinners by any chance so you could—"

Sam looked at the boy very calmly. He was the sweetest kid Sam had ever known. Two months ago the chief had got a tip that for years Al Manders had been coming to this Greenwich Village restaurant at regular intervals, and the chief had immediately sent Sam to cover the place. Sam had met the boy at the corner newsstand the first night he'd been down there, and a deep friendship had sprung up between them.

The kid had no family, but he'd made a go of supporting himself with the newsstand. He'd had to leave school, in order to take care of a sick mother and himself, when he was twelve. He was an unusually intelligent lad, and could play the violin beautifully, and it had quickly become Sam's intention to see that the boy got a chance to study music.

He had already inquired into good teachers and their fees, and the latter had stumped him at first. But then he had figured he could afford a second-rate instructor for the boy anyway, by paying so much each week, and that, he'd finally assured himself, might work out just as well—particularly when the

pupil had genuine talent, as Harry did.

"Harry," Sam said, keeping his tone and actions casual, "do me the favor of getting me a copy of the latest edition of all the evening papers from your fine establishment. And be sure they're all the latest editions."

The boy's intelligent blue eyes were boring into Sam's flat-expressed gray ones. And the frown had not left the lad's high forehead. Sam avoided Harry's eyes calmly, raising his own to the boy's curly brown hair.

"And while you're gone see if you can't put a little design into those golden locks of yours. How would I feel if my friends saw me sitting here with a guy whose hair wasn't combed?"

Then Sam's lips tightened the least bit—for the kid was turning and looking back at the three men.

"Sam," the kid said softly, "are you sure all that stuff you told me about this just being your regular beat down here is straight . . . detectives don't have 'regular beats'—"

Sam's eyes had flicked to the three men and he suddenly felt his stomach fold up like a fist. One of the two men facing Sam was looking at him. Those two guys' faces had looked familiar to Sam because he had probably met them somewhere before in a vice raid no doubt . . . and now this one looking at Sam was recognizing him . . .

"Harry," Sam said quickly through his teeth, "get the hell out of here and get out quickly. I mean it, boy, get—"

The second man was looking now, too. But Manders had not turned. He was watching the faces of his two henchmen. And his hands were sliding back off the table.

Sam had got hold of Harry's arm and he was pulling the boy out from between the seat and the table when it happened.

Simultaneously the two modern round white globes hanging from the ceiling exploded the place into darkness. A series of ragged orange flames slashed out from the other side of the room. Roaring explosions were reverberating between the close walls. Sam felt the boy yank his arm from Sam's grasp, but the detective somehow knew the boy hadn't yanked voluntarily. And Sam heard a familiar dull thud, a bullet smacking a human body, and he knew it was not his body that was hit.

Then Sam was clawing for his gun. He was clawing, but he was not making anything like a lightning draw. He felt sick and a little dizzy but he knew it was not because he had been hit. It was because he had heard that dull thud, as of a bullet smacking a human body.

THEN Sam's gun was bucking against his wet palm and a woman was screaming and there was one hoarse cry as from a man hurt. But in the bedlam Sam's ears were recording only that dull thud—and another *chocking* sound that had followed the thud a split second later. A *chocking* sound, like the sound a rock makes when it hits a hollow cardboard box. Like when a bullet hits a human being's head.

And Sam knew his head hadn't been scratched.

Then Sam was running toward the door, toward the eerie frame the door made in the darkness against the pale light of the street lamp. He stumbled over a body in the doorway and almost pitched headlong into the street. He slammed against a sedan parked against the curb and his knees gave momentarily. He saw two dark figures disappearing into a doorway down at the corner and he recklessly smashed a bullet after them. An old man ducked back of a parked car as the bullet took out a window next to the dark doorway. People were fleeing in all directions. A police whistle shrieked. Sam's customary caution was flung to the winds now. He had gone a little crazy. Crazy with knowing that that sweet kid was lying back there in the dark with bullets in his body—and head. Crazy with knowing that those men up ahead had shot those bullets . . .

That thud and that *chocking* sound were tapping in Sam's head in a mad rhythm. He pitched headfirst down the street at the doorway. He skidded to a stop in front of the doorway and hurtled into the black hall. A streak of flame ripped the blackness from above and Sam felt fire tear the flesh of his cheek. In the flash of light he saw the staircase, grabbed the newel post and started up the stairs. The banister creaked as though it would tear loose. A muffled report sounded at the top of the staircase. And then a solid heavy body smashed down onto Sam out of the blackness. It landed mostly on his head

and he felt as though his spine had snapped.

He was slammed backwards to the floor. His head cracked against the bare floor, he saw a myriad of red and white stars and then he knew nothing.

When Sam opened his eyes he was in a hospital room and his body was wrapped heavily and tightly in bandages. Detective Jack Staley was beside the bed, perched on the edge of a chair. He smiled feebly at Sam.

"Hello, guy," Staley said.

Sam stared at Staley. His gray eyes had a wide, flat, bleak look. He opened his lips with an effort.

"The kid—"

"He's down the hall," Staley smiled. "He's okay—except for his right arm. It about got tore off. He caught a slug with his head too, but it was only a nick—"

Sam's eyes had brightened momentarily, then became bleak again.

"His right arm?"

"The doc says he won't never use it again—unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless that famous medico up in Minnesota could have a go at it—and the doc says that would cost a little matter of three grand at the inside."

Sam stared silently. It finally got Staley fidgeting uncomfortably.

"It was my fault that the kid got shot," Sam said in a dead tone.

Staley said, "Oh."

"He'd still have his right arm if I hadn't taken him in the place."

Staley gulped.

"He'd still have his right arm if I had used my gun instead of fussing with that damned booklet again."

Staley folded and unfolded his big fingers.

"Didn't the lad have a newsstand?" he hazarded. "Maybe having a newsstand it wouldn't be so important about the arm—"

"He plays the violin," Sam said.

Staley mumbled, "Oh."

"He's good on the violin. He's only a kid and he's never had any training but he's good anyway. He has natural talent. He won a national contest last year and one of the judges was a big conductor and he told the kid he'd be a great violinist some day."

Staley said, "Oh." Then his face suddenly beamed. "Manders got away, Sam. The two guys with him were dead, but Manders got away—and now there's five grand reward out for him—"

Sam's eyes went sharply to Staley's face. But Staley's face had suddenly dropped a mile.

Sam's eyes flashed. "What's the matter?"

Staley gazed blankly.

"What's the matter?"

"Sam," Staley mumbled, "I don't think the chief would let you go out on the Manders job again—"

Sam moved as though trying to get up.

"Sam, boy, you're gonna be in that mummy pack for two months anyway, and by then the other guys will have nailed Manders—"

Sam dropped flat. His face looked dead. He looked like a corpse. His eyes were open and staring, but like a dead man's eyes.

A WEEK later the kid came in to see Sam. Harry had a bandage around his head and his right arm was in a fat sling. Sam's eyes looked like the eye holes in a skull. The kid smiled cheerfully, to cover up the cloud that had passed across his eyes at sight of Sam.

"Sam," he said, "you look terrible. I don't think you're getting enough exercise. How do you get around in that football suit, anyway?"

Sam's ghostly expression didn't change. The boy pretended to be puzzled.

"Sam, if I didn't know you so well, I'd say you weren't a bit glad to see me."

Sam parted his white lips. "Hello, boy." His voice sounded like a worn-out, rusty motor being turned over for the first time.

The third week they had Sam sitting up inclined. They told him his back hadn't been as bad as they'd thought at first. He'd probably be able to leave in another week.

The chief, Staley told him, hadn't had a chance to get to see him.

And Manders hadn't been caught. There had been only one definite clue for the detectives to work on and that had got them nowhere: the gangster that had landed on top of Sam had gasped "Doc Benson" with his last breath, but all the

Dr. Bensons in town had been checked without any lead to Manders' whereabouts being found.

"The bullet they found in the guy that landed on you wasn't from your gun," Staley explained to Sam, "so they figured Manders had put a bullet in him and pushed him down the stairs at you. And they figured the guy knew Manders had double-crossed him and was trying to peach on his boss."

Sam looked at Staley. What Staley had been telling him began to click in his brain. He hadn't seen a newspaper and he hadn't talked to anyone except the kid in the whole three weeks. He had just lain there, packed in bandages, staring. His mind had gone almost dead. Now what Staley was saying had begun to make sense to him . . .

Manders hadn't been caught . . . he was still on the loose, and there was five thousand dollars on his head . . . and that morning they'd told Sam he could leave in about a week . . .

Sam looked at Staley and there was a strange brightness in his eyes. When he spoke his voice sounded alive again.

Sam grabbed Staley's arm. Staley's eyes went open wider. Sam almost looked himself again. He was talking clearly, surely, again . . .

"Staley, I don't care about the chief. I know what you're trying to tell me. I've been demoted. I let Manders get away when I should have had him cold. Staley, I don't give a damn if I get fired. I'm going to get that reward for the kid. Now sit there quiet and tell me every last detail of what they've found out and done about Manders . . ."

Sam was heading straight out Broadway in a taxi. The taxi was going fast despite midday traffic. It was pulling up at red lights so short it looked as though it would telescope. And at speed peaks between red lights it was hitting better than sixty. Sam had given the driver the address of one "Dr. Smith."

Sam had left Jack Staley standing in the middle of the hall at the hospital. In front of the phone booth.

Sam had got his idea just as he and Staley were about to leave the hospital. They had just got out of the elevator on the first floor when Sam had suddenly stopped dead in his tracks, looked wildly about, and dived at the phone books inside the adjacent booth.

All that last week in bed Sam had been studying the red-bound yellow-paged Classified Directory. For the only clue on Manders that had been found by detectives was still the dying gasp of Manders' henchman: "Doc Benson."

Once Sam had said to Staley: "Did they only check the Dr. Bensons?"

STALEY had blinked and replied: "Of course." And then a moment later, a little impatiently: "They couldn't check every doctor in town, you know. You might have noticed that there's eighteen pages of them, and three long columns to a page. And besides, this 'Doc Benson' might not have been a regular physician."

And Sam had murmured: "They ought to all be checked."

The taxi bounced over the curb and back into the gutter again in front of Dr. Smith's residence and office.

Sam got out and paid the driver and looked the residence up and down. It was sufficiently on the outskirts of the city to have a little grass around it, and two evergreen trees flanking the three white front steps. It was built mostly of red brick. It had a strange quietness about it.

Sam rang the bell and waited. Finally he saw some motion through the reflecting glass of the door and then the door opened. A girl stood there. She had on her hat and coat. Sam noted that she was very pretty and that she looked worried and tired.

"Yes?" she asked. Her voice had a sweet soft quality.

"Is the doctor in?"

The girl hesitated a moment. Then: "He's out of town."

Sam's heart skipped a beat.

"Has he been gone long?"

The girl frowned, and Sam thought he better show his badge. When the girl saw it a startled look crossed her face. She seemed to step back a pace.

"Have—have you—" she stammered, "news of him—"

Sam tensed. He said quietly. "May I come in?"

The girl stepped back and Sam entered the hall and then a little reception room.

"How long has he been gone?" Sam asked the girl when she had followed him into the room.

"I don't know. I just got back from my vacation a little over a week ago—you see, I am his secretary—"

"How long were you gone?" Sam's voice had become low, tight.

"Three weeks. And when I got back I found this note—" she stepped back of a little desk and produced a typewritten sheet and handed it to Sam. "—sticking up in my typewriter, apparently so I'd be sure to see it."

Sam read half aloud: "Have gone away for a complete rest. Am not leaving an address because I do not want to be disturbed for any cause. I don't know when I'll come back, so you better get another job."

The girl sat down on the edge of a wicker settee and wrung a little handkerchief in her hands.

"I've been looking for a job ever since, but I haven't found one, and I've been stopping back here every day to see if the doctor might have returned. I've worried about him, for he was always so nice to me, and his note didn't sound like him at all." She was talking breathlessly now. "You see, he always seemed so unhappy, so hopeless, and his work was always so secret, and the only patients I ever saw were hard-looking men—"

"Have you anything else that Dr. Smith typed?" Sam had been studying the note.

She thought a moment, then jumped up and pulled open a drawer of her desk.

"There are a few notes here that he left me on previous occasions—"

Sam compared the notes she handed him with the first note. Finally he said quietly: "The doctor didn't write this note you found in your typewriter."

The girl put the back of her hand to her mouth.

Sam explained: "There are two spaces after every sentence in these genuine notes you gave me. And there is only one space after the sentences in the note left in your typewriter. A man who habitually leaves two spaces would not abruptly leave one, and twice in the same note."

Sam put the fake note in his pocket and put the others on the desk. He scanned the room.

"Was anything out of place when you got back?"

The girl said, "No," weakly.

Sam studied the floors, particularly in the halls, for scratches. He took several minutes at the front and back doors of the house. He went upstairs. When he came down the girl was standing wide-eyed at the foot of the staircase.

"The doctor had no family?"

THE girl shook her head. "No. Not that I ever knew of. He lived on the second floor alone."

"Is there a cellar?"

"Yes. Here."

The girl went to a door under the staircase and turned the knob. Then she yanked frantically at the knob—

"It's locked! And I'm sure he never kept it locked . . ."

Sam tried the door. He pulled hard on it.

"Have you a key?"

"There was always a key in the lock but it was never used so we had no second—"

Sam put a foot against the door jamb. He took firm hold of the knob with both hands. The lock tore apart and Sam leapt back from the opening door.

A cold dank odor waited to Sam's face from the darkness below. He probed down the wall for a light switch, found one, turned it, but without result.

"Light doesn't work," he murmured.

"Doesn't work?" the girl echoed. "But it always—"

"Have you a flashlight?"

The girl quickly got Sam one. It was of the small flat five-and-ten variety. It gave a dim light.

Sam probed it down the wooden cellar steps. It shone a sickly yellow on them and only made the surrounding blackness thicker.

The steps creaked under Sam's tread. He felt them waver under him, as if they were loose. Dank sinister waves of air came out of the Stygian gloom and caressed his flesh. He had a momentary grim impression of being on the way to Hell.

The girl cried feebly above him: "Please be careful! . . ."

His feet finally on the lumpy moist cellar floor, Sam groped to the wall and hugged it as he moved slowly ahead. With the ghastly dim ray he minutely inspected as much as possible of the hard scratchy wall.

Suddenly his foot hit something. The angle of the wall likely . . .

Sam put the weak light ahead. He moved it slowly forward until it made a yellow circle on a smooth surface.

Sam reached out with his left hand. He touched the surface. It was wooden. A cupboard or closet . . .

He went around it carefully. It looked like the kind of a box skeletons fall out of when the door is opened. . . . Sam couldn't keep down a brief shudder. . . .

He found the little knob. The door came open so easily he fell back a step. It made a long piercing screech as it dropped open from Sam's jerked-back hand.

Then Sam thought he heard the girl give a stifled cry, at the top of the steps. And there was a light thud that sounded like the cellar door bumping shut. . . .

Sam whirled almost frantically, aiming the futile flashlight on instinct, as though it were a gun, in the direction of the staircase. He was letting this business get him and it was nothing. . . .

He couldn't make out the opening at the top of the stairs. He could see only gyrating blackness . . . expanding in front of his dilated eyes, contracting, expanding again grotesquely, horribly. . . .

Sam yanked himself around to clear his head. He grabbed at the closet violently to reassure himself and banged his knuckles against it before he got hold of it. He bit his teeth together. He stabbed the hand holding the dim yellow light into the closet and then leapt back in new terror. . . .

His fist had hit something hard . . . something that wasn't a wall . . . something that was hard and covered with cloth . . . like a bag of cement that has ossified. . . .

Sam's palm was soaking wet and hot around the nickel flashlight case. He pulled himself together again and moved the dim light slowly into the closet.

It focussed on a coat button. He moved it up not too steadily. It passed another coat button . . . diverging black lapels . . . and then jumped back, in Sam's hot hand, from the most horrible sight Sam had ever laid eyes on. . . .

A human face hacked almost beyond recognition—and then dried! The bloody gashes across eyes and nose and mouth—caked into a hideous cast!

WHEN Staley had stopped sputtering Sam put the receiver to his ear again and resumed.

"Listen, Staley, let me talk. I've got to hurry. Just tell the chief I'm on Manders' track and I'll have him back in New York, dead or alive, in a couple of weeks. That's all you've got to tell him.

"And then plaster that name and address I just gave you on your windshield and get over here as fast as you can. You'll find the doc in a closet in the basement. Bring a flashlight with you. And you better bring another doc with you and let him have a look at the girl. She's okay now. I got her lying on a couch in the reception room. All right, Staley, that's the story. I'll be seeing—"

"Sam for God's sakes, how did you—"

"How did I find the doc and how do I know he's the right guy? I'll tell you when I get back. I gotta hustle now. Besides, it isn't the kind of info that should be broadcast over the phone. So long, boy!"

Sam clanked the receiver in its cradle and went into the reception room. The girl was lying there on her side, her eyes closed. Her shiny black hair was loose around her face.

Her eyes fluttered open. They looked large and blue in her pale face. She tried to smile.

Sam asked: "How do you feel now?"

She smiled gently. "Better. I—I must have fainted against the door when I heard the screeching noise—"

Sam gazed at her a moment and then said: "I've got to go now. One of the boys is coming soon to look things over and he'll take care of you." He paused briefly before adding: "And if you'll give me your name and address I'll help you find another job when I get back to town—"

Sudden terror widened the girl's eyes.

"What—what did you find—"

"Nothing yet," Sam lied hurriedly, for he didn't want her to know of the corpse in the basement. "That's why I'm going away. It's just that I'm afraid something might have happened to the doc . . . and then you'd definitely be out of a job. . . ."

The terror gradually faded from her eyes and a warm tenderness replaced it.

Sam said abruptly: "Listen, do you

have enough money to get along on—”

“I have a little over a hundred dollars in bank, and that will carry me easily until I find something.” She smiled in a way that somehow disturbed Sam. “You’ve been very sweet to me,” she murmured.

In his little two-by-four hotel room on East Thirtieth Sam perfunctorily packed his bag. His mind was whirling the facts and getting nowhere. With those facts there was nowhere to get. He snapped his bag shut and set it at the door. His lips pursed in thought, he sat down on the bed.

He reached in his pocket and took out the nail and looked at it.

With that nail the doc had told him everything—and nothing. Evidently not yet dead when he was stuffed into the closet, the doc had groped on the floor of the closet and found the nail. With it had scratched a message into the wood of the closet door. It had been written so faintly, and the door had been already so marred from age, that Sam would never have found it if he’d not noticed the nail clutched in the man’s hand.

So Sam was sure that Staley and the others would not find it, would not even think to look for it, now that he had taken the nail. His chance of nabbing Manders was now one in a million, and it wouldn’t be that good if he couldn’t work alone.

Sam stared at the floor. He snatched out his watch and noted that it was almost train time. And if he didn’t do some awfully good thinking very soon this trip was probably going to be very much in vain.

Once more he reviewed the wording of that message, trying to get some new clue or angle on it. He muttered it half-aloud:

“MANDERS NEW FACE WAYNE INN MICH”

And again all he could get from it was its obvious meaning: Manders had had the doc change his features with plastic surgery, had murdered the doc then—had hacked the doc’s face probably in a very amusing scene in which he told the doc now as a reward he’d change the doc’s features too—and, to taunt the doc further, had told him, just before he chopped him down, that he was off for a nice long vacation at the famous

Wayne Inn up in the northern part of Michigan.

SO—the blank-wall facts were: Manders was at the Wayne Inn. His face was unrecognizable. His body was average—not tall, not short, not fat or thin. He was known to be an educated man, to be able to talk perfect English. And at this time of year there were at least two hundred men staying at the inn.

Beyond that, all that was known about Manders were his aliases and his fingerprints. The aliases were useless—Manders of course would have a brand new name now to go with his new face—and the fingerprints were no help either. With an army of detectives the inn could be raided and every male guest fingerprinted. But springing such a huge trap successfully, without Manders getting wind of it and escaping ahead of time, would be next to impossible.

And besides, Sam *had* to get that reward, for Harry, so Harry’s arm could be repaired perfectly, so Harry could study violin and some day play in a symphony orchestra . . . instead of running a newsstand the rest of his life. . . .

Sam jumped to his fet. How the hell was he going to pick Manders out of some two hundred men? He didn’t think Manders would recognize him as a dick, for Manders had not looked back at Sam in the restaurant before the place had been blasted into darkness, and Manders was certainly traveling alone now—so Sam would have time to work. But how would he work?

Sam sat down again. This time he sat in a rocker at the window. Times like this he used to consult his booklet—that damned booklet! It had got him promoted fast, but it had got him demoted still faster—and had been the cause of the kid getting his arm shot to hell. . . .

He jumped up again and grabbed the booklet from his pocket. He’d throw the damned thing away. The chief was righter than hell—it was certainly time he started going after criminals with his gun instead of his damned booklet. . . .

He scanned its pages for any addresses or information he might want to copy before he threw it away. . . .

He suddenly paused in his page-flipping. The hand holding the booklet be-

gan to tremble. Perspiration suddenly stood out on his forehead. He felt a cold drop of it slither down his right side from his armpit.

He had paused in the section where he entered philosophical and psychological generalities. . . .

Huge drops of rain pelted the canvas top of the motor launch. Water poured and whirled down the windshield, so that Sam couldn't see a thing through it. He turned to the sturdy young man at the wheel.

"How do you know where you're going? It looks to me like it would be hard enough just driving out here at night, without having a rainstorm to contend with besides."

The young man smiled. He had knobbed features and blond hair and was wearing a woolen stocking cap and a mackinaw.

"I could cross this lake with my eyes shut, because I've done it so many times."

"Is it just a straight path or—"

"No, we have to wind around several small islands before we start across the stretch to the big one that the Inn's on."

Sam tried to peer out the side window—a square piece of glass set in the tan canvas—but he could see only blackness through the rivulets of water.

"Well, how do you know when you're near shore?"

"Can see the lights of the Inn when we're almost there."

"Oh."

Sam sat silent for several minutes. He looked out all the windows. His companion was silent too. He wasn't, Sam decided, a very talkative lad. He was one of those strong silent outdoors men, the kind that make strong silent city men feel a little foolish.

"A good night," Sam smiled conversationally, "for a murder."

"U'm."

"And certainly a good spot!" Sam laughed. From the outset he wanted to sound as little like a detective as possible.

The blond young man reached down at his side and adjusted something.

"You couldn't find a better place anywhere," he said quietly, "for disposing of the body."

THE Inn loomed ominously at the top of a long flight of flagstone steps. The wet smooth slabs glistened in the light from the porch. Sam was breathing hard when he finally reached the level terrace in front of the wooden porch steps. The porch itself seemed to run all the way around the great frame structure.

Inside, at the desk, Sam immediately established the part he wanted to play.

"Horace Evans, from upper New York State!" he laughed at the clerk.

The clerk was a pale precise fellow.

"I am afraid," he smiled toothily, "that you should have written for reservations. The rooms that are left—"

"Just put me in any old cubby hole!" Sam roared.

Guests standing and sitting in groups in the big room to the left were now all gazing at the newcomer. A great many were clustered about the vast open fireplace. The licking, crackling flames played on their faces weirdly.

"I'll have to give you a small room on the top floor," the clerk said. And then he added smilingly: "It's really the attic."

"The attic!" Sam roared. "Good!" He turned to the guests. "I always wanted to sleep in an attic!"

A few of the guests tried to smile response to the newcomer's somewhat boisterous humor. Most of the guests, though, didn't even try. Particularly the men.

The blond young man had appeared beside Sam with his bag.

"Take Mr. Evans up to five-sixteen, Jerry," the clerk said.

The blond young man started up the wide steps just past the desk.

"Let's go," he said.

Sam took his one straight chair into the adjoining bathroom. The bathroom was even smaller than the room itself, so he had some trouble fitting the chair in.

Then he climbed back into the room and stood there several moments. His eyes roved the room. They finally lighted on the matchbox that was attached to a thick glass ashtray on the bureau.

He emptied all the matches out of the box and climbed over the chair into the bathroom and again stood looking about.

He espied what he wanted on the win-

dow sill. It was a flat stick, the size of a ruler, and apparently was used to prop the window up. He clamped one end of the stick under the medicine chest door, so that the stick projected flat, and perched the empty matchbox on the end of the stick.

Then he turned the chair slightly so that it faced the matchbox, and so that the bathtub was directly beyond.

He filled a glass with cold water and sat down in the chair. He took a gulp of the water, but he didn't swallow it. Instead he juggled it in his puffed cheeks, and, after a moment, spouted it at the matchbox.

The stream fell heavy and short into the tub.

He took another gulp. A smaller one this time. He juggled it tentatively, then let go. He had a thinner, sharper shot this time, and the stream whizzed within two inches of the box.

Twenty minutes later he let go a bullet-like wad of water that picked the matchbox off the stick clean.

He smiled grimly, and filled the glass again.

That was at ten-fifteen, a half hour after he'd arrived. He didn't leave the bathroom to go to bed until well after midnight.

Sam was leaning on the glass candy-counter, next to the clerk's desk. It was the following morning. He was eating a bar of chocolate. He was also smiling broadly. The clerk was smiling too, but not broadly.

"There's nothing like a bar of chocolate right after breakfast," Sam smiled happily, "with nuts."

"Chocolate is good," the clerk commented feebly.

"Which way do you like it best," Sam asked, "with nuts, or without?"

"It doesn't really matter to me," the clerk mumbled, trying to add a column of figures.

"I like it with nuts," Sam said.

One of the male guests approached, ignored Sam, and surveyed the candy display. He was of medium height and had ordinary features and black hair. His eyes had a flat look. He took a package of chocolate-covered almonds, put a coin on the counter, and walked away.

"He likes it with nuts too," Sam said,

following the man with his eyes. He turned to the clerk with a laugh. "He and I should get to know each other, eh?"

"His name is Marberry," the clerk supplied patiently.

"Oh," Sam said, "Marberry."

HE seemed to weight that for a moment. Then he turned to the clerk again. "I ought to start a club for guests who like candy, eh?" Sam laughed. "Those who like to eat it in the morning could be charter members, and those who like it with nuts could be honorary members!"

"That sounds excellent," the clerk murmured.

"And I'd be president because I like all kinds and at any time!" Sam roared.

Sam hung around the candy counter most of the morning—to the clerk's dismay. He munched candy of one sort or another most of the time, and reviewed all the souvenirs and postcards. Whenever one of the guests bought candy Sam greeted him as though his "club" had already been organized.

Every morning until about noon Sam hovered about the candy counter. He had struck up quite a friendship with the four biggest male candy eaters—even with Mr. Marberry, who wasn't very easy to cultivate.

"Only a true candy lover will eat candy in the morning!" Sam roared once to the clerk.

Afternoons Sam spent with his four fellow candy lovers. He regularly asked one or the other of them to go swimming in the lake with him. His "Candy-eaters Club" had indeed become almost a reality.

Evenings he set up his matchbox target in his bathroom and gradually got so that he could pick it off almost every time.

Sam was swimming, the tenth day he'd been at the Inn, with one of his candy-loving friends, a Mr. Lonsdale. Lonsdale was bald and had a slightly aquiline nose, and was almost as boisterous in his humor as Sam. And on the dock Marberry and the other two, Mayers and Benton, sat watching their antics. Sam had finally got the four candy-eaters down swimming at the same time,

Lonsdale and Sam were both floating on their backs. Lonsdale's paunch showed above the level of the water. Sam was flailing his arms in a wild backstroke. He looked and acted like a powerful country boy on his first vacation from the farm. He and Lonsdale had been having a large time.

Marberry had actually smiled once or twice. Mayers, a sharp-featured shrewd-looking man, had kept a smile on his face ever since Lonsdale and Sam had started clowning, but it was a wry smile. Benton laughed out loud periodically. He wore horn-rimmed spectacles, and had a smooth pale round face.

Now Sam had taken a mouthful of water and he was spouting it high into the air as he flailed his backstroke.

"Evans," Lonsdale laughed, "you look like a whale!"

Sam turned over and swam toward the dock.

"I'm better than a whale, Lonsdale," he shouted. "Watch!"

He grasped the dock, reached up and dumped two cigarettes from a pack lying there. He took one of the cigarettes and set it end up on the corner of the dock. Then he dropped back into the water, swam a stroke, suddenly spun and sent a bolt of water at the cigarette. It picked the cigarette clean off the dock, flopped it into the water beyond.

Lonsdale screamed. That really wowed him.

"Bravo!" Marberry applauded.

Mayers smiled wryly.

Benton let out a loud laugh.

Lonsdale got another cigarette and set it up on the corner of the dock. He started potting at it. He missed it by a mile every time.

He yelled, between tries: "Do it again, Evans! Let's see you hit that cigarette I've been shooting at!"

Sam took a wild dive in the manner of a seal, popped up immediately with a mouthful of water, picked the cigarette neatly off the dock again.

Sam whooped: "Hows' that, Lonsdale?"

"Bravo!" Marberry cheered.

"Ten bucks says you can't do it in twenty tries, Marberry!" Sam yelled.

Marberry was stepping down the ladder into the water.

"I'm sure I could not," Marberry said.

SAM turned his eyes on Mayers and Benton. There was a strange momentary flicker in them.

"Fifty bucks says you can't sock the cigarette in twenty tries, Mayers!"

Mayers' wry smile pulled a bit more to one side.

"Fifty dollars, Evans?" he asked.

"Fifty bucks," Sam replied. "If you miss all twenty shots, you pay me. If you hit, I pay you!"

Mayers got up.

"I can't let an easy fifty like that get away from me," he said, and dove in.

Twenty times he spouted at the cigarette, twenty times he missed.

"I guess I'm out fifty iron men," he concluded.

Benton laughed.

"A hundred bucks you can't hit it, Benton!" Sam yelled.

Benton shook his head warningly. "I'll take your money away from you, Evans!" he laughed.

"No chance!"

Benton climbed down into the water.

"I warn you, Evans!" he said.

"Nuts!" Sam taunted.

Benton slid into the water, took a mouthful, measured the cigarette with a glance, suddenly drew his lips back and let go a fine stream from between his teeth—and plucked the cigarette as though by magic from the corner of the dock.

Sam's gray eyes widened as though from sheer amazement, but there was more than sheer amazement in their depths.

"My God!" he groaned. "One hundred bucks out the window!"

Lonsdale and Marberry and Mayers gaped. Benton laughed.

An hour later Sam was on the way up to his attic room. He was wearing a robe, over his bathing suit, and leather sandals. He was taking the steps two at a time. There was a capable purposeful air about him now. He no longer looked like Horace Evans from upper New York state. He looked like Sam Jones, detective, New York City.

He reached the top of the last flight and turned left to his door. He turned the knob quietly, and stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Hello, Jones."

Sam jumped erect, stiff. Benton was

sitting in the rocker, fully dressed. He had left the dock just before Sam. There was no hint of a laugh on his face now. His face looked dead white. His eyes were glowing snake's eyes. They looked strangely alive and cruel in the white flesh of the face.

And resting easily in Benton's right hand was a large .45. It wasn't the kind of a gun you could trifle with. A bullet fired from that bore would knock a man down, not just put a hole in him. It would take the top of a man's head off, if it were aimed high.

Sam didn't perspire. He didn't feel chills run up and down his spine, nor did his palms feel moist. His throat didn't even get dry.

That's the way Sam was. He'd get in a stew sometimes, experience all those symptoms, when he was faced with a minor danger. But when a big job faced him, when he knew he had a big job to do, the danger of it for himself, however extreme it might be, did not even occur to him.

Sam had tensed when Benton had spoken, but he relaxed completely now. All that seemed alert about him now were his eyes, and there was an intense confident light in them. Sam relaxed the way a cat will; that little muscle played along his jaw the way a cat's tail will wave slowly, ominously.

"It's a shame," Benton sneered, "that New York City has to lose such a clever, clever detective. How proud its citizens would have been when they read of the oh-so-clever methods their own Sam Jones had used to nab that terrible Al Manders!

"But now they'll forget all about Sam Jones. A few old friends might remember him as a nice guy, but a dumb one. The police will remember him as something of a mad dumbbell, who would have made a better librarian than detective.

"You see, Mr. Jones, I know all about you. I read the papers. I read the whole story of the strange case of Sam Jones, detective, who rapidly rose in the ranks because he thought before he acted, and fell just as rapidly for the same reason. Who discovered the mutilated body of one Dr. Smith, left word that he would bring Manders back within two weeks, and, as far as the police knew, disappeared completely.

"AND incidentally, Mr. Jones, the last entry the police will make on your record as a detective will be just that: 'disappeared completely.' For you and I, to be very blunt, are going for a little ride—in the motor launch. I've been driving it quite a bit since I've been here, and they let me take it out whenever I wish. So you'll pack your bag, check out downstairs—with me at your side of course, with this little implement in my pocket—and I'll explain that, since you have to leave unexpectedly in a great hurry, I will be glad to run you across to the mainland.

"It will be a simple matter then to cruise off among the many smaller islands, well out of the Inn's sight and hearing, put a bullet through your head, and leave your body—on most any one of the little islands. They are never visited, you know, so there's no risk for me at all—particularly will there be none after I have dragged you well inland, and have dropped you into some natural cavity in the ground and covered you with logs and brush.

"The guests at the Inn will simply think that Horace Evans went home and will forget him; your fellow police will close Sam Jones' record with 'disappeared completely' and forget *him*. And of course with the demise of Mr. Evans and Mr. Jones, all trace of Al Manders will be erased—and Henry Benton will enjoy a long, luxurious life!"

"Well thought out," Sam commented quietly.

"It is good, isn't it? I am almost as clever as you, am I not? As a matter of fact, though I easily saw how you tracked down Dr. Smith, I must admit I didn't get on to your game here until a very few minutes ago. You are an excellent actor, Jones, and you might indeed have caught me. It was my former nicknames, 'Candy' and 'Spit,' that you worked on? You figured find a man staying at the Wayne Inn who ate a lot of candy and who knew how to hit a cuspidor, and you'd have Al Manders?"

"That's right."

"A man's aliases and nicknames often reveal identifying traits and habits—your whole elaborate plan was built simply from that observation. Very clever, Jones."

"It was, wasn't it."

"U'm. One thing I still don't see,

though. How did you know I was at this Inn?"

"A little bird told me."

Manders' black snake-eyes glittered evilly. Sam noted that the repairs on the gangster's face had been superficial but effective. The nose had been shortened, the scar had been removed, the ears looked more natural, the forehead didn't have that low gorilla-like appearance. . .

"I see," Manders said. "Well, you can take that bit of information to your grave with you. Now, Mr. Jones, would you mind putting some clothes on, and getting your bag packed, as quickly as possible? And I mean quickly."

Sam moved to the bureau.

"Don't try anything funny, Mr. Jones. I've removed your gun from your bag."

"You've been all through the bureau drawers, too?"

"Yes, I have."

Sam was opening one drawer after another.

"They look it," he said.

He dressed deliberately, not slow, not fast. He packed what he didn't wear. He didn't look at Manders. Manders rocked gently, but that big .45 floated level.

"You don't seem a bit nervous," Manders said.

"I don't feel nervous," Sam replied.

Manders smiled. "That will be to my advantage when you are checking out."

Sam snapped his bag shut.

"I want to do anything I can to help," he murmured.

"You're remarkable, really," Manders smiled. "I am sure I would not be so calm when I was about to die."

Sam picked up his bag and took his hat from the bureau and stood facing Manders.

"Maybe I'm not about to die," he said expressionlessly.

Manders leaned forward and up out of the chair. It creaked under the pressure. The long cold muzzle of the .45 held Sam's chest. The chair banged back against the wall, as Manders left it, his beady eyes unwaveringly on Sam.

"Shall we?" Manders purred.

Sam turned and opened the door. Manders followed him out and pulled the door gently shut. They moved down the steps. Manders slipped his gun hand into his coat pocket.

"Now, I wouldn't try a thing downstairs, if I were you," Manders gritted as they went along the second floor hall. "You'll only force me to cut down a few innocent people. And capturing just one more bad man wouldn't be worth that, would it, Jones?"

THEY stepped into the downstairs hall and moved directly to the desk. Manders quietly explained to the clerk that Mr. Evans was not feeling well, that Evans wanted to leave at once, that he, Manders, was going to take him in the launch to the mainland. The clerk sympathized—not too heartily, however, for he had grown very weary of the bellowing, joking, candy-eating Mr. Evans.

Sam paid his bill and quietly contributed whatever conversation was required of him, and he and Manders at last moved away from the desk. To the clerk, and the other guests standing around, Sam's flat manner looked exactly like Horace Evans not feeling so good.

The clerk whispered out of the corner of his mouth to a guest leaning on the desk: "The man's full up to his ears with chocolate bars. It's no wonder he's ill."

Manders and Sam were crossing to the front door when Jerry, the blond young man who'd brought Sam to the Inn during the rainstorm, suddenly appeared with an armful of logs for the fireplace. He noted the bag in Sam's hands and paused in the entrance to the big room. Manders' eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. He touched the muzzle of the gun in his pocket hard against Sam's side.

"You leaving, Evans?" Jerry said.

"He doesn't feel well. I'm going to rush him ashore," Manders explained quickly.

Jerry stared.

"Oh," he said. Then: "Well, if you'd like me to take him—"

"There's really no need," Manders supplied, "I'll be glad to run him across."

Jerry gazed at Sam. Sam was looking at Manders. He was standing there with his bag in his hand looking at Manders' head. There was a hint of scorn in his eyes. He looked as though it didn't matter to him how things went, he knew he was going to take Manders. He was going to take him because there

was \$5,000 on his head, and if he let Manders get away, the kid would never play his violin again . . . Sam looked very calm, like a cat quietly waving its tail . . .

"Okay," Jerry said at last. "So long, Evans. Come see us again."

Sam's eyes had wandered to the left, past the clerk's desk, to the bar room. They paused there a moment and then returned to Manders.

"Benton," Sam said abruptly to Manders, "I think I'll have to have a whiskey before we go."

Manders' eyes narrowed noticeably this time, but he relaxed them again.

"I think a whiskey might be just what I need," Sam added.

He moved toward the bar room, Manders stayed beside him.

There were no guests at the tables, and the bartender was arranging some bottles, his back turned.

"Listen, you slug," Manders hissed in Sam's ear, "what's the idea—"

Sam said in an undertone: "You wouldn't deny a man a drink just before he's going to die, would you?"

The bartender turned.

"Two whiskeys," Sam said.

Manders moved up beside Sam.

"One whiskey. I don't want anything."

"One whiskey," the bartender echoed.

Sam set his bag down and faced Manders.

"Not drinking?" Sam raised his eyebrows.

Manders fastened his beady eyes on Sam's gray ones. Sam's flat expression didn't shade. He kept his eyes on Manders' eyes and picked up his drink. The muzzle of the .45 moved forward a bit against the cloth of Manders' pocket.

"Not drinking," Manders confirmed deliberately.

Sam put the glass to his lips, tossed the whole drink off—then suddenly the dim light of the room glinted on some-

thing streaking from Sam's mouth. A tearing stream of fire had leapt at Manders' eyeballs, he had stiffened from pain and shock; his gun hadn't exploded, no sound had come from his choked throat.

And then Sam's right fist was moving. His eyes hadn't left Manders' face, he had eased his body to put every ounce of it behind that fist.

Manders' face looked like it spread flat when the blow arrived. It looked like the fist had blasted it apart.

MANDERS ended up in the far corner. His body had torn a wide path through three sets of tables and chairs.

They were on the dessert course. People had been glancing their way. The waiters had evidently spread the word who the man at the head of the table was.

Sam Jones looked around from one to the other of his party.

"Does that maybe give you the whole story?" he asked.

Staley said: "All but what sent you scooting to your Dr. Smith's place when the tip-off had been 'Doc Benson'—"

"I think I've figured that," Detective Captain John Pane interpolated. "Dr. Smith's first name was 'Ben'. The dying thug was trying to say 'Doc Ben Smith'. He didn't get the whole name out. He didn't get past the 'S' in the 'Smith'. So it of course sounded like 'Doc Benson'." Captain Pane smiled at Sam. "The man who figured it first, though, gets the credit, the promotion, and the reward."

Miriam Barlow was smiling at Sam and saying nothing.

Harry said: "Sam, what with finding Miriam a new position and taking me out to Minnesota and holding down a full time job here yourself, you're going to be a busy guy."

Sam grinned broadly.

"Maybe I'll find the solution for that in my booklet."

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SEX HEALTH

MAGAZINE

SEX EDUCATION—THE
KEY TO A HEALTHY LIFE

NOTHING BUT A COPPER

By EDWARD S. RONNS

Author of "One Million Dollars—In Corpses!", etc.

Hilary had no particular objection to corpses—it was just that he didn't like sleeping with them!



The bullet slogged into her with an audible after-sound

THE voice in the receiver said: "Hilary. Hilary. Hilary!"

Hilary Putnam winced and removed the telephone a distance from his ear, looked across the hotel desk at Alpert, the night clerk. Above Alpert's shiny, sleek hair a maroon-faced clock had its dull silver hands forked to twenty after eight. Hilary's eyes swung away to the big man lounging nearby—

Hank Meers, hotel dick at the Stowe-Conklin. A big man, with small sullen brown eyes that matched the harsh thrust of his chin and the blue of his jowls. He rolled a toothpick thoughtfully from one corner of his mouth to the other.

Hilary turned back to the phone, said: "I'm Hilary. All three of me."

"Oh!" The girl's voice was breath-

less. "I—Mr. Putnam, I wish you would come up, at once. Please. You know, I'm in the room adjacent to yours."

"I know."

"I'm aware that you've been following me for three days now," came the girl's voice. She sounded stiff, chilly. There was a slight shiver in her voice. "But will you come up? Now?"

"On my way," Hilary said. He shoved the phone toward Alpert, the night clerk, and glanced once at Hank Meers. He pulled his fuzzy hat a little lower over his dark, black eyes—a hat with a rakish crimson feather stuck in the black cord. A cigarette wisped from a corner of his small-lipped mouth.

Hank Meers said, very quietly: "You louse."

Hilary's eyes darkened. He took the cigarette from his lips and studied the glowing end of it.

He said softly: "The lady in Eighteen is in distress."

"Then I'm going with you. As house cat around here—"

Hilary's voice remained soft. "She called for me."

"And what's your angle?"

"She's my case. All of it."

Alpert focussed his sleepy eyes a little better and folded his very white hands on the shiny desk top. "Mr. Putnam, are you really working a case in this hotel?"

HILARY said: "It's already worked. See you both in the morgue, some day."

Meers said: "Yeah. You'll be lookin' up at us from a cold marble slab when we come in to identify you. The little lady upstairs is plenty tough. Of all the private shamuses in this man's town, you're the privatest, when it comes to talking."

"The mostest," said Hilary. His thin face warped into a little lopsided grin. "After I see the damsel in distress, boys, I'm checking out." He strode casually toward the elevators, the smoke trailing flippantly from the end of his cigarette.

The alcoved bend of the eighth-floor corridor was purple with intimate shadows. Hilary stopped his low whistling and paused, bouncing slightly on his toes. There was a blue runner rug trimmed with mouse-gray, a star-shaped

chandelier, and a spindly-legged gold-painted lounge in the hall.

Hilary's eyes cruised over these for a moment, then lifted to the two doors ending the corridor. The girl's room was 818. His was 816. The soft light made a sheen on the dull white numerals.

Tucking the cigarette between his teeth, he inserted a key in his own door, very softly, and pushed gently inward with his fingertips.

Dull gray sped noiselessly ahead of him into his two-room suite. There was a swelling murmur from Avalon Avenue below, while the white ceiling of the living room flashed with occasional sweeping beams of brightness from the window. Hilary stood very still while his room was brightened twice in this manner.

He took the cigarette from his lips, sighing gently. There was no sound from the next room. He pinched off the glowing tip and ground it into the rug. The butt went into his pocket. Light crept under the connecting door to 818, showing only near the casing edges, as though something lay against the door and blocked off the yellow flood.

Hilary snapped on the light with a backhand movement and looked at his bed.

"Corpses, corpses," he muttered. "Now they expect me to sleep with 'em."

Hilary didn't know the dead man. He sprawled casually on his back, a knife in his heart, one arm across his face as though to shut out the light from dead eyes. The other arm flopped limply over the edge of the counterpane. Beyond the broad new soles of a pair of cardigan shoes, Hilary could see the rumpled gray trousers of an expensive suit.

He took out his gun, weighed it in his palms, and put it back in his side pocket. Then he dusted his hands together, and moved silently to lift the dead man's arm from his face. The man was middle-aged, with salt-and-pepper hair, a rather fleshy nose. No chin to speak of. The mouth hung wide open in an eternally silent yell. There was no blood on the chenille cover, and the steel handle of the knife shone bright with a serious, steady sheen.

Scattered over the bed were pink, green, white and rich-blue objects. Several lay about the man's body, others were in the folds of the bedding.

Hilary picked one up. It was a lapis-

lazuli figurine of a tiger, exquisitely carved, vibrant with life breathed into it by the artist. He picked up another—a jade elephant. Then an ivory dragon with grinning jaws, three inches long from the tip of its serried tail to its forked tongue. Chinese art.

"A whole damned menagerie," Hilary muttered. He dusted his hands again and stood a moment, tossing the little dragon absently in the air. Then he crossed the room to a brass-latched suitcase, opened it, and took out a box of cartridges. He loaded the automatic and pocketed several extra clips. His fingers found the cigarette butt again. He lighted it, rocked on his heels and put the dead match in his pocket. A crooked smile touched his lips when he looked at the connecting door to Eight-eighteen.

Holding the blue automatic in his left hand, he pressed down slowly on the lever handle. It moved with a slight feeling of resistance as the bolt slid aside. The door wasn't locked.

He flung it open suddenly and almost tripped over the girl who lay on her side just beyond the door.

"Hell, another one," he breathed. Then: "No, hooray."

THE girl was unconscious. She had raven-black hair done up in a coronet and had red, red lips that gleamed moistly in the light. Her mouth was open a little, her throat moving slightly with her shallow breath. She wore a black velvet evening gown that left her creamy shoulders bare. There was a bruise high up on her forehead.

Hilary sucked at his cigarette, staring down at her. He took off his rough hat and brushed the thick crimson feather in it.

He tried shaking her. "Miss Genova. Dana," he said. Then he got up, pocketing his .38, and went to the Roman bath for a glass of water.

He was gone only about a minute, until he found a green-tinted glass and poured water into it.

When he returned, the girl was on her feet. She leaned against the door casing to his room. Her face was very white and her lips trembled with her deep breathing. She held a small derringer in her hand, close against her stomach. She looked tall, almost as tall as Hilary, and she was shaking from head to foot.

"Please," she said. "Please be careful." She had a soft husky voice, just the sort he had expected. Her eyes were a deep, solid gray. He put the glass of water down on a little inlaid end-table and looked at the little revolver in her hand.

"Put it away."

"I don't dare," she admitted. "I'm frightened."

He said with a faint smile: "So am I. All the more reason to put it away. Those little things go off."

"I know. So please don't come any closer."

Hilary paused in the middle of the room. He crushed out the tiny cigarette in an octagonal malachite tray and shrugged.

"You called me on the lobby phone?"

"Yes."

"After you killed him?"

She sucked air sharply. "Who? Killed who?"

He said: "The man in my bed."

For a moment the girl almost turned around to stare into his room. Then she steadied herself, the twin black holes of the derringer boring straight at Hilary.

"No, I didn't kill anyone. You're trying to frighten me."

"Put the gun away, Dana."

The girl's face was deathly white. Her gray eyes searched his frantically. A muscle twitched suddenly in her cheek.

She said huskily: "I know you've been following me. Now it seems that you've caught up with me."

"Not yet." He smiled. "Wait until you put away that gun. Right now you're holding trumps."

The girl caught her rich lower lip between her teeth. Her shoulders quaked again with an inward shudder, and the jittery muscle in her smooth cheek tugged violently. Her eyes were very wide, very frightened, fixed on Hilary's tall figure.

Her voice had a desperate edge to it. "I called you because I'm in trouble. I've been robbed. I knew you were a detective, following me. I thought if I could call you in, I could straighten out . . ." Her voice trailed off. Strengthened. "What do you want of me?"

"I've been after a set of carvings you stole from a man named Dwight Brennan. I've been hired to return them."

She said wonderingly: "But the carvings are mine. I did not steal them from

Dwight Brennan." She waggled the derringer at him, stepped aside from the door. "Please, we'll go into your room. I want to see this—this dead man in your bed." She paused, looking steadily at him. "You think I killed him?"

"I don't know," Hilary said frankly. He walked past her into his room. "I hope not."

"Well, I didn't."

The girl came in behind him, shot a quick glance at the dead man sprawled on the blue counterpane. Her breath was drawn in with an audible, startled gasp.

Hilary said swiftly: "Do you know him?"

"His name is Cuvri. John Cuvri. He's a well-known art collector."

"That menagerie crawling over him," Hilary continued. "That's the one you stole?"

SHE said dully: "It's not stealing to take back what belongs to you."

"What else do you know about this?"

"Nothing very much." Her knuckles grew white around the ivory butt of the gun. "Someone came to my door and knocked. When I opened it I was hit on the head with something. I don't know who it was. I was out for a while, and seem to have heard somebody dragging something—it must have been Cuvri's body—into your rooms. They must have left the door between us deliberately open. I didn't look. I called downstairs for you, because the carvings were gone, and then I—I fainted again."

"But the carvings are here, with the dead man," Hilary said. "Why?"

"To frame me for the murder," the girl said dully. "To frame you too, because you've been tailing me; they were afraid you would find out the truth about the case—my side of the case. But I don't think you're the sort who wants the truth."

Hilary looked at the dead man. "Why not?"

She shrugged slightly, looking away from the bed. She spoke coldly. "Otherwise you wouldn't be working for crooks. Money seems to be what counts with you."

Hilary grinned at her. "Some of us are honest, Dana. I only know what my client told me. That you had stolen this set of carvings from him. If there's

something I don't know, tell me. I want to know the truth. If I've been on the wrong side of the fence so far in this case, then I'm the sucker. I'll switch. Just tell me what it's all about."

"We haven't time," she said. Her voice shaded a little higher. "Not now. I tell you we're framed—this dead man—"

The telephone exploded with a shrill burr.

The girl jumped nearly a foot at the sound. For a startled moment she flicked her gray eyes at the ivory handset on a book-shelf, and the gun muzzle was lowered. Hilary spanned the room with two quick, noiseless strides. His arm flashed out and caught the girl's wrist.

She gasped, beat at him helplessly with her free hand. With a quick flick of his fingers, Hilary twisted the little derringer from her grip and thrust her away from him.

She bumped hard against the wall, looking very tall, very frightened, her smoke-gray eyes bitter with hatred and disgust.

"And I was about to break down and trust you," she said, her voice etched with acid.

Hilary said softly: "You can still believe me, Dana. But now be quiet."

He slid her gun into his side pocket and reached for the excited telephone, flipped it up to his ear.

"Go ahead," he invited.

Alpert's brittle, precise speech rattled in the receiver. "It has been brought to our notice that you are having some difficulty in your rooms, Mr. Putnam."

"No trouble at all," said Hilary.

"It has been further brought to our notice that you are harboring a young lady in your suite; that you have opened the connecting door to 818."

Hilary looked at the girl and scowled, his lips wry. "It must be telepathy. You're so smart."

"Do you deny these facts?"

"No," dryly.

"I'll be right up."

The telephone clicked promptly. Hilary cradled the one-piece, looked from the dead man on his bed to the girl whose eyes watched him, very wide and staring.

There was a catch of terror in her voice. "They're coming up here?"

Hilary nodded. "So I'm the one who

gets it in the neck, huh? You must have told them. It was all arranged, real pat. Otherwise, how could Alpert know?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "I'm as much surprised as you are."

"I'll bet," he said sourly. He moved to the bed, slid one arm under the dead man. "I'll just bet."

HE hoisted the dead man to his shoulders, toed open the closet door and put the body down behind his suits. He closed the door and snicked home the lock. Then he found a shoe-box, collected the little figurines off the bed—there were about twenty of them—and dumped them into the cardboard container.

The girl hadn't moved all the time. Hilary straightened, tucked the cardboard box behind the pillow, smoothed the counterpane and then crossed the room with long strides as knuckles rapped harshly on the door.

He had his blue .38 in his hand, dangling carelessly from his lean fingers. He called out: "Come in, gentlemen. But take it easy." The hammer of his automatic clicked loudly. "I'm a little nervous."

Alpert and Hank Meers sidled into the room. Their faces reflected astonishment at the sight of the big gun in Hilary's fingers. Alpert's voice was neither aggressive nor apologetic as he looked at Dana Genova.

"I was right," he said.

Hank Meers grunted and tried the connecting door. It opened at his touch. A broad grin marred his rocky features. His little brown eyes crinkled around the edges.

"You can't make a suite," he said thickly. "You're chiseling the hotel out of six bucks."

Hilary said easily: "Put it on the bill." He kept the gun in his hand.

Meers looked at the automatic and pulled at his lower lip.

"I'll just look around."

"What for?"

Alpert fluttered his hands, distressed, and said: "Well, I—I better get back to the desk. Mr. Meers will handle—"

Hilary bobbed a little on his toes and barred Hank Meers' way. "Look in the closet. I've got another girl in there."

"Maybe you have," Meers said sourly. He walked around the tall man and

pulled at the glass knob. It was locked. He turned around with a muttered curse, looked coldly at Dana Genova. "What kinda case you working on, Putnam? This damn hustler—"

Hilary Putnam said flatly: "Shut up."

Meers turned red. His lower lip stuck out. "Yeah?" He leaned his meaty shoulders forward a little. "Funny guy, ain't you?"

"No," said Hilary. His long length seemed to unravel as he straightened from his lazy stance. "Now let's see if you can answer one of mine."

His left hand, hanging open at his side suddenly lashed upward. As it traveled it closed until it was bunched into a hard-knuckled fist that cracked loudly on the house-detective's big jaw.

Meers spread his big fingered hands wide in front of him and looked surprised—then silly. His legs folded under him and he began to sit down, thrashing his arms wildly. Five steps to the rear he completed the operation, with a crash that set the furniture spinning crazily.

Hilary Putnam rubbed his bruised knuckles and flicked down the cuff of his coat sleeve. "No more maggoty ideas out of you, Hank. Miss Genova and I —"

The girl was gone.

Hilary swiveled in a complete circle on his hard heels, his eyes sweeping the room. The door to 818 was wide open, still moving slowly. Cursing, he moved swiftly into the girl's suite, then stopped and stood there with disgust spreading over his features. The corridor door was swinging, too, coming ajar with slackening momentum. The hall was empty. An elevator whined faintly around the corridor corner.

"Detective business," he said bitterly. "Hell."

He returned to his own room, his face suddenly blank. Hank Meers was still folded on the floor against the wall, mechanically shaking his head, his brown eyes slowly clearing. Hilary slid the .38 into his underarm holster and picked up the shoe-box from behind the pillow. His fuzzy hat sat far back from his black, alert eyes, the brush-feather rakishly aslant. He looked a moment at the dazed hotel detective and went out on silent feet.

THE night air was balmy, sibilant with the whisperings of spring. Hilary stalked out through a side entrance to the hotel and paused on the pavement, the shoe-box tucked under his arm. He stuck a cigarette between his lips, scratched a wooden match aflame on his thumb-nail, and stood holding the dancing light before his face.

A powerful coupe slid up the Avenue and came to a noiseless halt in front of him. A man's hoarse voice bubbled:

"Yuh got it, boss?"

"I got it, Bonny. Yeah. In the neck." Hilary slid into the front seat beside the squat, thick-bodied driver, John Bonnywell. Bonny was Hilary's one luxury—man of all work, and expert behind the wheel of a car or behind a gun.

Bonny rumbled: "Whadda yuh mean—in the neck, boss?"

"I just parted company with a corpse."

"A dead guy?"

"Corpses usually are dead. Drive around the corner two blocks and then let me out."

A powerful car siren wailed far in the distance, bringing a sour smile to Hilary's lips. He drummed idle fingers on the shoe-box, then as Bonny turned down a dark, tree-shaded street to a cab-stand, Hilary tucked the box once more under his arm and elbowed the door open.

"Go home and wait for me."

"Yuh gonna be all right, boss?"

"Hell, yes. Do as I say. If anybody should ask, you haven't seen me."

"Will anybody ask?"

"Too damned many, I'm afraid."

Hilary waited until the coupe slid around the corner, then he crossed the street and opened the back door to the third cab in line.

"Dresham Road, 719," he ordered.

Twenty minutes later he got out and stood beside the cab on a gravel driveway. He shoved the cardboard box over into a corner of the leather seat. "Wait here," he told the cabby.

719 Dresham Road was one of a group of houses bordering an oval-shaped driveway, entered from the main road by means of a high-walled, ornamental grill gate. Moonlight was soft and buttery on the tops of thick poplars and giant silver maples. Hilary moved silently through the little gateway in the iron fence, trudging up the curving gravel

road. He walked on the lawn to avoid the grating of his shoes on the stony road.

The house he sought was at the opposite end of the tree-bordered oval, set far back from the driveway, almost lost in the thick black shadows. He could see only a white stone wing with green-blinded bay windows. Ornate columns of a colonial-style house stood in military fashion, visible in the warm, white moonlight.

Hilary stepped silently up on the wide front porch, his tall, rangy figure lost in the sudden blackness. He stood remembering where the knocker was, lifted it and let it fall twice, before a light bloomed behind the four tiny panes of glass in the door.

A pear-shaped face peered out at him. A fat man with slackly hanging jowls and a head narrowed to a pinpoint on top, with close-cropped bristly red hair. The man's eyes were pale blue with ugly, puffy red lids.

"It's me, Pud," said Hilary. "Let me in. I've got business."

"Hullo, copper." Pud Caster opened the door all the way, frowning. "You want Muriel—Miss Gleason? She's still awake."

Hilary Putnam's voice was casual. "That's the one." Then, in passing into the dark-paneled corridor, he flipped back the fat man's coat with a quick movement. Pud yelled, "Hey," and wrenched backward. He was not swift enough to prevent a glimpse of the ridged gun butt in a new, shiny black leather holster.

Hilary smiled lopsidedly.

He said softly: "Ever try a knife, Pud?"

"What you shovin' at me?"

"A gentle hint, Caster. Did you ever?"

"Nah!" The fat man's underlip wriggled forward. "I use this."

The gun bloomed in his hand. Hilary stared at it in silence for a moment, eyeing the little black circle that pointed at his eyes.

"Well, well," he said.

Pud Caster said: "Hi, ho. Better come on."

"Fine way to treat an employee."

"You," said Pud, "ain't nothin' but a copper."

"That's all," Hilary admitted.

HE walked ahead of the fat man. The corridor angled sharply to the left into the white-stone wing with the green-shaded bay windows. The room Hilary entered was large, low-ceilinged, illuminated by a pebbled glass globe that reflected powder-blue light from the edges of the walls. A pale green grass rug covered the parquet floors, except at the curved bay window, where there was a large desk.

A man stood behind the desk. Dwight Brennan was thick-set, broad-shouldered, with a beefiness that comes from solid eating. His face was a permanent dull red, in which the white sharpness of his nose stood out with startling refinement. His pale blue eyes were smiling, jovial.

He said: "Well, Mr. Putnam, you're looking healthy."

"I don't feel so good," said Hilary. He stared at the woman who sat behind the desk, a little in front of Dwight Brennan. She looked as prim and neat and cold as the chromium desk ornament she fingered. Her hair was a polished, platinum helmet tight-spun against her scalp. Her black dress was elegant with simplicity, relieved only by white revers. She looked up at last at Hilary, smiled with closed lips, and indicated a nearby chair.

"Mr. Putnam!" she greeted throatily. "Sit down, please."

Hilary turned his head on his neck. "The gun gets in my way."

The woman's eyes blazed angrily. "Pud, you fool! The cop works for us!"

Hilary said easily: "Your mistake. I've quit—temporarily."

Caster said: "See?"

"Put away that gun." Muriel Gleason folded her hands under her chin, moved her face into the light, and eyed the fat gunman out of the room. "Now, Mr. Putnam, if something disturbs you—Please, sit down."

Hilary parked his length beside a pedestal on which was placed a benignly smiling brass Buddha. His eyes, cruising the room, fell on curios, carvings and paintings of every type and description. He returned to Muriel Gleason with an apologetic little smile.

"I'd like to get something straight," he said quietly.

"Something about the case?"

"It's the story that's got me puzzled," he admitted. He watched Muriel's thin,

penciled eyebrows slide up a little. "You and Dwight Brennan are partners in this antique business. According to you, the Genova girl worked as secretary to Brennan and stole the set of Chinese figures, worth plenty."

"Worth fifty thousand," Muriel sniffed.

"Worth plenty," Hilary repeated. His voice was earnest. "You hired me to find this Dana Genova and get back the menagerie. That's the way you put the case to me. For five thousand dollars and no questions asked."

Muriel Gleason watched him with cold-bright green eyes. "You've found the girl?"

"I found her." Hilary's dark eyes had little lights splintering in them. "I found the menagerie, too. But I also found out a little about you. On the whole, your business is hardly legitimate. You specialize in counterfeiting antique art objects, gypping fool collectors. And me—I'm an honest cop. Working for you rubs the wrong way."

Muriel Gleason touched her lower lip, squeezing its crimson ripeness hard against her teeth. Her eyes got smaller, harder.

She said, very softly: "So what?"

"So I quit," Hilary decided.

She stood up behind the desk with a surge of impatience, leaning forward a little so that the light sheened golden off her burnished hair. "You can't pull a cross on us. You haven't anything on us anyway. Return the menagerie, and you get your fee."

Hilary shook his head. "I want the real dope on them."

The woman flared: "They're ours and Dana Genova stole them from Dwight! She worked as secretary for a month and skipped out with them, and we couldn't find her, so we hired you."

"Case of dog eat dog, eh?"

DWIGHT BRENNAN stirred his big frame behind the woman. His laugh was easy, assured. "Now, Mr. Putnam, there is no need to be disturbed. I assure you, your case is strictly legitimate, no matter what you think of our private enterprises."

Hilary smoothed his hat in his lap. "I don't work for swindlers."

Muriel Gleason blurted: "He's got the menagerie, Dec. You heard him."

She glared at Hilary, her eyes venomous.

Brennan rubbed his hands in a dry wash. "I heard him. You recovered it from the Genova girl?"

"I found it," Hilary nodded. He paused and leaned back in the chair. "But the little beasts have a corpse with them. That wasn't in the contract."

The joviality left Brennan's red face as though swiped off with an eraser. He scowled sharply, observed Hilary with bright eyes. Muriel bawled out a startled curse.

Brennan said softly: "Who was it?"

Hilary shrugged. "A man named John Cuvri. An art collector. He's dead, murdered—and I found the carvings sprinkled all over him. I found him in my bed, and Dana Genova next door. She had been slugged."

"She must have done it," Brennan mused.

"Yeah. And then rapped herself. Oh, yeah."

"Well—"

Hilary leaned forward. "I want the real story behind those carvings you claim she stole. I want to know where John Cuvri fits in."

Brennan snarled: "I wish I knew myself!"

Shrugging, Hilary said: "That fancy yarn about Dana Genova just doesn't go down, Brennan. I've met the girl. It don't go down with that dead guy hanging around. In my bed, too. And I've met the Genova girl. You're too damned interested in jailing her."

"That's none of your affair."

"Yes, it is." Hilary put on his hat. "I like her. She's real people. So—I'll be going, now."

Big Dwight Brennan suddenly had a gun in his hand, a large Colt .45 that shone silvery in the pale blue light. His face was glittery with perspiration.

"First—the carvings. I want them."

Hilary looked blank for a moment. He didn't seem to see the gun. Muriel opened her mouth and shut it, twice in succession, and then she grinned.

"Take him, Dee," she said throatily.

Hilary's lean frame uncoiled like a set of springs suddenly gone haywire. He reached out a long arm, crooked an elbow, and wrapped his hand around Muriel Gleason's middle. The girl yelled, cursed, and kicked frantically. He lifted her from the floor in a swift

flow of movement, and with almost the same motion he advanced toward the man with the gun.

Muriel screamed: "Don't shoot now, Dee! For God's sake—"

Dwight Brennan hesitated a fraction of a second. Hilary Putnam closed the gap between them with a long stride and his free hand lashed out over the girl's bright-blond head in a bee-line for Brennan's big jaw. His knuckles spattered crunchingly over the man's mouth. His fist came away smeared with blood.

Brennan staggered backward, knocking his spine on the edge of the glass-topped desk. The Colt .45 slid from his hand and thudded heavily to the pale green rug.

From a doorway a second gun roared deafeningly. A bullet fanned the air above Hilary's hat. Pud Caster stood in the entrance to the room, his pear-shaped face pasty, his pin-point eyes goggly. He leveled his smoking gun at Hilary again, careless of Muriel.

The girl raised long-nailed fingers to claw at Hilary's face. Cursing, he swept her up once more, a bundle of lashing fury—and heaved her with all his strength at the fat man in the doorway.

Her flying body struck the gunman, warped around him. Both the fat man and girl went down in a heap. Hilary allowed himself a swift grin at the spectacle and then dived for the doorway. Pud Caster fired from the floor. The head of a shimmery statue of Venus disappeared in a puff of plaster dust, and then Hilary yanked open the front door and cleared the wide porch with a single graceful leap.

A bullet clipped through the brush after him. Hilary spanned the oval lawn of Dresham place, moving at a swift rangy trot, until he ducked out of the flood of cold silver moonlight and reached the main highway.

His cab was still there. The driver saw him coming, his face a rocky white patch in the gloom, and got the door open for him.

The lurch of the machine as it leaped away from the curb threw Hilary back against the leather seat cushions. He stifled an annoyed curse and patted the penciled red streaks of blood on his cheek, where Muriel Gleason's claws had reached him.

IT was past eleven when Hilary dismissed his cab and swung into a drugstore. He had the precious shoe-box tucked under his arm. Sliding into a vacant phone booth, he fished a nickel out of his pocket and used it to dial the number of his living-quarters in the Sherwood Hotel.

He listened to the distant phone burr three times before a hesitant, feminine voice said:

"Yes?"

Dismayed, Hilary sat silent for a moment.

"Yes?" the voice repeated.

"Dana," he ventured.

"Oh. It's you. I—I'm here at your place."

He said gravely: "Obviously. I'm glad of it."

"There is a man here." Dana Genova gave a little laugh, a high false note that belied the huskiness of fear in her voice.

"He won't hurt you," Hilary assured her. "Bonny's my assistant."

"I know he—he won't hurt me. Will you please come quickly?"

"That's the second time you called me," Hilary said. "Have you got another corpse for me?"

But the phone was dead.

The lobby of the Sherwood was deserted, a stretch of dim furniture tidied up for the night. The clerk at the PBX switchboard looked bored, sitting asleep with his eyes open. He looked right through Hilary without seeing him.

The whine of the self-operating elevator as it took him up to his top-floor flat played a sympathetic tune on Hilary's nerves, set them vibrating. The studied slowness of the automatic mechanism as the door unfolded before him, and the hushed silence of the softly lighted corridor gave him a fleeting impression of coming catastrophe, if not actual danger. One wall of the corridor was lined with rectangular windows, like an enclosed ship's deck. The windows opened on a terrace with potted palms and a tiny pond bathed in liquid moonlight. The city was a flashing carpet of jewels on velvet, stretching limitlessly beyond the roof edge.

Scowling, Hilary reached his door and pulled out his key. Reconsidering, he rang the bell.

Dana Genova's voice came, muffled:

"Come in, please."

The door was unlocked. Hilary paused on the threshold, his dark eyes suddenly shocked. The tiny foyer had two exits, one into the dark room that was fitted out as an office, the other into his living room. The foyer was high-ceilinged, circular-walled, so that it resembled nothing more than the inside of a fawn-tinted cylinder.

Sprawled on the emerald carpet in the center of the circle was the crumpled body of a man. The high ceiling light made a spotlight on awkwardly spread arms and legs.

Breath eased from Hilary's lungs in an exhausted whisper. There were two bullet holes in the back of the man's pleated worsted coat. Thin rivulets of blood had crept hesitatingly over the man's body and coagulated before reaching the floor. A gun lay against the wall-moulding shining with blue highlights.

The dead man was Bonny—John Bonnywell.

Hilary stood still for a long minute, with no other sound than the whir of an electric clock in the next room. His dark eyes were inscrutable as they silently roved over the body of his assistant.

A movement in the doorway lifted his glance to Dana Genova. The tall, dark-haired girl was very white. Her shoulders shook with an inward shudder.

"I—I found him like this," she whispered. Her voice trembled a little. "Please believe me. I don't know who he is."

"He worked for me," said Hilary. His voice cracked hoarsely. "For four years. He worshipped me."

HE walked around the dead man into the living room, into the glow of a cozy bridge lamp shining on heavy masculine furniture. The walls were lined with books from ceiling to floor. His face was dead white.

"Believe me," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault if murder plays tag with you," he sighed. "How long have you been here, Dana?"

"I came as soon as I got some sense. I rode around in a cab after I escaped from Stowe-Conklin, and then I decided that you were the only one who could help me, after all."

His voice went flat. "Yeah, I'll help you."

She said pitifully: "Please don't talk like that, Hilary."

"Bonny was a good guy. He took what was meant for me."

"I don't understand."

"Somebody was waiting here for me to come home. I let Bonny take my place here. When he walked in, he was killed. The murderer didn't wait to find out if it was me."

"But—but why?"

"He didn't want me to talk any more with you." Hilary looked dully at the girl. "You'll have to tell me the truth now. The whole story."

"I will. Oh, I want to!"

"And I'll believe you," he promised grimly. "And someone may die because of what you say. So don't kid me." He paused. "First—who was John Cuvri?"

She looked away to the foyer door and wetted her red lips. Her gray eyes seemed to run away from him with frightened horror. Hilary got up silently and closed the foyer door, then walked across the room and poured Scotch from a pinch-bottle into silver filigreed tumblers. He handed one to her.

"Drink up and answer me," he said brittlely.

She sipped a little and put down the glass. "John Cuvri was a big antique collector, as I told you. He specialized in ancient Chinese art."

"Was he going to buy the menagerie from Brennan?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I think so."

Hilary took the shoe-box and spilled the jade, ivory and lapis-lazuli carvings of monkeys, tigers, elephants and dragons into her lap. "This the menagerie? All of it?"

She nodded absently, touching one of the tiny figures. "Yes, these are the ones I recovered from Brennan. They were taken from me to—plant on Cuvri's body and frame me."

He leaned sharply forward. "And you stole them from Brennan?"

"I thought they were my set," she explained huskily.

"Then there are *two* menageries!"

"Yes. These are worthless. I tried to recover the set that really belonged to me, and in the dark I made a mistake. I took the duplicate set that Brennan had made: If the original carvings belong to anybody in this world, they belong to

me. They're Chinese antiques, and they are almost priceless, dating back to the Han dynasty—the time when Buddhism was introduced in China, you know. My father had gained possession of them as a reward for some service to a mandarin while in China, years ago. The collection legally belonged to him.

"He never fully realized their value. I've always had the little figures, but I never considered them worth much, either. I was working for Dwight Brennan until a few days ago—I worked a month, altogether—and I didn't realize his art business was shady in any way. I told Brennan about my carvings and showed him the collection. He borrowed it from me in order to show some collectors, with a view to selling it for me. So he said, anyway.

"But I learned that he was planning to swindle John Cuvri, and I tried to get my property back. Brennan wouldn't return it. He had a counterfeit set of carvings made from the originals, and he planned to palm them off on Cuvri by first showing the real ones and substituting the duplicates after the sale. When I tried to get my statuettes back, Brennan just laughed at me. He wouldn't return them."

Hilary said gently: "Why didn't you go to the police about it?"

The girl moved her shoulders, examined her fingertips interestedly. "What good would that do? I found them in my father's trunk. They weren't mentioned in his will. Their value wasn't appreciated; he considered them as curios, that's all. Possession is nine-tenths of the law in a case like this, isn't it?"

Hilary frowned at the foyer door, picked up a dragon and felt its ridged back.

DANA smiled weakly. "When Brennan discharged me and told me to stop my so-called silly claims, I went back to the house the next night—five nights ago, it was—and burgled the house on Dresham Road. But in the dark I got the counterfeits. I suppose Brennan still has the real ones."

Hilary sat leaned forward. He shook his head.

"I don't know. There are a lot of questions I have no answer to. There is no sense to John Cuvri's death over

a valueless set of carvings. And Brennan wouldn't have tried to put through the deal without finding you and the duplicates first. And the risk of my finding out the truth of the case is puzzling. Why should Brennan have hired me?" Hilary paused, breathed through his nose with annoyance. "Now that we've both escaped the frame—temporarily, anyway—we're equally dangerous to Brennan. Probably I was hired to be the fall-guy with you. We're both paties."

"And your assistant—that man—" Dana began hesitantly.

Hilary looked at the girl. "Let's go get the real menagerie for you," he said suddenly. "We'll go see Hank Meers."

From the doorway, Hank Meers said: "Don't bother."

Hilary got up from the couch with a swift lunge, then stood very still. His black eyes narrowed at the big man who lounged in the foyer doorway. Behind Hank Meers was the small, trim figure of Muriel Gleason. The couple stood between Hilary and Bonny's crumpled body on the green rug. Both the man and the girl had long-barreled revolvers in their hands.

Meers' sullen brown eyes were hooded, vicious. Muriel's lips sagged at one corner where a frantic nerve tugged at her scarlet mouth. Seeing them together, Hilary's smile went off-balance again.

He said softly: "It grows clearer already."

The smile didn't quite reach his eyes. They flicked to the girl on the lounge. Dana Genova sat forward, her hands clasped in her lap over the many-colored carved animals. Her eyes were very wide, very gray.

Meers said slowly, rolling each word with satisfaction:

"You're both under arrest, for knifing John Cuvri. And I guess you'll stand the rap for the gent in the foyer, too."

Hilary said flatly: "I've got the whole set-up now. Cuvri was the mooch, the sucker. Meers' part was to play bird-dog, spotting the guys Muriel and Brennan planned to heel. You're pretty good at double-crossing, too."

"Versatile," said Meers, grinning. "That's me."

The gun in Muriel Gleason's hand

swiveled from Hilary to Dana Genova, and the raven-haired girl settled back on the lounge with a helpless sigh.

Meers said thickly: "I'll just blast you, copper."

The gun in his hand coughed, ejected flame and sound at the moment he spoke. The man laughed with his lips pulled back tight against his teeth. Something struck Hilary like the flat side of a board, wielded with incredible strength, and a gorgeous blossom of red bloomed before his eyes. He seemed to see in the center of it Dana Genova's horrified, anguished face, set among the orange stamens of the flower.

Then the blossom decomposed into hideous wriggling red worms that spiraled frantically away into blackness.

The red worms came back presently, to the accompaniment of a pounding noise that coagulated into thumping rhythm. Hilary cocked open one eye and the worms vanished under his eyelid; but the music remained, dimly muted by thick walls.

His hands were tied behind his back, his ankles fastened to his wrists to double him forward in a torturing arc. He rolled over and saw faint yellow light from a dust-encrusted window.

When he could make out the outlines of the place, he concluded that he was in a sort of wine cellar under an old house. He wasn't gagged, because he could have yelled until his lungs collapsed, and never been heard.

AFTER about five minutes he rolled over the floor to the nearest shelf of bottled liquor. He couldn't stand on his legs, bound as they were to his wrists, but he arched upward until his teeth hooked on the dusty neck of a wine bottle on the lowest shelf. He yanked backward and the bottle crashed on the concrete cellar floor. Cool wine flowed under his bound hands. Working with stiff fingers, he picked out a piece of broken glass and began to saw through the cords.

Fifteen minutes later, gasping for breath and soaked with perspiration, he was free. The cellar windows gave no difficulty, and led him into an alley. He staggered erect, pausing in the cool summer night to glance at his wrist-watch. One-thirty. He looked back at the house he had left and saw lights on the second

and third floors, heard music and riotous voices. He puckered his thin mouth into a soundless whistle.

In a nearby subway station lavatory he washed coagulated blood from the side of his head where Hank Meers' bullet had creased his scalp, and ran wet fingers through his rumpled yellow hair. He brushed dust from his clothing, straightened his tie.

He was whistling audibly and cheerfully when he bounded up the steps and squeezed the front doorbell of the house he had escaped from.

While he waited his eyes scanned the disreputable street. He was in a downtown section, near the river, stifling with sounds and smells that defied identification.

He raised his hands to punch the doorbell again when a tall blonde appeared. Music hit him with the force of a rising gale. The blonde weaved and had to lean against the door-jamb for support. Mascara stained her face with the remnants of drunken tears.

The girl giggled and spread her hand in an all-inclusive gesture.

"Hi, handsome. C'mon in and join the p-party." She cursed. "D-damn, I'm stuttering again. Anyway, you got some hair on your head, not like those other baldies."

Hilary smiled. "Whose party is it?"

"Hank's, silly! Hank Meers. Whose would it be?" She tugged at his arm, and he went inside far enough to heel the door shut behind him. "C'mon in," the girl insisted. "I'm Cleo—that's short for Cleopatra. I guess you're Anthony, huh?"

"Just call me Tony," he said. "Sometimes I'm called Hilary, too."

She said: "Hi, Tony."

The blonde steered him down a garishly lighted corridor and up a flight of worn steps with a bannister shiny-black from use. There were about two dozen assorted drunks upstairs in the apartment. The two front rooms had had the wall torn down at some time past and was now one large room. A hi-boy radio was the source of the tumping music Hilary had heard down in the cellar. The air was thick with the fumes of whiskey, cigarettes, and loud talk.

No one paid any attention to Hilary or the blonde. Cleo slid a plump arm around his shoulder, said imperatively:

"Dance."

They swung off through the motley crowd.

"Where's Hank?" he asked.

"To hell with Hank, handsome," she giggled.

"But I've got to see him."

"What for?"

"It's business."

She pouted, said: "You're too glum. Not hilarious Hilary. Hee-hee."

"Hee-hee."

A high spot of red color appeared on the blonde's cheek. She wasn't as drunk as Hilary thought she was.

"To hell with you, Tony," she snapped, and she freed herself to swagger away through the couples dancing on the floor.

Hilary didn't look after her. His dark, somber eyes were fixed on a woman who threaded her way impatiently through the party crowd. Boyishly waved platinum hair, sea-green eyes, a small pinkly rouged mouth—Muriel Gleason!

HILARY'S lopsided smile broadened to a grin. He lit a cigarette and leaned back against the wall. He counted slowly up to ten. When Muriel vanished through thick velvet curtains, he strolled after her. He found himself in a dimly lit bedroom, unoccupied, and crossed swiftly to the next door into a yellow-enameled kitchen.

Muriel was bending over the porcelain icebox. Hilary moved soundlessly behind her, caught her arm and quickly twisted it up behind her back.

She gasped, "Oh-ooo!" and tried to twist around to glimpse his face.

Hilary chuckled softly. "Don't wriggle, Muriel, or you'll be swinging a broken flipper."

"You!"

He tightened the pressure momentarily on her trapped arm. "It's Hilary Putnam, remember? And you're taking me upstairs to Hank Meers."

"I'll never—" She writhed, sucked air with pain, and suddenly went limp, offering no resistance.

"That's better," Hilary breathed. "Lean on, darling."

There was a small staircase at the end of the hall, across from the kitchen. Muriel moved forward with Hilary close behind, holding her arm. She was cursing softly under her breath—a reaction

that made Hilary plaster a grin over his thin face.

At the top of the steps the crude furnishings melted abruptly from the gaudy to the comfortably refined. A silver-gray corridor rug led down a softly lighted hall to the first of three doors opening into the one apartment. Light made a golden bar across the rug opposite the third door. Hilary pushed the straining girl ahead of him, tested the first door with his free hand and opened it.

There were thin gauzy curtains across the darkened room that permitted a tableau glimpse into the lighted room. Dana Genova huddled in a squat chair, her gray eyes wide and staring at Hank Meers. She had a new bruise on her jaw; the marks of fingers on her throat. Yet her eyes were defiant. The big man was leaning over her, laughing softly to himself as though amused over a tremendous joke that he shared with himself.

"Have a drink, baby," he said with throaty urgency.

"Never mind the drink," Hilary rapped.

Muriel Gleason exploded into tiger-like activity in his arms, screaming: "Hank, look out!"

Hilary released the blonde's arm and shoved her, staggering crazily, through the gauze curtains into the room. She flew toward Hank Meers. The man's mouth opened stupidly, astonishment convulsing his red face. Then the blonde's body catapulted into him and the drink shot from his hand to spatter against the wall with a tinkle of broken glass.

Hilary followed the girl into the room. It was small, square, with two windows opening on an alley with a blank red wall facing them. Besides the chair that Dana Genova huddled in, there was a low-slung lounge, an odd chair of imitation Spanish wood, a desk with a small mahogany box on it, and an inlaid tray-table with two pairs of handcuffs dangling over the edge, evidently to relieve Meers' pockets.

Meers yelled at the impact with Muriel's body and crashed back against the wall after his spilled drink. Hilary crossed the room with two leaps and closed strong fingers on the big man's collar.

"See how you like a little of this, lover!" he snapped.

He yanked the crooked hotel dick to his feet with a swift movement. He heard Dana Genova's gasp of relief, and out of the corner of his eye he saw her sit forward, her eyes alert.

Meers clawed at his hip, pulled out a gun.

Hilary swung hard. Blood spurted over his clenched fist, and the gun in Meers' hand waved in a wild arc, finally crashing down on Hilary's shoulder.

Blood ran in a thick river over Meers' crushed mouth, sliding redly over his lips and chin. The big man's crescent eyes were blank and staring; he held the gun with limp fingers. Then he took a sudden lurching step backward, eyeing Hilary, and touched his shoulders to the wall. He began to slide slowly down, until his knees suddenly buckled and he pitched face-forward on the buff-colored rug.

Hilary scooped up the gun and said quietly: "Hold it, Muriel."

The blonde was panting, leaning against the desk, holding her arm.

Dana said: "Hilary, you—"

Hilary swiveled, his black eyes hooded, alert. Dana smiled a little wanly.

Dwight Brennan's voice came: "Stay just like that. All of you."

BRENNAN and Pud Caster stood in the doorway. Both men had guns in their hands, and their eyes begged Hilary to give them an excuse to use them. So Hilary stood quite still. He kept his hands at his sides, his black eyes faintly amused as he noted Brennan's swollen, bruised mouth. There were virulent red scratches on Pud Caster's face.

Brennan said softly: "What goes on here?" His eyes jerked to Meers, just crawling to his feet, and then to Muriel Gleason's wild appearance.

"Well?" he demanded. "How did these two get here?"

Muriel's pink tongue darted out to wet her lips. "Hank and I were just—"

"Hank and you!" Brennan's voice was laced with bitterness.

Pud Caster rumbled wisely: "I always told you, boss. Didn't I?"

"Shut up!"

Hilary moved carefully to Dana Genova's side. He flicked a spot of dust off her shoulder with a gesture that was at once protective and tenderly possessive. She leaned a little toward him and

nodded almost imperceptibly to the mahogany box that stood on the desk.

Hilary said swiftly: "What's—"
And then he smiled softly.

Brennan turned to him. "You tell it, mister."

Hilary said: "You won't like to hear it."

"Just tell it."

Hilary shrugged. "You've been double-crossed all around, Brennan."

"Yeah?"

"No, that's a lie!" Muriel gasped.

"Go ahead," Brennan insisted. He didn't look at the little platinum blonde. The gun in his big fist adequately covered them all. His eyes were pained, troubled.

"It goes like this," said Hilary. "The original menagerie belonged to Dana. You can't deny it—not to me. You planned to swindle her out of it. You had a counterfeit set made to work the old switch game on John Cuvri, the wealthy antique collector. But Dana Genova stole your fake set. That was all she got—the fakes. But you, Brennan, found the originals were missing, too! And that's why you hired me. You thought Dana had taken both sets!"

"That's right," Brennan said. "Both sets were taken."

"You and Muriel and Pud Caster and Hank Meers were all partners in your swell little swindling syndicate. Hank Meers, with his job as hotel dick at the Stowe-Conklin, played bird-dog for you, spotting the mooches. He found Miss Genova as soon as I did. And he knew she had *only* the duplicate collection.

Brennan snapped: "How did he know that?"

"Because he and Muriel had taken advantage of Dana's attempt at burglary to snatch the original set from you. It was a double-cross and Dana was to take the rap. Hank and Muriel planned to swing Cuvri alone, without you. You and Pud Caster were to be told to take a merry whistle up an alley."

Pud Caster muttered: "Like I told you, boss. I always told you."

"Keep quiet," Brennan rasped. His eyes glittered redly, jerked away from Hilary to settle speculatively on Muriel, lingering on her heaving breasts, her parted lips. "Go on, Putnam."

Hilary moved away from Dana to the tray-table. He fingered the handcuffs

that lay on the polished surface.

"Meers and Muriel got the fakes from Dana's room while I was out," he said softly. "It was easy for Meers, since he had the master key by virtue of being the house-cat. Then he and Muriel called John Cuvri in to try to sell him the fake set by themselves. Cuvri recognized the carvings as counterfeit, refused to take excuses, and raised a squawk. Muriel stuck the knife into him."

The blonde screamed: "That's a lie! I didn't! It was Hank—"

She stopped and turned very pale. She didn't look at Brennan.

Meers rasped hoarsely: "You damn little fool! Anyway, you done it, not me—like he says."

HILARY'S voice flowed impassively over the interruption, his eyes meeting Brennan's. "Hank and Muriel framed me with John Cuvri's body because you had hired me to find the *real* set of carvings. They knew that once I contacted Dana and found out that she had only the duplicates, I'd let you know. And then you'd be wised up to the fact that Dana hadn't stolen the originals, that Meers and Muriel had them. So they tried to frame me and stop my work on the case. They parked Cuvri's corpse in my bed; and they left the fake set of carvings scattered around to inermine Dana.

"When Meers lost out in his attempt to surprise me, after I hid Cuvri's body, he went after me and thought he trailed me to my flat. Instead he followed my assistant, John Bonnywell. Meers killed him without even making sure of his identity. He just shot at whoever answered the door and ran."

Meers swiped viciously at the thick blood on his chin. His eyes were tortured with pain from his broken nose.

He snarled: "Yeah, and I'll kill you, too!"

Brennan spoke softly. "No. You won't kill anybody. Not if Putnam can prove his story. Not if you've been double-crossing me."

Hilary pointed at the desk.

"All the proof you need is to find the original carvings in Meers' possession. Right?"

"Yes."

Hilary said: "Then look in the box

on the desk."

Muriel gasped, "No!" and Brennan turned white. Meers cursed. Brennan crossed the room to the desk, flipped back the lid of the mahogany box. He held up two or three of the exquisite little carvings.

"These are the real ones, all right," he said hoarsely. Sweat stood out on his forehead in great glittery beads.

Muriel screamed: "Dee, you know I've been true—!"

Pud Caster said solemnly: "If you ask me, boss, the snooper is all right. I been telling you all along that the fancy frill was two-timin' you."

Horror lurked in the blonde's green eyes.

"Dee, I swear—"

"Shut up." Brennan's voice was heavy with exhaustion. "For God's sake, shut up. The snooper knows too much, anyway. I'll deal with him and the girl first, then I'll fix you and that cheap louse, Meers. I'll fix the lot of you."

Hilary leaned back against the tray-table, his fingers still toying with the loose set of handcuffs. His yellow hair was looped in strands over his forehead. The lopsided grin didn't change as Pud Caster raised a gun to point at him. Pressure crept insidiously along all his muscles; his nerves became white-hot wires of tension.

Through the crawling silence came the sound of Dana's quick breathing. He felt the rippling warmth of her body as she slid into place beside him. Her slim hand crept into his, cold and trembling.

She whispered: "I won't get a chance to properly thank you for what you tried to do for me, Hilary—"

Pud Caster's fat lips jerked, slewed out of line. He leveled the gun at Hilary, when the floor in the hall creaked to the tread of weaving feet. Muriel lifted her head a little. Brennan muttered something unintelligible, then:

"Hold it."

The door banged open and the girl named Cleo stood there, breathing deeply, hips insolently uneven. Her face was tear-stained, her lip-rouge interestingly smeared. She lurched blindly into the room and wept:

"Where's my handsome Tony? I'm gonna show him!" She grinned in silly fashion and swerved toward Hilary. "Gonna make you like me, Tony!"

Hilary said, "Look out, now. Please." "Gonna make you like me," she insisted.

Hilary looked over her shoulder, saw Pud Caster's white, bulbous face. The gun gleamed in his hand, pudgy knuckles went slowly white. Hilary swung his hand out from behind him and the steel handcuffs left the tray-table to slide from his fingertips in a glittering, flashing arc. The metal links clanged loudly against the gun in Pud Caster's hand.

Caster staggered, cursing. Hilary left his feet in a dive that took him across the room. His shoulders crashed into the fat gunman's knees and Caster went down with a plaintive yell of surprise, cut off by the dull thump of his head as it struck an edge of the chair. The gunman quivered, lay still. Hilary started to get up, then froze as a gun crashed out bitterly.

IT was Brennan's revolver. The big man's red face was twisted curiously, his eyes cold. Muriel Gleason got the bullet. It slogged into her with an audible after-sound, and a red carnation of blood blossomed on her creamy skin. She staggered, went half around, her green eyes wide with incredible hurt.

"Dee, you shouldn't—"

Hank Meers made an animal noise and caught the girl as she started a slow spiral to the floor. The hotel dick's face was shiny with sweat, messy with blood. His voice was strained and rasping as he looked at Brennan.

"You killed her," he croaked. "Damn you, she's dead!"

His hand flashed for his coat pocket and came out with a second revolver. It roared flame at Brennan. The bullet smashed a Japanese print that hung on the wall. The glass shattered with a musical tinkle, and then Brennan's gun spoke twice, pumping vengeful lead into Meers' big, meaty body.

The roar of the revolver was deafening, blasting back from the walls in reverberating echoes. Hilary moved off the motionless Pud Caster and watched Hank drop his gun, take a step toward Brennan. His face convulsed. He clutched at his middle and stood doubled over for a long moment, staring at the floor, his fingers digging at his stomach. When he fell, he fell stiffly, head-first to the floor.

Hilary reached for Pud Caster's gun. The fat man was coming to, stirring spasmodically. Hilary reversed the gun and slashed at the man's head. Pud Caster sneezed violently, like a great kitten, and stopped wriggling.

Slowly Hilary climbed to his feet, gun in hand. He pointed it at Dwight Brennan. The red-faced man stood frozen. He seemed unaware of Hilary, his eyes fixed blankly on Muriel's little body as it lay on the floor beside Meers.

"Drop your gun, Brennan," Hilary invited softly.

The gun slid from Brennan's fingers.

There was a howling silence in the crawling gunsmoke, suddenly broken by Cleo's high-pitched, hysterical laughter. The tall blonde stood with hands flat on her hips, her head thrown back, and laughed crazily, in long spine-chilling ripples.

Hilary glanced swiftly at Dana. She was shuddering, but her eyes were normal. He scooped up Brennan's gun and thrust it into Dana's cold hand.

"Keep it trained on Brennan. He'll snap out of it soon. If he makes a phony move, plug him."

Dana wetted her red lips, nodded, and whispered: "Yes, Hilary."

Then he walked solidly across the room toward the hysterical Cleo. He grabbed the laughing blonde by the shoulders, shook her so that her whole body trembled loosely.

"Can it!" he snapped. "Put it down the sink."

The blonde kept laughing.

Hilary slapped her, hard. Her head snapped back. Her laughter stopped with

the spat of his fingers on her cheek. She shivered, trembled like a leaf, and stood looking at him as he dug hard fingers into her shoulders.

His voice was gentle as he turned her around, facing the door. "Call the cops. Snap out of it, you understand? Call the cops and tell 'em what's happened."

He shoved the blonde from the room. Returning to Dwight Brennan, he scooped up the handcuffs he had thrown at Pud Caster and snapped one ring on Brennan's wrist, yanking the man to the radiator. He cuffed him solidly to the iron pipe.

Then he turned back to Dana Genova. The girl watched him with brightness in her gray eyes and a trembling gratitude on her red lips.

After a moment Hilary put the mahogany box on the lounge, opened it, and picked up the little jade and ivory carvings.

He sounded awkward, said: "This the real menagerie?"

She nodded, said in a tiny voice: "I—I hate them. All this—this misery." Her eyes were shiny with incipient tears. "I—I don't want them."

Hilary breathed through his nose, annoyed. "What you need is a good job of reforming, young lady."

She flared: "I—I can't help it. Just because I'm grateful—" She stopped suddenly. Her voice went very interested, very soft. "Reform me, Hilary? In what way?"

He leaned forward, looking at her, then he tilted up her chin and smiled his crooked, wistful smile.

"Well, let me show you," he said.



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This man Reming was no ordinary murderer: he thought out every last detail, even concealed the corpse in a dense hammock where it could never possibly be found. The only trouble was . . .



THE CORPSE CAME BACK

By **LEO
STALNAKER**

DEXTER REMING, suddenly awakened from half-conscious sleep by the muffled scuffling of cautious feet in the adjoining room, became strangely aware that he must kill Poe at once, and not wait until morning as he had so carefully planned. He lifted his blunt, blond head from his pillow, stared craftily for a brief moment at the thin streak of yellow light on the floor beneath the door. He flung back the blanket, got up and dressed.

Reming listened again, to make sure. Yes; Poe was packing his things, moving with hurried, stealthy step. Leaving. Poe had perhaps guessed Reming's sinister design, and was slipping out of the trap. Reming's hard mouth tightened and became lipless in the darkness. A few more minutes and his bird would have flown.

Reming waited until the soft opening

and closing of a door told him that Poe had left his sleeping quarters and was now in the front room, ready to go out. Then Reming opened his own door, strode into the living-room dimly lighted by the floor lamp Poe had just switched on. Poe dropped his packs of camping equipment, turned and stared in wordless surprise.

"Why you leaving so early, Poe?" queried Reming in feigned astonishment. "Thought you said before we went to bed that you'd leave at sun-up." Reming continued to advance, slowly, tentatively, holding himself in tense readiness for the unexpected.

Poe confronted him, his deep-set eyes gravely apprehensive, his lean face taut and chalky in the half-light. "Just thought I'd get an early start, Reming," he answered hollowly, speaking with obvious effort. He simulated a smile that became a sickly grin on slack lips. "Decided to do a little fishing at daylight, and it's exactly ten miles from my wharf here on Orange Lake across the lake, up the narrows, and over to my favorite spot on Crooked Lake. So I'll need all my time. I was intending to leave a note for you saying I'd left earlier than I'd expected, but I'd be back in a couple of days and we could talk then about—"

"Oh, that's all right, Poe," cut in Reming suavely. He allowed himself to smile, loosely. His right hand in his trousers pocket closed over a length of cloth twisted into a rope. He was almost near enough now to thwart any surprise move Poe might make.

Poe was lean, frail, and Reming was a big man, athletic, with the short, thick neck and blunt head of a wrestler and shoulders of enormous breadth. "Yes; that's all right, Poe," Reming repeated. "Like I said before we went to bed, I just came here to visit you a day or two. Of course I did want to talk with you about the estate, but that can wait. Go ahead on your camping trip and enjoy yourself." His slow words and ingratiating smile apparently deceived Poe.

Poe bent his lean frame to pick up his packs. "Okay, Reming. See you in a day or two—"

"Bet there's good fishing up there on Crooked Lake," broke in Reming, musingly. He carefully held himself in check. There was a bit of information he must have before he did away with Poe. Reming was an adroit and precise man in matters of this sort. "By the way, Poe, have you ever learned to swim?" A nervous tension now came into Reming's broad face and tightened it into bleak, twisted lines as he waited for Poe's answer.

Poe, still gathering his packs together, jerked his bowed head negatively. "Nope; but I get along—"

That was all Reming needed. His right hand streaked out of his trousers pocket and a loop of twisted cloth flipped over Poe's head, settled about his thin neck, cut short his words. Reming sprang with the agility of a savage jungle beast upon Poe's bent form, and twisted tight the noose. Poe's lean body thudded to the floor under Reming's huge bulk. Poe's spindly legs threshed the air, pounded the rug, and his fingers clawed futilely at the cloth rope.

WHEN the struggle ceased, Reming quickly removed the noose and felt Poe's pulse. He nodded in grim satisfaction, assured himself the strangling process had been halted at exactly the right time. He carried the limp body to the bathroom, placed it face downward in the tub and turned on the water. Poe's breathing was weak, but amply sufficient for Reming's purpose. When the body would be found, two days later, in the lake, there would be water in the lungs. That would be a very important fact.

Presently, Reming carried the lifeless body, flung over his broad shoulder, the short distance from the house to the little wharf at the lake shore, and placed it in Poe's boat.

The Florida night was silent and lightless; the sky hazy, gauze-shrouded. The summer moon, behind ragged clouds in the west, afforded a pale, leprous illumination sufficient to enable him to see short distances, without the likelihood of being seen.

He returned to the house, gathered up Poe's packs, lugged them to the wharf, placed them also in the boat. Then Reming untied another boat at the wharf and fastened it to the stern of Poe's boat,

working rapidly but very cautiously in the blackness. He loosed Poe's boat, settled his bulky frame on the center seat, seized the oars, pulled out into the lake with gloved hands. The empty boat followed in his curving wake.

Faint gray streaks above the eastern horizon told that he did not have time to row the body up through the narrows into Crooked Lake ten miles away as he would have liked to do, but he must find a hiding place for the corpse in the nearby jungle growth until the next night.

Furthermore he was a stranger in this locality, and might get lost. During the day he must learn the way up through the narrows, and with the coming of night again he would take Poe's boat containing the body and packs, row it up through the narrows into Crooked Lake, and overturn the boat.

Poe's body would be found, no marks of violence on it, water in the lungs. Several persons knew Poe had intended making this camping trip to Crooked Lake. Everybody knew he couldn't swim. His packs would be taken from the lake, and there would be no fingerprints other than Poe's upon Poe's belongings, for Poe had done his own packing. Reming had shrewdly waited and let Poe attend to all that.

There would be the usual coroner's inquest, and the inevitable verdict "Accidental death from drowning." A bubbling chuckle welled up in Reming's short, thick neck as he pulled on the oars.

He rowed parallel to the shore and entered a vine-hung lagoon. The pale moon now shone diffusely through rifts in the ragged clouds and shed a brighter glow—an illumination he desperately needed now in the thick of the jungle growth. He pushed branches and dense tropic greenery aside, penetrated deeper into the matted tangle, slowly navigated black waterways studded with innumerable cypress trees and overhung with Spanish moss.

Finally he ceased his labor, nosed Poe's boat into a jungle pocket and tied the bow rope around a cypress on a narrow peninsula, or island perhaps, no great distance from the wharf but well concealed. So perfectly concealed was this spot that Reming became apprehensive that he might not be able to find his way back here the next night. He

noted the location studiously.

For a long moment he sat silent, and listened. No sound save the sinister, eerie sigh of the night wind in the cypress boughs above him. Then he pulled up the empty boat, clambered in, and negotiated the intricate waterways back to the open lake. When he reached the wharf the eastern horizon was taking vague form in the dim distance, but the filmy, diaphanous grayness of the night still deepened into black along the lake front and obscured his movements. He tied up the boat exactly as he had found it, returned to Poe's house, entered and went to bed.

HE was awakened from sound sleep by heavy pounding on the bedroom door. He bolted upright, and struggled to set his thinking faculties at work. The bright Florida sun was high in the sky and sending warm rays slanting through his window to yellow on the rug.

"Hey!" bellowed a lusty voice beyond the door. "Wake up in there."

Someone was in the house! Then Reming heard other voices in the room beyond, muttering in unintelligible conversation. "Okay," called Reming, reaching for his clothes. "I'm coming. Wait a minute." He was a bit confused.

In the living room he found three men waiting. Strangers. They eyed him inquisitively. He got the impression there was something bulging at the hip of each, under their light summer coats.

"Are you Reming?" inquired one of the trio—a fat slug of a man, equally as bull-necked as Reming himself.

"I am," answered Reming politely.

"Poe's cousin, eh?" went on the squabby man, pushing back a broad-brimmed, felt hat, leaving exposed a wide expanse of brown forehead deeply seamed by weather wrinkles. "You came here yesterday to visit your cousin, didn't you?"

Reming nodded. "That's right." His even gaze shifted to the others and he silently quizzed them and speculated upon the probable reason for the trio's visit here to Poe's house.

"I'm Sheriff Banks."

This significant remark, quick and blunt, from the short, fat man jerked Reming's attention instantly back to the corpulent speaker, and left Reming strangely apprehensive. Sheriff Banks'

queer, opaque, colorless eyes told exactly nothing.

"Do you know anything about Poe?" inquired Sheriff Banks. "Where is he?"

So that was it. Only looking for Poe. Just wanted to talk with him, maybe. Reming kept his voice even and answered without obvious effort. "Poe left before day this morning. Went on a fishing trip over on some lake." No use to give them too much information. "Said he'd likely be back tomorrow." Reming started to ask if anything was wrong, but quickly checked himself, recalling that most criminals get trapped because they talk too much.

"We came to look up Poe," went on Sheriff Banks' slow drawl. "He had an appointment with me at nine o'clock to straighten out a little tax lien matter."

Nine o'clock! Reming glanced at the clock on the mantel. Almost eleven! He had certainly slept.

"When he didn't show up," added Sheriff Banks, "like he promised, naturally decided to look him up."

"Naturally," murmured Reming, for a moment tremendously relieved. "Sorry he's not here." Awkward. Why did Poe have to pick this particular morning for a date with the sheriff! Nasty coincidence.

Reming became conscious he was strangely tired. The sudden coming from sleeping to waking, and the unexpected questioning had definitely weakened him. He sank into an easy chair and stretched his taut limbs. Sheriff Banks frowned, made a vague gesture as though about to object, but never finished it. Queer. He shot a cold-eyed glance from Reming toward the front door, then in the direction of the windows. He seemed to be actually measuring distances, or contemplating angles. Reming laughed inwardly, but kept his broad face wholly expressionless. He had no intention of running away. He had better sense. This hick sheriff was evidently quite dumb, thought Reming.

SHERIFF BANKS turned abruptly, beckoned to his men, and strode out on the porch. The others followed. Reming, from where he sat in the deep, cushioned chair, could not see out front through the door or front windows. But he had no desire to look. If he did he'd perhaps get caught spying upon the offi-

cers' movements. He could afford to take it easy while they searched about the premises; he had the situation well in hand.

He leaned back and relaxed, but somehow he now experienced the feeling that he was being watched. He smiled, a mirthless, twisted smile.

On the table at his elbow was a telephone. He contemplated it, very thoughtfully. His hard eyes took on a shrewd glitter as a sudden thought was born and nursed in his scheming brain. He became convinced his right hand, as it rested near the telephone, could not be seen from the doors or windows. He studied Poe's telephone number written on the dial center. Then he slowly lifted the receiver from its prong to the table. As an old telephone workman in his earlier days, Reming could guess rather accurately just what number could be dialed on that telephone and cause it to ring when the receiver was hung back on the prong.

The little scheme that had come into Reming's mind should stop these officers from further snooping. He could hear Banks and his deputies conversing in low tones outside. They gave no indication of leaving soon, and prolonged prowling might reveal something. Reming was certain he had left everything in order about the house and dock, but there was always a chance something might be discovered if snooping continued.

He twirled the telephone dial three times, dialing a number, and hung up the receiver. The bell didn't ring. He tried again and was successful. The bell jangled. He waited, so the officers outside could hear it. The bell rang again, in the short, intermittent way common to automatic telephones.

Confident it had attracted the attention of the sheriff, Reming lifted the receiver to his ear. "Hello—Yes; this is Reming—That you, Poe?—Oh, you forgot about your appointment with the sheriff, eh?—Yes; I'll tell Sheriff Banks—Yes; I'll tell him. But wait a minute. Banks is—Hello—Hello!" Reming slowly pronged the receiver, conscious now that Banks and his men were at the front door taking it all in. "He hung up," muttered Reming.

Sheriff Banks strode in. "Reming, who was that?"

"Poe?" answered Reming easily. "He called to say he'd forgotten his appointment with you, and to leave word he'd see you tomorrow."

"Why didn't you let me talk to him? Didn't you tell him I was here?"

"I started to tell him, but he hung up."

"Where did he phone from?"

"He didn't say. Probably from one of the tourist camps over on Crooked Lake. Maybe from Smithville. It's not far from the lake, is it?"

Sheriff Banks didn't say. He shifted his colorless gaze from Reming to the front door and windows in that same calculating way again, as though estimating distances and angles. Then he took his stand directly in front of Reming. "Let's do a little reminiscing," he drawled. He shifted his short, heavy bulk ominously, and shot an oblique glance to Reming. "I like to reminisce."

He stared in tense silence at Reming, as though he had asked Reming a question. But he hadn't. Hadn't asked anything; he had merely made a simple statement, insignificant enough, and now seemed to be waiting for an answer. Silly. Reming waited, and said nothing.

"You don't like to reminisce," declared Banks reproachfully.

"I haven't said so," said Reming stiffly, thoroughly annoyed. Was this hick sheriff trying to kid him? "What's on your mind, Banks?"

"You're Poe's cousin," clipped Sheriff Banks, his tone brittle now. "You came here yesterday to visit him a few days, I'm told. You and Poe are the only heirs of a certain uncle who is thought to be dying in Chicago. If anything should happen to Poe, you'll inherit the entire estate of that rich, old uncle." He paused impressively, quite obviously to allow Reming to think that over twice.

"But, Sheriff," smiled Reming thinly, "nothing has happened to Poe."

"Then we'll reminisce some more," retorted Sheriff Banks, his voice low-pitched, insinuatingly soft. The two deputies sauntered forward, square-shouldered. Reming fidgeted, and sensed a foreboding of impending disaster. In utter puzzlement he listened as Banks' too-soft voice rambled on.

"Reming, you came here to visit Poe

for the sole purpose of killing your cousin, so you would be the only heir to your uncle's estate!"

THAT sudden, ice cold declaration sent a chill sweeping along Reming's spine. In desperation he saw those opaque, colorless eyes narrow and glint metallicly. He managed an indulging smile, feigned amusement. He slowly moved his head negatively, wordlessly.

"Reming, did you ever hear of a man drowning in a lake—his lungs filling with water—without getting in the water?"

Reming became instantly weak under a film of icy sweat. His numbed brain seemed unable to accept what his ears had heard. Then the quivering voice of reason assured him that this hick sheriff was merely guessing at something. These officers had absolutely nothing on him. They couldn't know the truth! Had no way of knowing. Poe's body was perfectly concealed in that matted jungle of cypress, moss, vine and palmetto.

"Reming, you're pretty much of a stranger in this locality. We woke you up before you had a chance to look around this morning. After you got up and came in here you've been standing or sitting where you couldn't see the lake front."

Reming listened in a half-daze. So that accounted for Sheriff Banks' measuring, calculating glances. But what was this all about? It didn't make sense.

"Get up, Reming!" snapped Banks. "Walk over to that window and take a look out front."

Reming, unable to move, sat numbly silent, gaping, wide-eyed. He caught himself listening intently to a soft, eerie sound coming from the lake—the sinister sighing of the wind in the cypress tops. Stark dread closed over Reming. Mechanically he rose. Somehow he knew he must obey Banks. He stalked forward, stiffly erect, on unwilling legs, to the window.

Sheriff Banks pointed toward the lake. "See what I found waiting for me when I arrived here this morning."

Reming's heart came into his mouth. What he saw out there galvanized and froze him. His wide, horror-filled eyes beheld Poe's boat with Poe's body and

packs in it, at the very lake edge. The boat was tied to a cypress tree, just as he had left it during the night. And it was the same cypress! Reming was definitely certain of that. The utter impossibility of it seemed to numb and contract his brain. Yet there it was. On the wharf close by were two men, one of whom seemed to be a doctor with a satchel. The landscape of the shore line seemed to have changed.

"You killed Poe last night, Reming," accused Sheriff Banks, his weather-browned face as grim and cold as gun metal, "and hid his body in that boat which you rowed some distance up the lake and tied to a tree in the cypress swamp."

Reming, his numbed brain whirling with conflicting thoughts, tried to shake off the stupor of dread. There remained one last straw. Poe was dead, but how could they prove he was the one who killed Poe? Some one else could have done it. No! He had tricked himself with that stupid telephone call!

He was trapped, and knew it! Sheriff Banks doubtless saw, and immediately understood, the look of determined resolve in Reming's wide eyes, for when Reming whirled and leaped savagely without warning, his right hand clutching a gun quickly snatched from a shoulder holster, the sheriff's knee came up, caught Reming in the groin. Reming doubled, and dropped, firing with spoiled aim as he went down.

A deputy sheriff flipped out a pair of handcuffs, snapped the steel links tight upon Reming's thick wrists. Two officers seized his arms, yanked Reming, groaning and breathing heavily, to his feet.

"That telephone call," nodded Sheriff Banks, sarcastically, "did you up. You thought you'd taken the corpse a good distance away and concealed it in a dense hammock where it'd never be found. But the trouble was, you're not familiar with this locality. What was a hidden spot last night was wide open spaces this morning. We have a few floating islands on this particular lake, and nothing would do you but tie that boat to a cypress on a floating island, and when the wind's course changed this morning the island drifted in this direction and the corpse came back!"

A QUIET CASE OF MURDER

By JAMES HALL

Author of "Crook in Florida," "The Crime Killer," etc.

The woman-blasted ego of a peeping-tom Casanova messed up the clues for jitter-nerved Joe Dill in that Manhattan murder maze!



Mary was struggling like a female wild-cat!

I WAS asleep in my roach-ridden third-floor apartment in one of those upper West Side rooming houses, and I was a jitter-nerved detective with nothing to do but sleep the sweet sleep of convalescence—when suddenly I wasn't asleep any more and I wasn't convalescing, either, any more.

What awakened me was the clatter of the cake-pans as they fell off the chair inside Mary Decker's door, next room. Maybe that sounds screwy to you—cake-pans falling off a chair at three a.m. in

the still of the night, but that's because you don't know Mary.

Mary was a manicurist, and one who made her keep holding guys' hands during business hours—not through being caressed by those hands *after* hours. The idea is, Mary was a moral girl as well as a pretty one. Sure, that's a rare combination in mad Manhattan, but the age of miracles *didn't* cease with Edison. When you've lived two months across the wall from a girl who lives in a three-dollar-a-week room, with never the sound

of a man's voice in that time, you can deduce two things: (a) That she's underpaid and (b) that she's no mud-kicker. I was fond of Mary. She had nice brown eyes and hair, pleasant features, and a figure that gave customers ideas, from what she'd told me.

Through August we'd got to talking to each other in the evenings, our doors being open to permit air to circulate. Sometimes she came into my room, sometimes I went into hers. Maybe we drank a little wine, maybe we went to a movie. I hadn't made a pass at her because, though I'm young and healthy and have the usual male instincts, she aroused my protective urge. She came from some whistle-stop up in New England and she was going to conquer the toughest town in America without going the way of all flesh. I had to admire the attitude. Maybe I'm sentimental.

So the cake-pans on the chair stemmed from her morality. She left the door ajar while she slept, for circulation from the window at the back of her little room. She put the pans on the chair, the theory being that if some fiend attempted to enter and play games, the clatter would wake her up and maybe me. Seems a guy had tried that once a year or so before, in another rooming-house, and she wasn't chancing it again.

I'd laughed at the idea, ribbed her about it.

I wasn't laughing now. There was the *crash!* of the pans, and here I was sitting up in bed at three a.m. of a sultry September night. My heart thumped, I jittered. My nerves were shot—because I'd been shot. I wasn't completely recovered from the slugs I'd absorbed three months before while giving the business to some payroll heisters.

My hand trembled, damp with perspiration, as I sat there in bed listening.

I HEARD Mary give vent to a soft exclamation and I heard a sound of footsteps turning hastily away from her door and the feet going rapidly, unsteadily down the stairs. The old West Side brown-stone rooming houses have two things in common; you'll find 'em in every one: roaches and creaky stairs.

I listened to the creaky stairs while I fumbled under my mattress for the .38 Positive. By the time I got out my door the stairs weren't creaking anymore. I

heard the soft click of a Yale lock, but I couldn't tell whether it was on the first floor or the second. One thing I knew—the lug hadn't gone out the front door. That front door was swollen, had to be banged shut, and it had a lock with a peculiar snap. In my four years as a dick, I'd learned to notice things like that as second nature, even though I wasn't any Sherlock Holmes.

I galloped down to the second floor corridor, listened, craned my neck down at the first floor. There wasn't a sound. I knew the guy hadn't gone down to the basement, where the landlady and a family lived. He hadn't had time. I sniffed around, but there was nothing to go on.

Mary was standing in the doorway of her room, when I came back up to the third floor. Her door was back from the head of the stairs, both our rooms in the back of the house, south. Mine was a double layout, with kitchenette, bath, clothes closet.

"Scared, hon?" I asked, trying to ease the fear in her eyes.

"I—I'm not exactly hilarious," she said. She was trembling and there was something in her eyes that brought the old protective urge back.

"Any idea who it was?" I asked, putting an arm around her somewhat clumsily. She was wearing a white negligee and the flashes of creamy thigh didn't detract from her appeal.

"N-no—I—I guess not," she murmured. The way she said it, I decided she was evading.

She lowered her eyelids and I stood there staring at her, trying to penetrate her confusion, and I was scared as hell, even with the rod in my hand. It gets you that way, being shot—the way shell-shock got soldiers in the Big-Mix-to-make-the-world-safe-for-dictators. I didn't think I'd ever gumshoe again. My guts were gone. They'd pried all the lead out of me, but my nerves were haywire. Even the thought of chasing this peeping-tom Casanova—if that was what the lug had been—made the perspiration come out cold all over me. I'd never be a dick again. I was washed up. I'd felt that ever since the heisters had shot me. It was why I was living in this fleabag—to go easy on the money I had left.

"You mustn't worry about it, Joe," Mary said, looking up at me again. I guess she knew what ailed me.

"No, I mustn't," I said. I felt terrible.

"Of course you mustn't. Maybe it was just—"

It was then I heard the sound of the dame moaning. It was from the front apartment; same floor as ours—the third. The right front was an apartment similar to mine. The left front was a fairly good sized square room. I didn't know who lived in either. New York's a place where you can live on the same floor with people for a year and maybe see them twice. With Mary and me it had been different, our doors being so near.

The moan came again a little stronger. My first impulse was to get back to my room, lock the door and crawl into bed. The Joe Dill who'd shot it out with three payroll heisters three months before wasn't living in my skin any more. That moan had a dismal helpless sound to it, sort of curling my frayed nerves.

I still had a vestige of male conceit left. Mary was standing there looking at me and I knew the thing to do was to investigate. I *had* to investigate. It was that kind of sound. And there was a big lump of ice in the middle of my stomach.

I went up the short hallway, holding onto the banister over the stair-well. When I got near I could tell the moans were coming from the right-front apartment. I rapped on the door with a tentative fist and the door moved; it wasn't locked.

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

The answer was a female moan.

Against my will, I went in. I was in the main room. There was a crummy reading lamp, with a low-watt bulb, burning in one corner. To my right, behind me, was a narrow inner hallway leading to the bath and kitchenette.

WHAT chilled me all the way through was the fact the guy who rented the room (I'd seen him a time or two in the hall) was lying dead on his bed, sprawled out on his back with the hilt of a long-bladed jack-knife in evidence over his heart.

On the floor nearby a good-looking blonde was lying. She was quite unclad, save for some lacy pink scanties, and she was moaning low, writhing a little, as if in a coma. I forced myself to walk in,

I looked at the dame and the dead guy. There was a strong smell of alcohol in the room and there was a quart bottle of good whisky, nearly empty, on a bedside stand; a partly filled glass near the bottle. One of the whisky glasses was spilt, on the floor beneath the corpse's feet. The front blinds were drawn over the windows, the curtains were heavy and not too sanitary. Nobody across the way could have seen the event occurring.

I went back out, pale and shaky.

"Nothing much," I said, trying to reassure her. "Just a dame with a belly-ache. You go back to bed. I guess it was some guy who lives downstairs who came in drunk, came up one flight too many and started into your room. Don't think about it."

"Like most advice, it'll work fine—but only in theory," she murmured, smiling wanly. Mary was a pretty bright girl, who rated a better vocation than paring fingernails for lustful lugs in a barber shop.

"Take a couple of aspirins," I told her.

She went in, shut the door, and I went downstairs, after getting my bathrobe and police whistle. I went down the block a way, blew an s.o.s. blast. About fifteen seconds later patrolman Monahan, whom I knew, came galloping around the corner toward me. He came up, looking slightly surprised.

"What goes on, Joe?" he asked.

I told him. And while I was telling him I got an idea.

"What I want you to do is crouch in the front basement entrance and see that nobody leaves the joint, front or back. I'm going to tackle this," I wound up.

"Ain't you going to call the homicide squad?" he asked.

"No. Not now. Later, if I don't make any progress alone."

He looked at me peculiarly.

"Never mind why," I said. "Just string along."

For three months I'd been fearing, jittering, dreading the thought of representing the law again. I was cracked up. I'd never be able to face danger again. That thought had obsessed me. Now I was nearly recovered, physically, and until this minute my intention had been to resign when they called me back for duty. I'd been getting full pay through convalescence, but if I quit

physically well I'd have no job, no guts, no prospects, nothing.

I was grinding my teeth together now. The idea was: maybe if I forced myself to see this through there'd be a cure in it for me. It's the only cure for any fear: to face down the thing you fear. Mine was so bad it stood to wreck me if it continued the way it had been.

I roused out a doctor who lived a couple doors away and took him up to examine the blonde.

"Alcoholism—and there's evidence she was struck over the head hard enough to knock her down," he said, concluding his examination: "She's a sensual, passionate, promiscuous type. What she needs now is a sedative and sleep. She wouldn't be able to talk coherently for hours, anyway."

He gave her a shot in the arm, we picked her up and put her on the bed, apart from the dead guy.

"Now have a look at *him*," I said. "How long's he been dead?"

It took the doc only a minute or so to examine the guy, who was in his late thirties. He had a basically handsome, but dissipated face.

"He was killed, I would say, no more than five or six minutes ago," the doc said, looking up, peering at me over his pince-nez.

I rubbed my chin, stared at the knife hilt. It had a black, dimpled bone handle—the sort of knife which has a long blade. If there *should* happen to be fingerprints on it, they'd be hard to check, fragmentary, because of the uneven surface. And a hundred to one there weren't any prints. Virtually all criminals wore gloves these days. Only madmen didn't. I didn't think this was the work of a madman. I had a strong theory it was somebody in this house right now who had done it. It was the assumption I was going to follow.

I gave the doc five bucks, dismissed him, told him to keep it under his hat until further notice. Then I went down to the rear basement apartment and roused the landlady.

SHE was a frowsy, overplump middle-aged woman, a widow, typical of the New York brownstones' landladies: just stringing out the autumn of their lives futilely—underpaid, listless, just eking along. She hauled out the trash, kept

the furnace, changed the linen once a week and dusted a room maybe once a month. Because of her untidy house-keeping there were always vacant rooms, and particularly in the summer. I lived in the dump only because it was economical, quiet in the back apartment—and I hate to move.

I didn't tell her about the murder. I flashed my badge to remind her, told her I wanted her keys, the names of all tenants and what they did. She grumbled, but gave me what I wanted, looked at me suspiciously and went back to bed.

The dead guy's name was J. Adams. He paid his rent regularly, had been here four months, but didn't have any occupation so far as the landlady knew.

I dismissed the people in the front basement. A poor married couple with more kids than they should have had. I dismissed the first floor front parlor: two fussy old ladies. The back parlor was occupied by an old male codger; he was in Canada on a two-week trip.

The two front rooms on the second floor were occupied by (a) a middle-aged seamstress and (b) a male waiter. I knocked on the waiter's door.

"Whatcha want?" he growled.

"Police," I said. He'd answered pretty fast.

He came to the door, opened it, bleary-eyed, half drunk, wearing a pair of shorts. He was thin, crab-faced, and I didn't like his eyes.

I showed him my badge. "What," I asked and, strangely enough, my voice sounded almost as tough as it had before I was shot. "What was the idea of trying to enter Miss Decker's room a few minutes ago?"

The waiter, whose name was Renard, seemed to quail for a moment and then he snarled, "I don't know whatcha mean. I ain't—"

"No?" I shoved in and looked around the room. It wasn't very tidy, but I didn't see anything suspicious. It'd have taken me too long to look it over thoroughly. What I wanted now was to look at the roomers.

"Okay," I said, backing out looking tough though I was jittery inside. "Stay where you are. I'll see you later."

I've always found that the odds are fifty-fifty in favor of a criminal's betraying himself if you make him nervous and leave him in suspense, not knowing

what's in your mind. And I still had a strong theory the murderer was right in this house; several things in the set-up pointed that way.

There was only *one* "apartment" at the back of the second floor. It was good-sized and was occupied by a Filipino who was supposed to have some white collar job in a hothouse uptown. His name was Felix Agallo and he was polite. He was dapper in a brown dressing robe, impassive, hardly flicking an eyelash when I flashed the badge.

"Investigating folkways of brownstones," I said, shouldering into his room. "Mind if I enter?"

"No, Senor." He stood there looking at me without expression.

I didn't see anything fishy. But I noticed some nice wood carvings, little figures of Philippine rusticity, on his mantel over the phoney fireplace. A couple of them were unfinished and there were wood shavings on a table nearby.

Then Mary yipped from the floor above, faintly. When I heard it the second time I looked at the Filipino. A strange expression flitted across his face. I galloped out, then, and up a flight to our floor and I didn't pay much attention to the fact that the Filipino was following me. When I got to the head of the stairs, Mary yipped again and it was from the murder room. I went in, the Filipino at my heels.

Mary was sitting back in a chair limply, staring at Adams, the stiff, and at the sleeping, nearly naked blonde.

"Baby!" I said, the jitters getting hold of me again. "Why'd you come in here?"

"I—I was lying there worrying, and I couldn't sleep and I was upset. I got to thinking, maybe I'll go in and see what I can do for the sick woman and maybe take my mind off things. So I knocked and heard a little moan and I went in and saw—" she shuddered, covering her eyes with a hand.

"I didn't want you to know," I said, patting her back. "You go back to bed."

"That knife—" Mary began, looking up at me, very pale. She broke off suddenly, started, seeing the Filipino there beside me. She stared at him in what seemed to me more than just ordinary surprise.

THE Filipino stopped staring at the corpse and turned to look at Mary as she started to mention the weapon. There was something almost imperceptibly sinister in the look he shot at her. Then his face was impassive again.

"Go on back down to your room—and stay there!" I ordered, giving him the gimlet eye.

He looked at me, and went.

"What were you saying about the knife?" I asked, as we went back to her room.

"N-nothing," she murmured. "I guess I—was mistaken."

I could feel her trembling against me, warm, soft, a child afraid—of what? I asked her, tried to probe her, but she wouldn't say any more. I gave it up for the present, told her to stay in her room. It was hot as hell. She left the door slightly ajar this time.

I went front again, to talk to the guy who lived next door to the corpse. I knocked. I knocked again hard and snorted, "Wake up! I'm a detective wishing words with you on local customs."

"What?" the guy snarled, sort of muffled and vexed.

I repeated the request, a little tougher. He came to the door and *his* name was Herbert Johnson and he was a lean, pale young guy about my age and he wore hornrimmed glasses. He looked at me sourly, acting as if he didn't enjoy being awakened from a sound sleep. He was high-strung, and a grouch. Had a job working in some neighborhood grocery, according to what the landlady had told me.

"What's the idea?" he asked, giving me an ornery look from head to foot. He was mean-eyed, which made three mean-eyed ones so far; this guy's were blue. "Can't a man sleep in comfort, without having guys breaking their doors down?"

"Not with me around," I said, feeling a little better as I flashed the badge. I went in and after I was there I asked, "Mind if I come in?"

Well, there wasn't anything startling here, either. I didn't expect there would be. It was a hot night and Herbert wore only the bottoms of his pajamas. We were alike in that respect, if no other.

I backed out, told Herbie to stay put and went upstairs. There was only one

room occupied up there. It was a deaf old gent who was on home relief. He was greying, broken, cast up on the shoals. *He* had watery grey eyes. I've always been interested in eyes. All the little involuntary expressions flit around the eyes. I was studying his and listening to him when I heard a terrific hulla-baloo rising from downstairs. I craned my neck over and looked down the stairwell. It seemed to be coming from the front steps on the first floor; male voices, kind of truculent. Then I heard the brogue of Monyhan, a little stouter and more strident.

I put the old man back in his room and went down to the front steps in about eight seconds flat. When I got there Monyhan was puffing and engaged in slapping the ears off Renard, the waiter.

"Take a poke at me, will you! Talk tough to me! . . ." the big cop snorted.

"Lay off! I didn't mean it!" Renard yelled, scared.

The cop quieted him down finally and I asked Renard: "Why'd you try to scram?"

"Ain't I got a right to go out for a cuppa coffee?" he whined, lowering his eyes furtively.

"Not when I told you different, you haven't," I said. "And do you always take a couple suitcases with you for a cuppa coffee?" I glared down at the suitcases, topsy-turvy on the sidewalk.

"They're his all right," said Monyhan. "He was talking a powder."

I went to work on Renard then, grilling him. For a couple of minutes I fired questions at him: tough ones, sly ones, kind ones. No result. I was getting ready to slap the rest of his ears off when I heard a muffled yip from Mary upstairs, again. I looked up and scowled. "By god! If this up-stairs-and-down whirligig keeps its pace I'm going to call time out and install elevators," I muttered. To the cop I said: "Hang on to that rat. Beauty calls."

When I got up to Mary's room again, there were muffled grunts and the sound of threshing around. I pushed the door part way open. It banged against somebody's head and I saw why that was.

Mary and the Filipino seemed to be engaging in a wrestling match on the floor. He had one of his hands clamped over her mouth to keep her from yelling, and

she had a hold on him like a female wild-cat fighting for her young. She had on a filmy white nightgown, practically transparent. What burnt me up was the fact that it was pulled up and disarrayed so far that too much of her pretty torso was on display. She had beautifully rounded white thighs and the other features on display were equally good. I didn't like the idea of this guy viewing them. I wasn't exactly in ecstasy over the fact that he was wrestling her around, either.

I REACHED down, got him by the collar, jerked him to his feet. Mary let go of him when she saw me. The Hon. Felix had expression in his eyes this time, when I jammed him back against the wall. It wasn't an especially brave expression. I have a good straight right and I loaned it to him, twice, against his beautiful jaw. He sank down on the floor, dazed, blinking up at me. I'd pulled my punches a little; I didn't want him out cold. I pulled my Positive and pointed it at him.

"Talk, but fast—and honest," I said, and meant it.

"It—it was about the knife," Mary gasped. She was sitting on her bed and her nightgown wasn't revealing so much now. "It's *his* knife in the dead man. I noticed it at once when I went in where the dead man and the drunk woman are. When Felix came up with you, he saw the knife, recognized it, shot me a warning glance. He came up a minute ago, after hearing you downstairs, to threaten me. Promised to choke me if I told you. So I yelled for you, he clapped a hand over my mouth and the wrestling started. I tried to hold him till you came."

"Hmmm." I stared down at the Filipino, rubbed my chin and thought. This shed a new light. I did a little serious thinking. Presently I grabbed Felix, dragged him out into the hall and yelled downstairs to Monyhan: "Bring that jackal up here, now." I saw the two old wrens from the front parlor talking to the seamstress in the hall and I yelled: "Get the hell back to your rooms and stay there!" I'm a little rough when the fever gets hold of me.

I took the Filipino and the waiter into the room of J. Adams, the corpse, and told Monyhan to keep a hard eye on 'em.

The blonde was sleeping peacefully, still almost naked. Too bad the doc hadn't been able to awaken her. Still, at that, she probably didn't know anything. If she'd known anything, the murderer would have killed her too. Logical. And it gave me another angle. I looked the room over very carefully. That whisky glass which had been spilt on the floor. It was a huge one, as whisky glasses go. Upset on the floor near the corpse's feet, tipped off the table. Hmmm. I got down and sniffed of the wet spot made by the spilled whisky. Funny shape it had spilled into the carpet.

I thought that over for awhile. I went back to Mary's room, to ask her some questions. I asked her if she knew the Filipino and the waiter very well. She told me no—but that for a couple months each had been sly on the make for her. Every night when she came home from work one or maybe both were standing in the doorway, trying to pick her up. The Filipino had been a little subtler. He'd shown her some of his wood carvings. That's how she knew the knife. She was interested in art and she'd stopped a few times to watch him work. But she'd never gone with him, though he was always asking her. Renard, the waiter, had been cruder about it. Exasperated, Mary had bluntly told him to go to hell a couple nights ago.

Well, that didn't really surprise me. Brownstones are like that. An attractive girl moves into one alone and every single male of every level is hard on the make for her as soon as he's sure she's alone. There was an angle *there*.

I thought awhile, pacing. Then I kissed Mary gently on the forehead and I said, "Baby, I think I'm close to the answer."

I liked the way she looked at me.

I decided I had to look through maybe three rooms. Herbert The Crabbed's was nearest. I went into it, after pounding on the door with the butt of my Positive and hearing a few snarls from inside.

"You again, eh?" he growled, glaring at me through his horn-rimmed glasses. "What's this all about? How the hell can I work tomorrow if I'm awake all night with you snooping around?"

"What I want you to do," I said languidly, "is to go over and wrap your head and torso—but especially the head—in your top sheet and bedspread, with

your face to the wall to boot. And stay that way till I tell you to quit staying that way."

Herbert blinked at me; he had interesting eyes. He backed off a little. "You must be crazy!" he said.

"Crazy as a bedbug," I agreed. "So crazy I'm apt to blast some treacle out of you if you don't move fast, like I said."

HERBERT moved then. The barrel of a Positive looks pretty big when you're staring right down it. When Herbert had himself all wrapped up like a mummy with his face to the wall, and had quit growling, I got busy with my scrutiny of his room, starting with the shoes and new socks which were in them at the foot of the bed. From there I proceeded through the bureau drawers and the clothes closet. I sniffed around, picked up a couple things which seemed interesting.

In all it took me about four minutes. When done, I admonished Herbert to stay as he was and I went into the next room. I gazed from J. Adams, deceased, to the naked blonde, to the Filipino, to the cop, and wound up gazing at Renard, the bleary-eyed waiter.

"Exactly what was your idea in trying to enter Miss Decker's room? I know you were on the make for her. Tell me the truth, to save me the trouble of splitting your skull with the butt of my rod. Tell me, Renard," I said.

Well, the guy was sobering up. He wasn't so cocky now. I guess he saw I meant business. He stared at me awhile and then he said: "All right, then. I was on the make for the dame. She wouldn't make. She told me to go to hell a couple nights ago, like she was too good for me. It boint me up. So when I got off shift tonight I was half plastered. I got a couple of dead fish outa the restaurant icebox and put 'em under my shirt. Then I got a couple more drinks and came home. I was going to toss 'em in on the dame to scare her."

"That's right," said Monahan, scratching his head. "I found a couple dead fish in one of the guy's suitcases, downstairs. I just figured the guy was screwy, like these collectors you read about."

"Hmmm. So *that's* it," I said, musing. "That was your revenge. Quaint.

But I believe you. When I called in at your room, you got scared and decided to take a powder, as you didn't want a more serious charge against you. You neglected to throw the fish in on Mary, because the cake-pans falling on the floor scared hell out of you. You scrambled back to your room with the dead fish. But when you took the powder, you stuck the fish in your suitcase for an alibi, just in case?"

"That's it. Honest to god! Jeeze you're a wizz!" Renard said, looking at me with pleading eyes.

I gestured to the cop to watch them. I went back into Herbie's room.

"Okay, Pharaoh," I said to Herbert. "Unwind yourself and come along."

He unwound himself, growled, looked at me fishily, but he went, ahead of me. I took him in and I lined him up against the wall between the other two lugs. Then I sat on the bed near the blonde and looked at them.

"I had an idea the murderer was someone who lived right in the house," I said. "It was done by someone who knew the place well, and not by some wanderer just in off the street on a lark. I narrowed it down to you three lugs." It was pretty dark where I was sitting on the bed by the blonde; the lamp was in the far corner, heavy-shaded and dim. I reached back and stuck the blonde with a pin. She moaned and gabbled a few stray and delirious words.

"It almost had me stumped. Lucky thing you didn't have sense enough to kill the blonde. She woke up a minute ago and told on you—Herbert! She saw you!"

"She's a damned liar! It was too dark for—" The bespectacled guy seemed suddenly to turn green as he realized what he'd said. It was the trick unexpectedness of my statement that caught him unawares, made him blurt the denial that hanged him.

"That's close enough to a confession, Herbie," I said. "So you knew it was dark. You ought to, because you stabbed J. Adams. That's proof enough, what you said. I didn't need it, but I like to clear things clean."

Herbert turned from green to ashen white and made a bolt for the door. Monahan reached out a foot, tripped him, grabbed him and sat on him. Slipped the cuffs on him, then.

"It really narrowed down to you, Herbie," I said, standing over him with the Positive. "The Filipino wouldn't be ass enough to stab a guy with a knife which maybe a dozen people knew the Filipino owned. These hot days and nights people are careless about leaving their doors open. You stole the Filipino's knife, as a sort of alibi if things got too hot for you later."

HERBIE stared at me, glared at me. He had peculiar eyes, all right.

"You're a good actor, Herbie," I proceeded. "When I first went to your door you were grouchy, just like your kind of guy would be. But when you crabbed about being awakened from your sound sleep, I smelled insincerity. You have strange eyes, Herbie. They were very wide awake. One of the hardest things in the world to fake is sleepy eyes, which yours should have been and weren't. I always notice eyes. That gave me my first faint suspicion of you. You were lying about your being awakened—for no reason, unless to fool me. I decided to keep an eye on you. (And when I saw that glass of whisky you spilled in here, I noticed it was in the outline of a bare or stockinged foot. That set me to thinking. In the dark, the murderer upset that full whisky glass—and spilled it on his foot.)

"So I made you roll up like a mummy so you couldn't see or hear while I searched your room. Well, in your shoes, you'd carefully put a *clean* pair of stockings. Hadn't been worn. That might have worked with anybody but me," I added. "I got to thinking: why would a guy put *clean* socks in his shoes when he went to bed. It isn't normal at all. So I figured maybe it was because you spilled whisky on your other socks when you crept in to kill Adams in the dark. That's what you did: you killed him and crept back, leaving his door slightly ajar, because if you closed it from the outside, you'd have to *slam* it; it's warped like the front door downstairs. You could close your own quietly, as the lock's inside."

They stared at me.

"But your sock was wet with whisky. You wanted to get rid of it and *would* have. But you didn't have time, because Renard came along with his fish-throwing project and woke me up and set me

going. So you just rolled your whisky-wet sock inside the other and tossed it into the closet," I said, pulling the socks out of my pocket. "I found them at the bottom of your closet when I searched a minute ago. The inner sock is still very wet and smelling strongly of whisky, and there's no whisky bottle in *your* room. The blonde didn't tell me anything," I finished. "You couldn't hear, bound up a minute ago, and you didn't know but what she had. She was drunk and you conked her to boot—figuring maybe when the landlady discovered 'em tomorrow the blonde would get the blame. *Why'd* you kill him, Herbie?"

Herbert glared at me for a while, and he bared his teeth very like an animal and he snarled: "His name isn't Adams; it's Streeter. My father was an inventor and Streeter was his helper. My father had been poor all his life. Then he hit a natural—a household gadget. He was perfecting it. Streeter stole it, patented it, sold it for fifteen grand, two years ago. My father went haywire when we finally found it out. My father blew his brains out in a fit of melancholy. I've been tracing Streeter for two years. A month ago I got wind of him. I figured he'd be in New York, living high till the money was gone. He had both weaknesses: women and whisky, and I guess he'd gone through most of the \$15,000—

or he wouldn't have been living here. I tracked him here, waited, got this room next to him a couple weeks ago. Reason enough?"

"I guess. The jury'll decide that," I said.

Well the patrol wagon came and took the three lugs away (one for murder, two for disorderly conduct) and I went in to see Mary and I was surprised—because I didn't have the jitters any more; I was rarin' to go. I could face a whole pack of gunmen now. I looked at myself in the mirror and marveled.

It had happened without my being aware of it. The fever got hold of me. I wouldn't wind up a wreck after all.

I was glad I'd forced myself into this, yellow-bellied as I'd been at the very start.

I kissed Mary again, but this time it wasn't on the forehead. She didn't seem to mind. I could feel her trembling.

"Baby, you certainly cooked up a devil's broth in your little cake-pans. Except for them, a murder might have gone unsolved and I might have wound up in the boobyhatch. What reward'll you have?" I murmured into her cute little ear those tender words.

"You might pull your homely face away and let me catch my breath," Mary said demurely.

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HOT ICE FOR HOMICIDE

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At first Ellen Baird wouldn't take that forty grand in gleaming loot, but when Hal Ferguson refused to hand it over, Ellen used a doll's right to be unpredictable—and got very persuasive with a snub-nosed gal!

HAL FERGUSON still smarted with annoyance at having brought the

wrong key to his grey canvas airplane bag. But, prying with his pocket knife while he hammered viciously with the glass ash tray from the hotel room dresser, he succeeded at last in cracking the brass lock. Ferguson straightened, tossed the ash tray on the bed, and mopped his forehead. There still was time, he reflected, to wash and don a fresh shirt, before reporting to his company.

Confidently he released the end catches, and as the halves of the suitcase fell apart, laid it open flat. A scowl puckered his dark brows as Ferguson stared down at a garment of tan satin. Blinking puzzledly, he lifted and shook it out. Why, some feminine—looked like a dressing gown! And there, topmost now in the bag, was peach-tinted lingerie.

What was this, a roommate joke? Growling, Ferguson dug into the bag's contents, to find them all feminine. Except a large purple velvet box, flat and rectangular. Taking it

out he pressed its catch. As the lid flew up amazement swept over Ferguson and he took an involuntary step backward.

Jewels blazed at him, a profusion of glittering stones. Diamonds—a diamond-strewn bracelet of dazzling white brilliance. And emeralds, far more precious! There was a large emerald brooch, and beside it an emerald ring with a square stone of rich clear green. An amethyst lavalliere, oval shaped, with twenty or so iridescent pearls forming a creamy frame. And half a dozen other pieces: a large beautifully carved pendant, a ruby ring of smoldering blood color, another ruby set in a pin, and a diamond pin with a marvelous blue-white gem that looked large enough to weigh three carats.

A hot wave broke over Hal Ferguson as he stared, bewildered. Reverently he carried the treasure over to the writing desk and put it down. A glance showed his corridor



door closed. He shot a look at the window opening on a narrow court between wings of the hotel. Then, piece by piece, Ferguson re-examined his find while his dry lips added up a hazard of its worth.

"That certainly is the McKeero emerald. I'd know it anywhere!" Helplessly he stood, running his fingers through his dense brown hair. "Why, if this collection's worth a nickel it must be worth—yes, all of forty thousand dollars. All of that! It's genuine, every rock of it. Genuine!"

Hal Ferguson's puzzled eyes returned to the suitcase. Striding to it, he searched for initials or a name, but there was no identification. He examined thoroughly the remainder of its contents, all articles a man in his mid-twenties customarily views only in lingerie shop windows.

At last he straightened with a low whistle. Somewhere in Milwaukee a woman was going to be numb with dismay when, instead of finding her jewels, she discovered merely a lot of male underwear and military brushes and vivid socks.

Dismay! The owner of this jewelry would probably keel over!

Ferguson paced the room, absently lighting a cigarette. How the deuce had he got this bag, and who owned it? Halting, he squinted at the window, reviewing step by step the trip from his small apartment in Chicago to this Milwaukee hotel room.

Suddenly his eyes gleamed. "Sure, that's it! The other train pulled into the station here just as mine did. That nervy redeap grabbed my taxi for the girl in the tan ensemble. We traded grips, of course—must be millions of grips in the world like mine. I'll bet she's hysterical now!"

He remembered the girl clearly for she had been the sort to remember; in fact he'd noticed her first out in the train shed. Dark-haired, very good looking in a cool, self-possessed way, young, of course, and modishly dressed. "I beg your pardon," a voice had said timidly at his elbow there on the station sidewalk. "Would you mind very much if I steal your taxi? I—I'm in such a hurry!"

Ferguson had of course made way, smiling his best and friendliest smile. He'd been delighted to have her steal

his taxicab because he'd enjoyed looking at her while hesitantly she asked the driver if the Hotel Dexter was the best hotel "and not too expensive?"

Yes, they had traded bags then. No doubt she was registered here, so his next move should be to notify the desk. Yet wasn't it strange that anyone carrying forty thousand dollars' worth of precious stones in a suitcase should be concerned about hotel rates?

She couldn't be wholesaling jewelry or she'd have known her hotel. And she'd have sent the stones by express. A thief . . .

Hal Ferguson envisioned that tall, dark girl, in the chic tan ensemble, her oval face pale, her hands gripping iron bars. He didn't like to picture her that way, nor the notion of helping to make it come true. Neither, of course, did he have any desire to compound a felony.

GOING to his telephone, he called the hotel desk. "I seem to have switched bags with someone—a lady. I'm sure I know who it was, a young woman in tan. She's slender, has dark hair, is quite nice looking. Would you remember—?" He waited a moment. "Miss Baird, 482. That's here on my floor so I'll just go around and straighten the matter out. No thanks, I prefer to do it."

Putting the telephone down, he calculated that room 482 must be in that wing opposite. Ferguson went to the window—and his golf-tanned face relaxed to a grin at sight of the girl of the station sidewalk. She was almost directly across the court from him. She had removed her jacket and she was acting very upset.

Well, naturally—over the loss of her jewels. Trying to decide what on earth to do as she paced jerkily about, a hand at her slender throat. Sometimes she halted and pressed her palm to her forehead as if at a wave of dizziness. Poor kid was scared!

Leaning, Ferguson waved to attract her attention, but just then the girl turned away to her door. Presently Ferguson spied her again, backing toward the window, and he could see a man and a woman slowly following her. The man, a heavy-set individual in a loud grey suit, turned back his coat lapel in an officious sort of way. The girl shrank from him

until Hal Ferguson saw her white silk blouse pressing the windowpane.

He sucked an exclamation. "Detectives!"

The plainclothes man looked doggedly skeptical about whatever the girl was saying. With a shrug he turned and disappeared to a shadowy corner of the room. Ferguson guessed that he was going to search her luggage, and he smiled grimly, picturing the masculine things the officer was going to find.

Reappearing, the detective gestured to his companion, a medium-stout woman attired in a sports outfit. She seized the Baird girl's arm and despite evident protestations, dragged her out of view. The male sleuth stood chewing his cigar, impatiently awaiting their return.

But when they came back the woman was shaking her head. There followed threatening gestures that must have accompanied harsh words. But at last, angry and baffled, the detectives stalked to the door.

Ferguson rubbed his jaw ruefully. "The stones are hot, all right. Those dicks got a tipoff about her, but not having the loot she defied 'em." He rescued the ash tray from the bed and daubed out his cigarette. "Wonder if I ought to ring up the police?"

He was rigidly law abiding; nevertheless this affair had a certain enigmatic look. A minute passed as he watched the girl across the court, and the more he saw her the more Hal Ferguson hoped she wasn't really crooked. Because she was charming. Pacing up and down, she halted as if struck by a thought, then resumed slow, worried pacing. Ferguson, drawing a long breath, knew that she was charming.

"Pshaw," he reflected, "an experienced thief wouldn't be so dumb as to let dicks in a strange town spot her so quickly! I believe I'm going to risk a talk with her. If she should make a wrong move I can always holler fire, and police, and help, help!"

He puzzled over the jewel case but at length tucked it in the airplane bag and replaced the feminine clothing. A few moments later his eager knock on a door in the south wing brought a baldheaded old gentleman with marshmallowy face ready for shaving. Apologizing, Ferguson discovered that the next door was 482. He reviewed the matter again, then

knocked. The door opened a cautious three inches.

"Hello," he grinned. "Remember commandeering my taxi at the station half an hour ago? We seem to have switched baggage," he added as he put his foot in the opening, then calmly elbowed the door wider and stepped inside. "I've brought your grip back."

Her oval face draining of color, she stared at him plainly trying to suppress her excitement. Ferguson closed the door. "I—you've make a mistake," she faltered then. "I haven't lost anything!"

"Oh, I'm sure you have. May I introduce myself? I'm Hal Ferguson. At the desk they said you are Miss Baird."

Color slowly came back into her face. She had wide-set intelligent brown eyes and a firm nose and chin. Her complexion was an ad-writer's rhapsody. "I'm Ellen Baird, yes. But really, Mr. Ferguson, you must have the wrong person!"

"Please believe me when I say I'm not another detective. I've merely come for my clean shirts, so mayn't we exchange bags?" He swung hers on the bed and opened it. "You own some valuable jewelry, I believe?"

"Jewelry! N-no. Of course not!"

"But aren't these things yours?" he insisted patiently. "These—er—garments?"

Apprehension soared in her eyes and with a startled exclamation Ellen Baird caught up the tan satin dressing gown. Its removal exposed the velvet jewel case, and hurriedly she flung the gown back. Her brown eyes searched Ferguson's face, dropped swiftly to his chest, fear-filled as the eyes of a cornered doe.

"Oh. Why—yes, these are my things, after all. I appreciate your returning them, Mr. Ferguson. You see—"

"Guess we tangled there on the station sidewalk. Now may I have my own things, please?" He indicated the suit case on the luggage settee.

SHE looked puzzled, but turned and snapped it open for his inspection. "You surely don't wear lingerie, Mr. Ferguson?"

His jaw sagged. With an effort he looked up at her. "No-no," Hal Ferguson stammered. "No, I don't, that's a fact." Blankly he stared again at the

second bag containing feminine garments like those he had brought here.

In the silence that followed perplexity heightened in him until he spied the ragged edge of a baggage check under her leather purse on the dresser. He stepped to it and picked it up. With his right hand he reached for the cradle telephone. "Send a boy," Ferguson requested briefly, and hung up.

"Miss Baird," he assured her, "you needn't fear me. I've always been quite harmless, and I'm not a detective, honestly."

She made no comment but stood staring out the window until the bellman knocked. Handing him the check, Ferguson asked that the bag it represented be brought at once. When the man departed, he found Ellen Baird watching him with extreme pessimism, almost fear.

"I happened to be looking out my window across the court when your visitors came. You know, there's something exciting about jewel thievery. Do you do pretty well?"

Her gaze flicked over him; then Ellen Baird turned her back. "I do well enough. I—I think you must do *very* well, don't you, in the jewel business?"

Ferguson chuckled. "How'd you know that? By the way—" He left off to open the door for the bellman with a third grey airplane-type case; and Ferguson needed only one encompassing glance to recognize it as his own. At last! The bellman gone, he fumbled for his key and inserted it in the lock. A moment later his collection of shirts and brushes was exposed.

"Now Mr. Ferguson, please go."

He glanced up quickly and felt himself redden under her icy look. Oh. Sorry if I annoy you, Miss Baird, really. I had hoped we might be friends. Here we're both strange in Milwaukee, and—"

"I ask you to go now, at once!"

"Aren't you a bit peremptory?" he asked, nettled, "when we consider the trouble I could cause by getting those detectives back here?"

But instantly he regretted that. "I'll go, of course, but—ah, well, Milwaukee's an interesting old German place. But you evidently wouldn't care to consider looking it over."

"I might," she told him in subdued anger, "in other circumstances."

"Quite. Believe I'd better take this grip along," he added, picking up the one he had brought. "I can't leave it because you disclaimed ownership, then decided it was yours when you saw the jewel case. Take my advice, Miss Baird, and don't tamper with stones that don't belong to you. I'm told it doesn't pay in the end."

"Good bye, Mr. Ferguson!" She slammed the door.

Carrying both bags, he returned to his room where he opened the girl's for another look at the loot. Feminine garments fluttered onto the bed as he burrowed feverishly to straighten at last with an incredulous look.

"The minx gave me the bag without the jewels!"

He sank disgustedly on the bed. It was his confounded self-confidence that had paved the way for her trick. He'd been careless. And now she had the case with the broken lock, containing forty thousand in gems!

Hal Ferguson sighed. She was, then, crooked. She would make a quick getaway, having nicely allayed the suspicions of those two detectives. He could notify the desk but that would only involve him in a lot of unpleasantness. And if Ellen Baird couldn't be found he might be putting himself on the spot.

Ferguson rose. It was time he started for the Milwaukee office of his company—and, he saw peevishly, through his desire to make the acquaintance of a pretty thief, he was going to be late.

Going through the lower lobby, he gritted his teeth in disgust. He stepped out on the Fifth Street sidewalk and glanced about for a taxicab. Then he choked back a gasp at sight of Ellen Baird just entering a taxi only five yards away.

Hal Ferguson had had aplenty of reflection. He was ready for decisive action, and it may have been masculine vanity, the yearning that seized him to emerge finally triumphant by recovering those stolen jewels. He sprinted across the walk and around the rear of the taxi, and just as it lurched forward, yanked open its street door and jumped in.

The driver bawled an angry warning as he slammed the door after Ferguson, sending him plummeting against the startled girl. "You fooled me once," he

panted, straightening, "but now I—"

"Don't move!" Her brown eyes sparkled dangerously. And when Ferguson saw the short, ugly automatic pressed hard against his chest he felt a cold thrill wriggling up his spine.

"Stop, driver! Stop!" Ellen Baird cried.

THE taximan whirled for a look and his eyes bulged. He jammed on the brakes. "Call an officer!" she ordered tensely, her gaze never leaving Ferguson's face.

A door jerked open. "I'm an officer. What's going on here? Put that gun down, lady, or I'll—"

She gave the man a swift glance. Ferguson, drawing back from the automatic, saw her face change. "You—you're not!" Ellen Baird wailed. "Help, police! Stop thief! Oh, stop that woman! She—"

A fleshy hand struck across her mouth. Ferguson saw the stocky female who had entered Ellen's room with the detective, making fierce efforts to snatch out the travelling case that squatted between Ellen's feet.

Instinctive sympathy made him forget the automatic, and Ferguson's chopping left hand broke the woman's hold. As the grey-suited man beside her grabbed at the bag Ferguson crowded past Ellen driving his knuckles to the fellow's cheek, then his right flush to the jaw. The man's head flared back. He staggered, caught his heel between paving stones, and toppled ignominiously in the street.

"Hold on, there! Get back! You, drop that gun!"

A new voice boomed in Ferguson's ear. He glimpsed a blue coat with brass buttons. He eluded the big hand grabbing at him as he burst out of the taxicab and darted after the flashily dressed woman starting away with the bag. She struggled and struck at him but Ferguson gripped her arms tighter until she was helpless. Meanwhile another uniformed policeman jumped out of a prowling car halted in the middle of the street, and a third squirmed hastily from behind its wheel.

Half an hour later they were lined up before a quizzical desk sergeant. "So this fellow's a jewel thief!" Ferguson scowled at the man he had taken for a

detective, and who had entered Ellen Baird's room while he watched across the hotel court.

The sergeant inspected his fingernails, then reached for his pocket knife. "Sure. He's Ice Olson. Lots of times he poses for a detective. Works with Annie here—Annie Moore. Well, Annie, you must've liked Wisconsin, to be callin' on us again. Now you," he growled, and pointed his knife at Ellen Baird. "I s'pose you got your story all set, huh?"

Swallowing, she glanced at Ferguson in mixed resentment and gratitude. "Certainly I can explain. I brought these jewels from Madison because the woman who owns them discovered her insurance lapsed. Her husband's expected tomorrow from New York, and he'll be certain to remind her about the policy. He can get very angry when she forgets such things. So she had me bring them here to an appraiser from Lloyd's insurance company from Chicago, whom she telephoned this morning to come to Milwaukee to meet me.

"I'm Mrs. James R. Wellman's secretary," Ellen Baird informed crisply. "The jewels are hers as you can verify by phoning her. I should like to know," she told Hal Ferguson, "just who you are?"

He shrugged. "Who do you think? Try one little guess."

"I—well, I certainly thought you were after the stones. You see, sergeant, there was an attempt last night to break in Mrs. Wellman's home. That's what caused us to remember about the insurance expiring. I was terribly frightened about carrying things of such value, and I *knew*—intuition, perhaps—that this man and woman who came to my room weren't real detectives. But I thought I had checked the bag containing the stones. I brought two bags along so that I could do that. When he—Mr. Ferguson—came to my room, I took him for another thief; but I wasn't sure. And then— Please, Mr. Ferguson," she demanded, "who are you?"

Hal Ferguson smiled his friendliest. "I hope you'll let me give every last detail over dinner this evening, Miss Baird. But for now: I'm here from Chicago in response to Mrs. James R. Wellman's call. You see I am Lloyd's appraiser, sent here to write the new policy.

BLOOD IS NO ALIBI

By
**ALEXANDER
FAUST**



He saw then that it was an automatic she was flourishing

*Duke had his own idea of a gag,
and a snatch and three murders
wasn't it!*

THE crowd in Casey's Inn was a composite of tight-lipped lads with darting eyes and "smart" people from the suburbs who got a thrill out of mixing with questionable company. But they didn't mix very well.

Common meeting grounds were the bar and the undersized gilt piano across from it. The bartender was anybody's friend; and so was Duke, the lad who in a very casual way plinked deft melody from the keyboard.

Duke had a mild face and wavy corn-yellow hair; he looked corn-fed, healthy.

Just after midnight Don Maple blew in, with a girl who didn't belong there. Duke saw them sit down at a little round table, and he muttered, "Trouble . . ."

His piano tinkled: "Oh, mama dear, come over here, and see who's looking through my window . . ." as he stared at Don Maple.

Maple got up from his table and strolled over to the piano, resting an elbow on it.

"Heigh-de-ho, Duke," he said. "Have a drink."

"Thanks, not just now," Duke said abstractedly. His eyes had been the languid color of smoke; they acquired a gray-green glisten. "I guess you know," he added, "Gard's looking for you."

Maple put a palm flat against the piano, but perhaps it was Duke striking chords that caused the arm to tremble. Because when Maple spoke, his voice was calm.

"I'm a lawyer—and I happen to be honest. Don't laugh. Gard came to me with one of his crooked propositions and I threw him out. He's threatened me, sure. But he won't do anything."

"A lot of men who thought that about Gard," Duke suggested mildly, "are underground."

"Do I look scared?"

Politely Duke admitted that he didn't.

"But—" Duke nodded toward the girl.

"If there should be trouble—"

"You're right about that. I shouldn't have brought her here. I'll get her out."

Somehow Duke's eyes remained upon the girl.

"I've seen her somewhere."

"In the papers, no doubt. She's Judge Marshall's daughter."

DUKE remembered a Mediterranean cruise two summers before, when he'd been in the ship's orchestra; he remembered Judge Marshall, and the dark hair and golden skin and blithe dancing feet of Lida Marshall. His fingers dreamed over the keys, murmuring a melody she might still recall.

But Maple was back at the table now, talking to her and holding her wrap; she made a face at him in protest. Maple paid for a drink he hadn't tasted, and marched her out.

Duke sighed, shrugged, and gave the customers their money's worth of something loud and swingy.

He heard the door slam shut after Don Maple and Lida, then . . .

Automobile backfire never sounded quite like that. That brittle blast was Death, chattering.

Before the strings stopped vibrating from the last notes he'd hit, before the tones died away, Duke was at the door.

Don Maple stretched on the sidewalk. There was no blood, but a man's harsh voice grated: "He's on ice!"

"Take him along; we'll dump him in the river." The second man was holding Lida Marshall, a palm clapped over her mouth. He swung her up and tossed her into a moving car at the curb.

Duke slammed out of the doorway, leaped the three stone steps to the sidewalk. The first man rose with Maple slung over his shoulder.

From inside the car, a shot whimpered through Duke's hair, smacked into the brick wall behind him. Duke let his legs

fold and hit the sidewalk.

The car door slammed and the thing leaped away from the curb, quivering.

Duke stood up, mechanically slapping the dust of the sidewalk from his knees. Heinrich, the waiter, was standing on the steps of Casey's Inn, holding the door with one hand.

His voice came, high-pitched: "Did you see any of 'em, Duke? Did you?"

"They were Gard's boys."

"But did you see 'em?"

"The big one looked like Max Leary. And it was Maxie passed the word, the other day, that Gard was gunning for Maple. That's the set-up."

"It sounds kind of dumb to me, for Maxie to leave himself open that way."

"That's the way Maxie is, kind of dumb!" Duke was moving along.

Heinrich said, "Where you going? The cops'll want to ask—"

"Tell them I couldn't wait."

There was a place on Drury street that Gard used. It had been a speakeasy in the old days, with the iron door and peephole; it could be defended like a fortress.

The police would go after Gard with tear-gas and sub-machine guns. But when the siege started . . . what about the girl?

Duke paid off a hackman at the entrance to Drury street.

He moved down the block until he was before the right building. Heavy shutters barred the window. He got down on hands and knees and tried the low screened cellar window, jerking to work it loose.

He was in position for it, but the kick was unexpected. His head shot against the screen and bounced back.

An amused voice behind him said: "Get up, snoop."

Duke twisted his head, and rose very carefully. He faced Gard. A thin smile burned on Gard's dark lips, and he was swinging an automatic with nonchalance.

Gard said: "If it isn't the Duke! On the snatch for my piano, huh? But you'll have a hell of a time getting it out through that cellar window!"

"No," Duke said. "I came here for something you've got and I want."

GARD'S brow laddered with sincere interest. "You know me, Duke. Anything I can do for you—"

That was the wrong answer. Politely

ness from a kidnaper is devastating.

Duke smiled, "I want to borrow a gun."

Gard's glance flicked down to the solid handful of automatic. "I hate to turn you down, kid. But if you're in that kind of a jam, a roseoe won't make it better."

"I just want to show it to a fellow. I wouldn't shoot him any more than I'd shoot—you."

And it happened. Gard said: "Be careful with it, kid. It goes off!" But foremost, he extended the automatic to Duke.

Duke's hand closed around it, the ridges of the gun-butt prickling his palm. The muzzle remained pointed toward Gard.

Gard said: "Who's the guy?"

Duke laughed.

Gard said: "Oh." He mused: "They oughtn't sell reefers to kids like you."

"Upstairs!" Duke ordered. "Where is she?"

Gard lunged up the white stone steps, unlocked the door. He was doing a good job of looking amiably amused. In the front room, he sat down on the dusty red-lacquered bar. Duke found a wall-switch and made a light. Gard selected a cigar from his breast-pocket.

"What goes on?" he asked. "And how long?"

"If you don't want to tell me," Duke said, "I've got to search."

Gard inquired gently, "Can you blow smoke rings with marihuana?"

Duke bent over and looked in back of the bar. He could sense the smile burning more broadly on Gard's mouth, and it made him uncomfortable; but he carried on his hunt methodically.

He left Gard and went out of the room. He poked through dusty closets and rubbish-accumulations, sneezing and clutching the automatic. There was no girl; nobody in the whole building.

He came back to the bar, where Gard still sat toying with smoke rings.

"You've got her somewhere else," Duke said. "Where?"

Gard put his heels up on the bar and rocked back. "Does that stuff make you see a Chinese princess, or what?"

Duke said: "Everybody knows you had Don Maple under the gun. Maybe that's a smoke-dream, too?"

"It sure is . . ." Gard was complac-

ently triumphant.

"It came straight from Maple—and from Maxie."

"That louse!" Gard bounded from the bar and took three steps toward Duke, "I kicked him out a week ago—he was knocking down on me!"

Duke forgot what he was going to say next; the whine of a police siren soared to a shriek in the street outside.

Clubs beat against the iron door.

There was a bitter edge to Gard's voice as he demanded: "Is the whole damn town coked to the ears?" He opened the door.

Leading the wedge of uniformed policemen who spilled over the threshold was Spewack, top man of that inner police organization crime reporters tagged: "The Little Mob."

The lurid title was shrewd publicity; it caught, by terror of the name, as many lawbreakers as did the spectacular raids that Spewack arranged with a careful eye to staging and newspaper space. These raids—when they came—were the results of hard, routine police work, but Spewack nurtured their appearance of tempestuous glamor. It made kids play cops instead of robbers.

Men were told to search the place. Duke knew how useless that was. When it was over, the meeting adjourned to City Hall, detective division headquarters.

Duke was in a not particularly pleasant spot. "Why did you go to Gard?" Spewack wanted to know.

Duke told him.

Spewack didn't like it. "I've got to hold you," he said. "Material witness, anyhow."

"You're booking Gard for murder?"

"Not until we find the body. But we'll book him, all right."

TWO telephones ringing simultaneously kept Spewack busy a while. He snapped out orders to the men around him; somebody hustle to Judge Marshall's home and get further details on the message he had just received asking fifty thousand dollars for his daughter's return; somebody else get a morgue wagon and pick up the corpses of Maxie Leary and an unidentified but equally dead male companion, who turned out to be a small-time punk of no particular account except that he was the second man Duke had seen on the sidewalk out-

side of Casey's Inn.

Gard said: "It's going to be awfully tough to hang *that* on me . . ."

"It looks," Spewack admitted, "as though the kidnaper's been hijacked, whether it was you or somebody else who started the game."

"Where does that leave me?" Duke wanted to know.

"It—" Spewack sighed and picked up the buzzing phone again and said: "Yeah. Right away." Then he finished answering Duke with the ease of a man with a four-track mind: "—leaves you back at your piano. That was Casey just now. The customers are walking out. He needs you."

Duke had a free ride back from the Hall. He said, "So-long, boys," to the men in the prow-car outside Casey's Inn and stood there on the sidewalk watching them shove off again into the night. He turned toward the three stone steps and hesitated.

"The hell with that . . ." he said, and *that* included Casey, Casey's Inn, and all its appreciatively impatient clientele.

He walked to the Beckford, a tall building which stood on one edge of a green square, its awninged windows staring down with supercilious amusement at the lads in lavender cravats who strolled the park paths. It was that kind of neighborhood. Expensive but by no means genteel.

The night-clerk at the Beckford was called Josh but he was a most serious young man, with frustrated ambitions and a face like a polite, wistful horse. The former may have been a result of the latter—a speculation not particularly worth pursuing; but at any rate the frustrations of a night-clerk's life resulted in a money-hunger that made him always amenable to reason.

Duke parted with a five-dollar bill, more than he could spare. He said: "There's a red-head lives here—"

"There's a lot of them. Our specialty."

"—named Meridel something—"

"Suite 815. But she's too big-time for you, Duke."

"No doubt. I've seen her around with Don Maple. She knew him pretty well, didn't she?"

"Better than that! The things a night-clerk sees, and ain't supposed to notice . . .!"

"Then," Duke speculated, "she ought to know his connections—who was gunning for him, if it wasn't Gard."

"Somebody gunning for Maple?"

"Not any more."

"Why? Why not?"

Duke muttered disgustedly, "Give me back the five, and I'll answer the questions."

Josh became very circumspect, and the bill moved out of sight. When it was well-cached he said brightly: "Well, your friend Meridel isn't around, anyhow. When I came on this evening I saw her pulling out in a hurry for the shore, with a tooth-brush and an extra pair of what-do-you-call-ems."

Duke said: "Hell! Where does she stay, down there?"

Josh shrugged. ". . . but I can tell you where she buys her gin and stuff. They always mail the bills here. An outfit named Stacy-Smith."

Duke nodded.

Probably not worthwhile to chase her. But it was only a few minutes till closing time at Casey's Inn—no use going back there. And down at the shore they stayed open later. He might find Stacy. Or Smith.

AN hour and twelve minutes later he got out of a borrowed car, stretched his numb-feeling legs and gulped the salt-tasting air of the shore city.

There was a club where Duke had played one season—the Million Club—

He ambled into the club. The pianist was hanging over the bar next to a blonde, so Duke took over. There were a few hand-waves, casual greetings, and somebody set a beer on top of the piano for him. He gave them a couple of tunes, while he studied the faces. He asked, finally, "Stacy around? The big liquor man, I mean. Or Smith?"

The response he got was: "What do you want them for?" from a youth.

"What's it to you?" Duke countered.

"I work for them."

"You'll do, then."

"Do what?"

Duke explained. He was looking for a red-head named Meridel, who had come to town this evening and probably ordered up some liquor first thing.

Duke saw by the pale eyes that the kid knew the answer.

"I can't go around giving out people's

addresses," the kid said. "She might not like it. She's a good customer."

Duke felt in his pocket, and his fingers encountered only small—very small—change. No folding money.

"Listen," he said in a world-weary tone which he strove to make confidentially impressive and convincing—"You're damned right she won't like it. That babe is my wife, and I think I know who she's with, down here. Give me a break. Let me get her dead to rights."

The pale eyes widened, the jaw slacked. The phoney situation held unmistakable appeal. To precipitate something like that—maybe even a shooting—!

"It's—it's 25 Sunstrand Place," the kid whispered hoarsely.

Duke heard the slap of sabots across the floor in languid tempo. The door opened a little way and she stood there, her hips insolently uneven under green satin, the rumpled red of her hair matching her sullen mouth. The negligee was bunched untidily at her shoulders, drawn tight over her hips, leaving her blonde legs bare. She had cat-yellow eyes, and like a cat's, the pupils seemed narrow ovals rather than round.

She looked blankly at him.

"I had a time finding you," he said.

She knew him, then. She smiled with her mouth alone. "You, Duke!" She did not move back from the doorway but she held her body taut against one jamb. "Inside," she invited flatly.

"I just want to find out—"

"You came to the right place."

He saw then that it was an automatic she was flourishing. He twisted his glance back to the cold darkness of Sunstrand Place, then to her again, and very carefully stepped into the house.

Ahead of her gesture with the shiny .32, he entered a summer-furnished room of green matting and cool green walls.

He heard himself echoing that plaint of Gard's: "What goes on?" But there was no need to ask. He knew, now.

On the other side of the room, beyond the piano, a girl was lying on a couch of sea-green frieze; lolling lightly as though she were borne on a wave—a girl with a swirl of dark lashes in the golden oval of her face.

He ran to her, saying her name: "Lida

Marshall!"

The lashes resting on her cheeks did not tremble. She breathed, but it was the breathing of stupor.

"She's good for another hour or so," the red-head said placidly behind him.

HE turned to her. "Then Gard is running the show—with you."

Her eyes became crinkled new moons, her whole body rippled. "It's a gag," she explained, "on Gard."

"What a gag!" he admired. "Only a snatch and three murders. . . ."

"Two—so far," said another voice. Buff hangings parted, and a man came in from the room beyond.

Duke stood still for the space of three hammered heart-beats. Then he said: "Do I call you Lazarus now, risen from the dead, or are you still—Don Maple?"

"It's a problem," Don Maple mused. "I can't be Don Maple any more. But fifty thousand dollars from the Judge ought to be enough to make any new name sound right."

Duke said: "This is an interstate job. You'll have the G-boys on your tail by morning."

"Why? I'm dead; alibis don't come any better than that. You saw it all; and you nailed the story down to stay, Duke. Thanks."

"You can't keep me here forever."

Don Maple's lips quirked with vast good humor. "Lida hasn't seen me since the snatch on the sidewalk. Maxie and the other lad are no longer a problem. And nobody will ever know from you that I'm still around."

The gun in Meridel's hand was no longer the same threat because there was not a choice between life and death any more; there was only death if he stood still. Every instant was borrowed time.

Duke's shoulder caught Meridel under the chin as he whirled and flung himself; her head snapped back, her gun hand was tossed uselessly in the air. His fingers clawed up her arm while with the other hand he held her close to him.

Her fingernails tore tracks across his cheek. Then his hand clamped around her hand on the gun-butt, and squeezed.

Don Maple slid smoothly to Duke's back, jammed the cold nose of another gun between his shoulder blades. "Come off it, Duke," he said wearily.

Duke expelled breath in a whistling

sigh. He relaxed, let the girl go suddenly. She staggered back, caught her ankle in a standing lamp, sent it careening with a crash of glass and parchment. She flung out a hand to steady herself and a vase, teetering on a little table, swept to the floor, shattering noisily into shards and dust. Meridel sat down suddenly—on the keyboard of the piano.

A mad crescendo of discords boomed. All through it, Duke stood very still, a gun-muzzle rooted in his back. And there was no sound from the even sleep of Lida Marshall.

But when the crashing subsided they heard the beat of footsteps upon the terrace. Meridel darted to the window.

"Local copper!" she clipped. "He's coming up—"

"I'll rig it," Maple said evenly. He shoved Duke away from him, stood lounging with his hands in his side pockets, the automatic making a scarcely perceptible extra bulge. "Play the piano, Duke. Just play. Anything."

Duke slid onto the piano bench and hit the keys. In response to a night-stick's rapping, Meridel opened the door. "What's all the racket about?" the patrolman was saying.

"Little party, officer," Meridel giggled, slurring the words with an edge of gay intoxication. "Dancing—"

The patrolman looked around the room. Duke huddled over the keyboard of the piano, plinking swingtime. Maple lolled, a drunken grin across his face. And on the couch a girl lay sleeping.

Meridel winked, laid a soft white hand against his arm. . . .

He clucked a remonstrance. "Getting on toward morning. Might ease up a little. . . ."

"Thanks, officer, sure. . . ." Meridel held the door open. He turned to go.

Duke glanced over his shoulder, looking for some last chance. Don Maple watched him, his hand never leaving the significant bulge of his pocket.

Duke turned back to the piano, brought another tune loudly from the keyboard, beating out the rhythm.

THE door closed. Meridel stood with her back to it and let her eyelids droop, as though her whole body sighed. "You can sign off now," Maple said. His hand and his automatic came up.

Duke stood up, feeling dull and stone-

like, unreal.

Glass tinkled at the front door; a pleasant, musical little sound. But one that made three people in the room breathe deep, and stiffen before they turned to look.

A hand reached in through a broken pane to throw the bolt; the door was shoved open. The patrolman was with them again. And the patrolman had his heavy police positive in his fist.

It must have been loss of nerve that made Maple fire, because he didn't have a chance. Even as his automatic spat, a blast from the police revolver seared the length of his arm. He dropped the hot automatic to stare dumbly at the bright red spurt sopping his sleeve.

Just then Lida Marshall stirred, murmured and struggled with her sleep.

The patrolman kicked the door wide with his heel and blew a bubbling shrill note. "Maybe catch a prowler," he said; then to Duke: "She the one was kidnaped?"

"She's the one."

No prowler came but headquarters made up for that, when in response to a telephone call the shore town's police and officialdom descended in a body on the house in Sunstrand Place. In an incredibly short time Judge Marshall was there too.

Through a welter of excited gabble and photoflash bulbs blooming, Duke and the patrolman exchanged verbal pats-on-the-back for the hurrying pencils of the press-association men.

"It was the cop," Duke said. "He got Maple. I didn't even have a gun."

"It was the lad," the patrolman beamed. "We had a teletype request to watch out for the kidnaped girl, sure. But I just came up here to ask about the noise; I would have gone away again and stayed away—but the minute I headed for the door the lad there at the piano gave me the only tip-off he could manage, by stopping his jazz and pounding *The Prisoner's Song* into my skull. . . ."

A dulcet voice said: "But—but what made you come after me . . .?"

Duke suddenly felt hot and guilty. Lida Marshall, awake now, was speaking to him, looking at him. He managed to stumble out some kind of reply, but he didn't dare tell her the real reason . . . yet.

HELLO, KILLER

By EDWARD WARREN

I started that haymaker somewhere down around my shoestrings, and I didn't exactly have the Queensberry rules in mind when I planted it. . . .

No guy can throw bombs at my girl friend and get away with it!



Dierst's arm was already up for the toss when my gun roared

THE Frisco plane came in at 5:50 P. M., right on the dot. The rest of the crowd at the airport surged forward to the railing; but I hung back near the fence next to the parking lot, wanting to be sure none of the gang from headquarters was hanging around to carry tales to the Chief.

Ignoring the cold breeze with its threat of rain, I flipped my topcoat collar down and straightened my tie as a porter pushed up the landing steps.

A short man in a light gray overcoat

was the first one out. The next, a tall Sheik with a beard, turned to assist the third passenger, a platinum blonde. Then Sylvia Mallory put one small foot through the door, and I stepped forward feeling all warm inside.

I'm not equipped with eyes in the back of my head, so what came next was as big a surprise to me as it was to everybody else. A burst of gunfire sounded loud in my ears. The blonde staggered, clutched her companion. Four more shots from the automatic. The Sheik and the girl

went down, and Sylvia pitched off the steps with one sharp scream. That was what got me; I started toward her.

Too late I jerked back to my senses and whirled. The shots had come from the parking lot directly behind where I had been standing a few seconds before. But a car had already pulled out of line, fast, and was racing away without lights. The wire fence had barbed-wire extensions on top, and the gate was forty feet distant. I saw only that the car was a big sedan, and blue, before it was out of sight.

I raced for the milling mob, the picture of Sylvia falling off the steps hot in my brain. Someone coming the opposite direction ran smack into me. It was the first passenger, the man in the light gray overcoat. His eyes were wild and he was gasping like a fish out of water. I grabbed his arm.

"You stick around!" I yelled in his ear.

I had to fight through the crowd. A woman on the outer edge was quietly having hysterics. An ambulance was tearing across the field from one of the hangars, siren going full blast. When I reached Sylvia, she was standing on one foot between the pilot and a jittery woman passenger. She reached for my shoulders and hung on.

"Hugh Storm!" she sighed. "Thank heavens you're here."

"Where'd you get hit?" I asked grimly.

TINY dark brown curls tickled my chin as Sylvia leaned her head against my coat. "I—I'm all right," she replied stoutly. "It's just my—my leg. It doesn't hurt much. Help the others first."

One of the ambulance attendants heard her and came over. "I'm afraid they are both beyond help, ma'am."

I showed him my badge. "Leave them for the homicide squad," I said, adding in a whispered aside, "This is Miss Mallory, daughter of the Chief of Detectives. Take good care of her."

"Yes, sir!" he answered, looking impressed. "I sure will."

"Did you get their names?" I asked, nodding at the two motionless figures on the ground.

"The man's is Arnold Barringer. I read about him in the paper; he's a la-

bor leader. I don't know who the blonde is."

Sylvia spoke up. "The girl is his secretary. They were rather—well, quite friendly."

"I get you," I drawled, realizing she meant much more. "You run along now and get that leg fixed up."

She stuck her tongue out at me as the attendants bundled her into the ambulance, and I wondered if they'd be able to keep her in the hospital long enough to do any good. They drove off noisily, and I went to work.

A couple of harness-bulls had arrived in a prowler car. One stood in the gateway, and the other herded the spectators off the field while I asked them about the woman who had had hysterics.

"She's gone," an elderly gentleman with glasses volunteered. "I saw her walk off that way." He pointed at the gate in the fence.

"Any idea who she was?"

"No. I don't believe I ever saw her before. She was babbling something about it being all her fault. She didn't talk sense, though. I may have been mistaken."

"Don't you know anything definite? What did she look like?"

"Small, on the shortish side, and I believe her hair was black. Dark, anyhow. That's about all I can tell you. I didn't pay much attention to her."

Nobody else had, either. I was still trying to find out more about the mysterious woman when the gang from headquarters arrived. Chief Mallory had come along for the ride, and maybe you think I didn't hate that! I reported everything to him, saving the part about his daughter for last.

"You young whelp!" he yelled in my face. "How many times do I have to tell you to stay away from Sylvia? You can't promote yourself in my department by playing up to my daughter. Furthermore, you haven't even the gumption to keep her from getting shot. Detective! Bah! You wouldn't even make a good bodyguard. Get out of my sight!"

There was more which I don't like to repeat. The Chief turned the case over to one of the other detectives, Rod Blaine. I didn't like him. He had a sharp nose, alert eyes that missed practically nothing, and political instincts.

"Blaine," the old man barked, "you're in charge of this. I want the killer within twenty-four hours."

"We'll get him, sir," Blaine promised, with a side glance at me, "if we have to hog-tie some of the amateur bunglers on the force."

"Amateur is right," Mallory growled at me. "What the devil were you doing? You say you were standing near the car, but you don't know the license number, you don't know what the killer looks like, you don't know anything. You—" He swung around angrily at the passenger with the gray coat. "Quit jerking at me! What do you want?"

"My name is Clough. This gentleman here told me to 'stick around.' I have important business and I'd like to leave."

"He did, huh? He's no gentleman; he's a washout. What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Clough replied indignantly as he wiped his forehead with a silk handkerchief. It must have been habit or nervousness because the air was positively cold by now. His hair was jet black, but wrinkles around his eyes and thin mouth indicated his age to be about forty.

"At the sound of shots," he explained, "I ran toward the fence. I thought I might be able to catch a glimpse of the murderer. This detective, however, was running the opposite direction and ran into me. That was when he said to stick around."

MALLORY looked at me. "I might have known it. Running away!"

I tried to keep my voice level. "If anyone was running, it was this punk. He was scared stiff. I was only trying to get to Sylvia."

"Don't argue with me. . . . All right, Clough, give me your name and address and you may go."

Clough showed his driver's license for proof of identity. Looking over the short punk's shoulder to see if he had told the truth, it was all I could do to keep my hands off his neck. The name was S. D. Clough, and the address that of an apartment house on Alvarado Street.

I was boiling with rage by this time, and knew if I stuck around I'd smear Clough's nose three ways from Sunday. So I pushed past the cop at the gate and

got in my roadster. The glass in the door cracked when I slammed it, and I nearly ran over a couple of young girls as I tore out of there.

What a swell spot I was in! I had to break this case or my name was mud. Not a chance for assistance, either; I had to do it myself. I wouldn't have asked Blaine for anything, anyway.

Well, said I to myself, where do I begin? Not much choice; I had a mysterious woman with hysterics, and the name of one of the victims. I pulled up in front of a drug store on Vermont and looked up Barringer's address.

It was an apartment house off Wilshire. The elevator operator sniffed haughtily, but took me up to the fourth floor when I showed him the size of my fist. The corridor was done in gold and rose, the carpet an inch thick. Light reflected indirectly from chromium and opal glass fixtures. One of those places. It didn't take any master mind to figure that Barringer was a big shot.

A maid opened the door and told me Mrs. Barringer was not at home. But I heard movement inside, so I pushed her gently but firmly aside and went on in. Mrs. Barringer had been crying. I was glad, in a way, because that meant she had already been told. Over the phone, I found out.

She was an attractive woman, even in maroon slacks. Her eyes were full of grief and, I thought, something else. But she was not short, her hair not dark, and she did not appear to be the hysterical type. I asked her where she had been at five-fifty.

"Playing bridge," she answered readily, "on the fifth floor. Mrs. Parker's apartment. There were three tables. I came down at six o'clock, about half an hour ago, and—"

"I'm sorry," I told her, "but these questions have to be asked. Have you any idea who might have done it?"

"No," she replied, the fear in her eyes showing plainly. "None at all. I can't imagine."

"Have you any relative living in town?"

She had a married brother, and she gave me his address. But she froze up and got hostile when I started asking about him. I saw I wouldn't get much more out of her, so I walked upstairs and talked to the Parker's maid.

This one was more cordial and would have been a very good witness for Mrs. Barringer—backing up the bridge-playing story—only she kept right on babbling about this and that and finally came out with what she had wanted to tell all the time. It seemed that while Mr. Barringer was away, as he often was, Mrs. Barringer had a visitor. A man.

"I saw him myself," the maid whispered, laying her hand on my arm, "with my very own eyes. He was sneaking out of her apartment, at two o'clock in the morning!"

"Can you beat that!" I responded. "What kind of a guy was he? What did he look like?"

THE same as with nine out of ten people you ask, that was where she fell down. He was tall and handsome—that was her imagination—and he had two arms and two legs and wore clothes. It could have been anybody, and I could have cussed. When she switched over to what nice ties I wore, I retrieved my arm and took my leave.

The evening paper headlined the murder, and had a lot of information about Barringer. His secretary's name was Cleo Norton, and it was hinted that her salary alone could not have paid the rent of the apartment she lived in. Most of it was old stuff from the files, but one portion interested me. Barringer had called a union meeting for seven o'clock that evening, at which they were to vote on whether to go on strike at the Dierst Airplane Motors Company.

It was twenty minutes past seven when I found the hall where they were holding the meeting. An oratorical voice carried clear out to the sidewalk. I walked up the steps and the doorman stopped me.

"Where's your card, buddy?"

"I don't want to go in, especially," I told him. "I just wondered how the voting is going. Or is that postponed?"

"Postponed my eye. Some of the fellows think Dierst killed Barringer himself, just to hold up the strike."

Just then a number of people inside the hall started yelling and whistling and stamping their feet, and the doorman grinned.

"There's your answer, buddy. Not a wheel turns in the morning."

Now I had three suspects: the murdered man's wife, her brother, and the factory owner. It was beginning to look like everybody had killed Barringer.

"I wonder how Sylvia is getting along?" I said out loud for no good reason except that I had been thinking it for two hours. To ease the pain I drove over to the hospital.

"You're at least the tenth person asking for her. Are you a policeman?" the girl in the office asked with a funny smile.

"What's the game?" I countered.

"Oh, nothing"—sigh—"only we let her have her clothes a few minutes ago. She's been threatening to bring down the entire police force if we don't let her go home. There's no real danger except infection, but the doctor thinks she really should stay until tomorrow. Will you try to persuade her?"

"It wouldn't do any good. Number 114, did you say?"

"Yes. End of the hall, at the back of the building."

A nurse came out of the room as I approached, her eyes wide and scandalized. Sylvia had her hat pulled down cock-eyed over a tangled mass of curls, and she was hobbling around on one crutch.

"My hero!" she shouted gleefully. "You always show up in the nick of time, Hugh. Get me out of this place of antiseptics and hush-hush."

"Aren't you rushing things a little?"

I stalled.

"I should say not. You can't keep a good girl down with a mere flesh wound in the—ah—leg."

"What do you mean, ah—leg?"

With a coy glance from beneath her long lashes, she gave me one of those all-in-one-breath replies, "I can't tell you, but it won't show in a bathing suit, and I'll have to eat off the mantel until it gets well, and if you tell anybody I'll never speak to you again."

I gave her my arm on that, and attempted to keep my face straight as I helped her down the corridor to the elevator.

"I think you're horrid," she complained indignantly, "I thought you were a friend of—"

I NEVER heard the rest of it for the simple reason that there was an explosion that would have drowned out

her loudest yell, even if the blast of air hadn't knocked her off balance. She swung all her weight on my arm, dropping her crutch, hat and handbag. I leaned her against the wall and dashed back.

Room 114 was a wreck. From the appearance of things, a bomb had come through the window and landed on the bed, because the bed wasn't there any more. A portion of the mattress had gone through the demolished door and lay on the immaculate white tile of the corridor, smoldering. I shuddered. Suppose I had arrived one minute later, or we had talked that much longer in the room!

I gave a few simple directions to the most authoritative sounding of the dozen internes who arrived from nowhere, talked to Mallory on the phone, and took Sylvia away from a nurse who had come to her rescue and who obviously thought I was an anarchist.

After searching through the hedges that bordered the driveway, I drove up to the side door and helped Sylvia into my roadster.

"That," she declared when I had gone six or eight blocks, "was close."

"Too close, young lady. The dirty—the guy evidently got your room number from the office. It certainly was no secret. At any rate, when you get home there will be several husky men who will guard you and keep you indoors. And you needn't complain if they also keep you away from windows. Your illustrious father's orders."

She thought this over for a while, then said in a puzzled tone, "I can't think what it could be. They sat across the aisle from me, but I noticed nothing that could possibly incriminate a soul. They were pretty thick, but every passenger on the plane must have seen that."

"True enough. Even the newspapers hinted at that angle. Perhaps whatever it was happened in Frisco before you left. How about Clough, the short fellow in the light gray overcoat?"

Sylvia laughed. "Daddy told me about that. So you have a grudge against Clough!"

"Not at all. It has to be somebody, and Clough lied about his purpose in running from the plane."

"Well, you'll have to guess again. All I heard him do was phone his wife and

tell her he was coming home."

"Where was that?"

"At the airport before we took off. I was talking to a girl friend and he was using the next telephone. They were not regular booths, just one long shelf with partitions between. I heard him drop five or six coins in the box, so I knew he was calling long distance. He used a term of endearment, and I could tell by the tone of his voice he wasn't talking to a sweetheart, so it was his wife."

"Is that all he said? Wasn't there something else?"

"Not a thing, darling. All he said was that he was leaving in five minutes."

The two bodyguards from headquarters had arrived ahead of us. I left Sylvia in their care and drove over to the residence of the factory owner.

He was short and broad, built like a truck, and you could tell he had come up from the ranks by his gnarled and calloused hands. His manner was polite enough, even though Rod Blaine had finished grilling him not more than ten minutes before. He had heard about the strike, of course, and appeared anxious for the murder to be cleared up so his workers would quit thinking he had a hand in it.

"You know how strikers are," Dierst suggested. "They are liable to riot at the slightest provocation and tear the plant to pieces."

I couldn't exactly agree, yet there was no point in starting an argument about it. He gave an average sort of alibi, saying his "man" saw him come home at five o'clock, and go directly to his work-shop in the basement.

"We have to keep up with the latest developments, you know," he explained.

"By the way," I inquired, "do you know a man by the name of S. D. Clough?"

DIERST chuckled. "The other detective was telling me. Clough's the one who crossed you up, isn't he? No, I can't say that I know him. You're not trying to get something on him, are you?"

This was the second time I had had that suggestion thrown in my face, and I saw red. "Sure!" I shouted. "He's mixed up in this killing. My girl gave me a hint and I'm going to follow it up if I have to throttle the guy!"

I stamped out of the house and drove over to the address on Alvarado. It was drizzling when I got there, but the way I felt I didn't care if it poured tadpoles. No guy could throw bombs at my girl and get away with it.

There was a row of mail boxes outside the door of the apartment house, with a card under each one. No S. D. Clough. My pulse began to pound faster and I knew I was on the right track. It wasn't likely that Rod Blaine was following up this angle. He apparently thought the incident between Clough and me at the airport was a big joke—the way he was retailing it all over town. But he hadn't seen the fear in the punk's eyes.

I talked to the manager. Clough had moved away three months before, without leaving a forwarding address.

"What kind of woman is his wife?" I asked, still having the hysterical dame in the back of my mind.

"Wife? Mr. Clough is not married."

"What!" I barked. "Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. Unless he married himself one when he moved away. He said he was going into a house on the south side of town, and that's all I know about it."

"Okay. What apartment did he live in?"

"Three seventeen. But it won't do you no good to bother the present tenants."

"I'm not going to bother them, I'm just going to ask a few questions," I replied, heading for the stairs.

A radio was blasting away in three seventeen, and when the door was opened by a frowsy dame the odor of garlic nearly knocked me down.

"What?" she shouted. "No, he doesn't live here. . . . Dave, turn that damn radio down. Now, what's the name—Plow?"

"Clough, madam," I repeated. "S. D. Clough."

"Never heard of him. There's been some kind of a Bolshevik newspaper stuck in the mailbox once a month, though. I wish they'd stop sending it, we got enough troubles as it is."

"Do you happen to have one you haven't thrown out? Maybe I can get what I want from that."

She dragged one out of a wastebasket, covered with wine stains and ashes. It was a radical sheet sure enough, about

as red as they come. The name and address was on a piece of paper stuck on the corner: Edgar J. Davis, Alvarado Street, Apt. 317.

I thanked the dame profusely. In fact, I could have kissed her, garlic and all. I stuck my head in the manager's apartment again on the way out. He had never heard of an Edgar J. Davis, and knew nothing about the newspapers; which was what I expected.

A dollar's worth of rubber tore off my tires when I skidded up in front of the main telephone exchange. The night superintendent was named Genevieve, and she had done me favors before. It wasn't three minutes until I had the dope I wanted. A private phone had been installed for an Edgar J. Davis nine weeks previously in the fifty-nine hundred block on Arlington. I did kiss Genevieve, to her expressed surprise and horror.

THE rain was coming down in sheets now; I had to drive more slowly. It was nine-thirty when I switched off my headlights and coasted to the curb across the street from the place I was looking for.

The house was dark. I walked around to the back and nothing happened, so I utilized a little trick I had learned and picked the lock on the back door. It has always been a mystery to me why people install elaborate locks on their front doors when a child could get in the back with a piece of baling wire.

The light from my flash revealed a bunch of dirty dishes in the kitchen sink, and the linoleum floor had been scrubbed about the time it was laid. If a woman lives here, said I to myself, she is either a hophead or a cripple.

The one bedroom had been the private playground of a cyclone. Furthermore, there was no evidence of a woman being around at all. No powder, no nicknacks, not even dresses in the closet. I moved up to the living room and flicked my light once to locate the windows, intending to draw down the shades so I could work more freely. Crossing the floor I stumbled over something soft and yielding. I finished what I had started to do, then switched on the ceiling lights. Face downward was the body—the very dead body—of Mr. S. D. Clough.

On top of his head was a nasty gash,

and the thing that had killed him was a knife. The handle sticking out of his back looked as big as my arm. There was a lot of blood, just beginning to clot; he had been dead less than an hour.

It gave me the willies to go through his pockets, but I did it. After all, I had gone to considerable trouble to find him. And I still had to find the louse that threw that bomb at Sylvia Mallory.

His pockets had been emptied before I got there. I ransacked the joint—he didn't have much—and gained absolutely zero, except a couple more of those red newspapers. So I phoned headquarters and gave them the dope. After that the operator switched me over to Blaine, who had left notice he wanted a word with me. He was subtly sarcastic.

"You can quit working on the Barringer thing," he purred, "I have the killer."

"I'm astounded!" I sarcasted back at him. "Who is it?"

"Mrs. Barringer's brother. She put us on to him by trying to cover him up. The brother's wife had told him about Barringer and the secretary, and he swore to avenge his sister. He's a wild-haired nut. His wife, by the way, is another of your oversights. She's the one who was having hysterics the same time you did."

"Has he confessed?"

"He will!"

"How about the explosion," I asked sweetly; "is he responsible for that, too?"

"We're not certain yet," Blaine admitted, "but we'll get it out of him."

"Yeah. That's right down your alley. What time did you pick him up?"

Blaine rolled the answer around in his mouth. "A little after eight. Not bad, eh? Less than three hours after the shooting."

"Yeah, that's great," I drawled.

"Except you got the wrong guy. Unless you can explain how he knifed S. D. Clough—another passenger in the plane if you remember—less than an hour ago."

The phone jumped in my hand. "You're crazy! What are you talking about?"

"Ask the harness bulls downstairs; they'll tell you all about it."

I hung up on his spluttering and sat

staring at nothing. I could hear the rain drumming on the roof, and a car made squishing sounds as it passed the house.

Something was decidedly screwy. Sylvia had said that Clough phoned his wife from Frisco, and Clough didn't have a wife. I spun the dial again. Luckily, Sylvia was still awake and took the call on her bedroom extension. I waited for the guard downstairs to hang up before I asked her what I wanted to know.

"Think, my dear, as you have never thought before," I begged. "See if you can remember *exactly* what Clough said over the phone when he called long distance. He couldn't have talked to his wife, because he hasn't any."

SHE sounded sleepy. "Oh, that again?"

"It's important, Sylvia. Please try to remember."

"Well, let me see. . . ." Silence while I strangled the receiver. "He got his party about the time I finished my own conversation. Then he said. . . . Oh, yes, he said: 'Hello, dearest. I'm leaving on the plane in five minutes. We arrive at five-fifty.' . . . Those are his very words. His tone was, well, rather business-like. As though the 'dearest' really didn't mean much."

An icy chill went through my body, leaving a cool sort of certainty. "It meant everything! What he said was not 'dearest', but 'Dierst'. D-i-e-r-s-t. Owner of the Dierst Airplane Motors Company."

"Oh, Hugh, do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it. He was telling the killer what time to expect the victim. Please don't tell a soul. And keep away from windows; until I phone you again, at least. I'm going to get that killer, and I'm going to get him alone. You know why."

A siren was screaming nearby as I hopped in my roadster. I should have waited, but what I had to do was more important. I went to the wrong place first, at that.

A light was on in the back of Dierst's place. My first ring brought no result, so I held my thumb on the button. A minute and a half later the door jerked open and a young elephant in a bathrobe came out on the porch with his jaw stuck out. Dierst's "man."

"Whatta ya think you're doin', mug? Want a poke in da puss?"

"If you think you're big enough," I yapped.

He evidently was not used to that kind of answer, because he hesitated before squaring off to give it to me. Which was too, too bad. I swung first and connected a haymaker to his jaw with all my weight behind it. Staggering back, he clutched the side of the door. I grabbed my gun and tapped him lightly where it would do the most good, and he folded with a gentle sigh in the middle of the doorway. I guess he had read only the Queensbury rules.

Pounding upstairs, I went through every room on the second floor, then did the same downstairs. The cellar was locked. I broke down the door, but nobody was there either. I did notice another of those radical sheets on a bench but no Dierst.

He was the killer; I had no doubt of that after seeing his workshop in the basement. He had the equipment to manufacture a hundred bombs if he wanted them. But why?

I remembered seeing a telephone in his room upstairs, also where he had scribbled one number in three or four places on the cover of the directory, surrounded by hearts and circles and things. So I ran back and looked up Arnold Barringer's number. Sure enough, they matched. Dierst was Mrs. Barringer's part-time boy friend!

The whole thing was clear now. He had killed Barringer because he wanted the woman, and perhaps the money she would inherit from her husband. Clough, perhaps unwittingly, had been the fingerman. The secretary and Sylvia just happened to get in the way of his rotten shooting. A little later Clough probably told Dierst about Sylvia overhearing his long distance phone call, so Dierst tried to get her at the hospital before she could talk. Then he got leery of Clough for some reason or other, and killed him too. The most dangerous type of murderer: ruthless and panicky.

What was it I had told him earlier in the evening? "My girl gave me a hint, and I'm going to follow it up." My Lord—that was his reason for knifing Clough! And Sylvia was next as certain as Fate, unless I could stop it!

It had quit raining and there was just

enough water on the streets to make them as slick as glass. I drove as fast as I dared. Which was too fast; three blocks from the Mallory home I wrapped my roadster around a palm tree.

Sprinting the rest of the way, I noticed a big blue sedan fifty yards from the house, and stopped behind another car across the street to get my breath. Something warm was running down my arm as a result of the crackup, but I didn't waste time thinking about it.

The Mallory place was set back from the sidewalk about sixty feet, and the yard was studded with clumps of shrubbery. The front porch light went on while I was still breathing hard. At the same time I caught a movement near one of the bushes between me and the house.

The way I felt wasn't like dodging around, so I marched across the street to get a better look. The figure of a man was vague against dark foliage. Then the front door opened and I heard the sound of Sylvia's voice as she hobbled out the door with a bodyguard fore and aft.

THE man behind the bush stepped out into the light and I saw for sure that it was Dierst, drawing back his arm to throw a large object he held in his hand. Sylvia and the two coppers, totally unaware of his presence, proceeded along the walk. Dierst's arm paused at the end of the back swing, and light glinted on metal.

Fear for Sylvia scorched my face, and agony tore at my chest. My mouth opened wide, but my throat constricted so tightly that not a sound came out. Even if I had yelled at the top of my natural voice, there was nothing Sylvia or her guards could do to avoid that awful, rending, mutilating death that lay poised in the killer's hand.

I do not remember pulling the trigger. I know I did not consciously aim. Dierst's arm was already starting up for the toss when my gun roared and jarred against the palm of my hand.

Dierst spun half around, fell to his knees, and the object dropped to the lawn with a dull thud. He screamed, once, trying to back away from it.

There was a blinding flash and a heavy, roaring explosion. An invisible wave pushed me back on my heels. Bits

of foliage floated down like confetti, and there was a ragged hole in the ground where Dierst had been.

I ran up the walk and grabbed Sylvia's shoulders, and then dropped my arms. I was trembling like a hop-head on the iron cure. I took her back into the house, and none too gently, either. To cover my jitters I got sarcastic.

"I suppose somebody phoned," I said, "and told you it was a hospital, and I was hurt. So you jammed on that goofy hat and pulled these two big brave men out the door after you." Nobody answered, so I yelled, "Was that it?"

Sylvia nodded dumbly. I couldn't stand the expression on her face, so I spun around. "Mike! You let her fall for a gag like that! I've a notion to—"

"Aw, gee, Storm," Mike butted in, "you can't do nothin' with her. She was actin' like the world was comin' to an end, cryin' and all. How could I—" Sylvia rammed his foot with her crutch. "I did no such thing! Don't

you believe the big ape. They—they—"

A big tear-drop rolled down the end of her pert little nose. She shook it off with a toss of her head, and finished in a rush. "The man on the phone said you were calling for me, and I knew you were going after the murderer alone, and he said you were shot, and—and— Oh, Hugh, darling, here comes Daddy!"

With that she dropped her crutch and threw her arms around my neck. I had to hold on, didn't I? And what could the old man do about it? I heard Mike whispering to him behind my back. After a while he tapped me on the shoulder

"Har-r-rumph," he said. "Pardon the interruption, Storm. Before I go to bed, I wanted to ask you what you have planned for Sunday. Why don't you come up for dinner? Syvlia makes the best oyster dressing that was ever introduced to a turkey."

I couldn't answer right then, but he sure was telling the truth.

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"Well, Spider," said the customs agent, "haul in your big fish"

SPIDER McHUGH lashed the wheel of his speedboat as the lean craft snored through the waters of Puget Sound. Just the right speed for trolling.

Spider—known to the underworld as the dope king who had quit the racket—moved back to the stern seat and began to rig his tackle. Fondly, he snapped on a spoon of his own design. He loved to fish. And he gave the fish a chance,

which was a concession he never made to anybody or anything else in life.

The motor was revving slowly as he paid out his line. His black eyes squinted across the water at the Bureau of Fisheries boat. Every time he went out, those blasted inspectors hovered around, spying on him. Why didn't they leave him alone? They'd stopped him hundreds of times in the year since he'd settled down to live a straight life on crooked

profits. Always, there was a customs agent aboard the fisheries craft.

They would stop him casually enough, asking: "How goes fishing, Spider?" And then, sarcastically: "Still using those home-made spoons of yours?"

Not that he minded being ribbed about his spoons. No, when he made a spoon it was a good one. Like the one he was trolling with now, for instance. Those sneopers had seen him land a thirty-eight-pound King salmon with this one.

Suddenly, his mind snapped back to the present. His line was jerking, pole bending like a willow in the wind. Quickly killing the motor, he played the fish like the master he was; now taking in line, now paying it out.

Finally, he brought the fighting King to gaff. Boy, what a beaut! That spoon sure did hook 'em!

Again, he started the motor, paid out the line. He was abeam of Point No Point now. Sight of the point brought a surge of memories. Here was where he had made his fortune. Many were the cargoes of opium he and his gang had picked up off this point!

He'd been smart, though, to quit the racket when he did. He'd known when to leave well enough alone. But those customs men still kept after him. They just couldn't believe that a successful smuggler had quit.

His thoughts wandered through the past. He heard a judge saying, "Case dismissed. Insufficient evidence." They'd always said that. He had been nabbed many times, but never convicted.

He thought of the smart methods he'd used. That idea of ballasting bundles of opium with measured rock salt. When thrown off Orient ships as they stood in past Point No Point, the bundles sank. Then, later, when the salt had dissolved, they floated to the surface and were picked up.

And there had been that idea of stringing the tacks together on a rope of glass floats such as Japanese fishermen use. Yes, he had been smart. Smart while in the racket, and still smarter to get out. . . .

Glancing furtively over his shoulder, Spider saw the fisheries boat bearing down on him. He had konked his motor, and was reeling in his line. In trolling past the point he'd snagged something—kelp, he supposed.

The fisheries boat canted sharply and drifted in close to his speedboat.

Slowly reeling in his line, Spider's face suddenly whitened. Ghost of the past! There, only a few feet from the boat, bobbing and glimmering in the water, was a line of cans, interspersed with glass floats! He'd hooked one of his own old dope cargoes! One that had been lost.

He looked at the glass floats, some still in good condition, some broken and water-filled. The cargo must have floated in the eddying currents around the point for more than a year, partly submerged by leaky floats, not sinking entirely because of the good ones.

"Well, Spider," called a man from the fisheries boat, "haul in your big fish."

Spider shot a glance over his shoulder. It was Customs Agent Johnson.

FRANTICALLY, Spider's agile brain sought a way out. If he reeled in, they'd certainly get him for *possession* of narcotics, if not for the more serious charge of smuggling. If he stalled, they'd board and get the stuff anyway. Could he run for it? No, they'd leap aboard before he could start his motor. . . .

An idea! He reached for his gaff hook, jabbed it in the water, twisted it in the light line, and jerked. The line broke. The dope cans began to sink.

Spider looked up, forced a smile. "Well, I guess I made a sap out of myself. It got away—"

Johnson had leaped overboard. He came up, swimming with one arm. In the other, he gripped the cans of opium and the glass floats.

Three other men seized Spider and brought him aboard the fisheries boat, then helped Johnson out of the water with his burden.

"You ain't got nothin' on me," Spider said triumphantly. "That junk wasn't in my possession!"

"No," said the customs man, "we won't charge you with possession. That's not so serious a count. You're hooked for *smuggling*, Spider! Hooked with your own tackle. That famous spoon you made is here in the rope net holding these cans of dope. We saw you deliberately break your line. That's circumstantial evidence of guilt!"

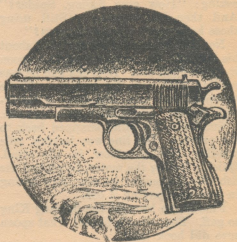
THE CARELESS CADAVER

By HUGH B. CAVE

Author of "Masters of Midnight," "The Gentleman Is Dead," etc.

IT was a tough assignment because it meant moving into new territory: into a wilderness so enormous and weirdly silent that Detective Joe Donnelly wondered how in the name of all things holy, a man could begin to cover it.

He had never been in the big woods before, and it scared him. The road behind him belonged to a paper company, and this so-called road he was now on, this pair of ruts snaking through to Nemoosechuk Lake, belonged to the camp from which Steve Andrews had vanished.



A dick for many years, Donnelly had seen death in many forms—but this was something new and different!

The two heavy-rumped horses worked as if pulling a dray. The buckboard bumped over boulders, sloshed through red, thick mud and hub-deep water. Donnelly hung on.

Off to the left a stream gurgled. To the right the woods were deep and still.

It was going to be a mean assignment, tracking down a killer in this wilderness. And he could be wrong to begin with. There might not be any killer. It might be just a case of three persons, two of them tenderfeet, getting lost.

But Angel Murdock *had* been seen on the outskirts of this region a week or so ago, and what more natural than for the rat to head for his old stamping ground after his break from the pen?

A log bridge loomed ahead, over the stream. One horse slowed, stopped and stood quivering. "Go 'long you, Jerry!" the driver said.

Reluctantly Jerry obeyed, but eyed every log of the bridge before putting his feet down.

"He broke through here last week," the driver explained. "Cut himself up pretty bad. Scared now."

"They're your horses, Mr. Lessard?"

"Yep. Had 'em three year. Haul lumber with 'em in winter."

The buckboard bumped off the bridge

and Donnelly said: "You see much of Mr. Andrews and his wife when they were here?"

"Some. He's nice fella."

"They don't come any better. Tell me, just what is this trip they started out on?"

"Takes long time," Lessard said. "By canoe you go to head of lake, then portage two mile to Nemoosechuk Stream. Paddle six mile down to Second Lake and portage again. In three-four days you get to Chamberlain, then go 'long Allagash trip."

"And Steve Andrews never got to Chamberlain, huh?"

"He never get to Second Lake, where he supposed to swap camp guide for regular guide. His wife, his guide, himself—they disappear."

"What do you think of it?"

"Fonny. Very fonny, I think. Abner Randall, he guide them and he know this country like I know my horses. He never get lost. Something very fonny happen."

"What could have happened?"

"Don' know." Lessard shrugged his shoulders, spat out over the wheel. "Mr. Andrews, he nice fella but he act queer. Two-three times I see him go off alone in woods. Once he go at night when whole

camp asleep. Why he do that? What he look for?"

Donnelly didn't know any answers. All he knew was that young Steve Andrews, just promoted to homicide, had brought his swell little wife Ruthie up here on a honeymoon. Now they were missing, and every available man in the region was searching for them.

The buckboard creaked to a stop. "You go rest of way by canoe," the driver said. Donnelly climbed down and looked around.

Nemoosechuk Lake lay to his left, and a canoe and guide were waiting. The buckboard, bearing his luggage under a tarpaulin, would bump another two miles by road to the camp.

Ten feet beyond the waiting canoe a big trout gulped a fly from the glassy surface. Over across, you could see lights winking in the camp.

It was a setting to quicken a man's pulse. No place for murder.

THE proprietor, a middle-aged, thick-set man named Travis, came down from the main lodge and showed Donnelly to his cabin. "Supper's ready any time you are," Travis said.

He walked to the lodge and found that, being late, he was to eat in the kitchen. The cook's helper, a scrawny, dull-faced fellow named Mosey, served him. While he ate, Mosey hovered close.

"You—you a detective, huh, Mr. Donnelly?"

"Yeah."

"Gosh! I allus wanted to meet a real detective! I read about 'em in books."

"Don't bother Mr. Donnelly!" the cook snapped.

"It's all right," Donnelly said, and wondered if the scrawny Mosey could be of any use to him. You never could tell.

He said: "You'd like to be a detective yourself, hey?"

"You bet!"

"Well, maybe you'll get a chance. You know why I'm here?"

"To find Mr. Andrews," Mosey said brightly.

"That's right. But I'm a city dick, Mosey. Not much good in the woods. Maybe you could tell me where to begin."

"Huh?"

"What do you think happened to

Mr. Andrews and his wife?"

"He got lost."

"But where?"

"Gosh," Mosey said helplessly, "I dunno."

Donnelly sighed. "I guess I was mistaken," he said.

He finished his meal and returned to his cabin. Lessard, the French-Canadian teamster, was unloading his luggage from the buckboard. "You got anything to do for a while?" Donnelly said.

"I take care of my horses."

"When you're through, come back. It might be worth something to you."

Lessard nodded. Alone, Donnelly finished unpacking and went out on the porch. The sun was down and the lake was a deep well of purple. He scowled at it. Somewhere out in that vast darkness was young Steve Andrews. Dead, maybe. And Ruthie. He'd been best man at the hitch. He'd kissed the bride. Not just peeked at her, but kissed her until she squealed. Two finer kids didn't live.

He had to find them. But how?

Lessard came in while Donnelly was lighting a lamp. He said: "You want me, huh?"

Donnelly took a newspaper from his suitcase and spread it on the table. "Take a look at this. You ever see this man around here? Or anywhere?"

It was a picture of Angel Murdock. He had others, police file pictures and some taken in stir, but this one was the best. It showed a beefy, beetle-eyed face with a long upper lip that needed but didn't have a moustache. The long upper lip curled down to a mouth that sneered. Small flat ears and a broad sloping forehead helped slightly, but not much, to lend a look of intelligence.

Lessard shook his head. "I never see him." He leaned closer, squinting. "This man, he is the one who escape from prison? That Murdock?"

"Yeah."

"I hear of him."

"Well," Donnelly said grimly, "I'm green up here, but if I'm right in what I think, you may meet up with Angel Murdock yet."

They thought he was crazy, because he did everything wrong. Instead of hiring guides and organizing searching parties, he went nowhere except for oc-

casional hikes into the woods.

Even that was hard work. He hadn't the clothes or the boots for it, and the black flies tortured him. Fly-dope, a greasy paste they gave him for protection, melted on his perspiring face in a gooey mess.

The others gave up hope, but Joe Donnelly kept at it. He didn't believe, as they did, that Steve Andrews and his bride were drowned. Steve Andrews had been the best swimmer on the force.

Still, as his efforts failed to produce the results he hoped for, his fly-bitten face grew gray and lined. The evening of the fourth day found him sitting on the cabin steps, staring moodily into the dark. And out of the dark came Paul Lessard.

"Tonight," Lessard said, "I think of one last place."

Donnelly shed his lethargy and snapped eagerly: "Where?"

"Down the road two miles or so there is a spring. Maybe it is dry up by this time; I don't know. But tomorrow I go there."

"Tomorrow, hell! Tonight!"

Lessard shook his head. "If he there, he see flashlight and run away. Then we mus' begin all over again. Tomorrow is best. You take canoe and paddle to foot of lake. I meet you there with buckboard on way in from garages."

He spat, wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Buckboard and horses they down at garages tonight, because I break down this afternoon when I take party out. Tomorrow morning I walk down, get horses and come back with supplies. Meet you at foot of lake, yes?"

Reluctantly the detective agreed.

HE was on his way back from the lodge, with breakfast under his belt, when Lessard left the next morning. With the teamster was the scrawny Mosey, the cook's helper. Lessard waved.

An hour later Donnelly pushed a canoe into the water and laboriously paddled to the foot of the lake.

Beaching the canoe, he walked up to the road and looked around. There was no sign of the buckboard. He listened, and there was only the weird stillness of the woods. He sat down, waited.

It was a long time before he heard the horses and turned to stare at the bend

of the road. And when he saw them, he knew something was wrong.

Lessard was not perched on the buckboard seat. The seat was empty. The two horses plodded along, their shoes striking sparks from the rocks in the road, but there was no sign of the driver.

Donnelly scowled, stepped forward. All at once his scowl became a gasp of horror and he stiffened.

He acted mechanically then. Snapping out of his trance he lunged forward, waved his arms and yelled at the horses to stop. They did, and the heavy stillness came back, and through it Donnelly stumbled around to the rear of the wagon.

The silence was all around him, heavy and strangling, and he could hear his heart thumping as he stared down at the thing in the road. The thing was Lessard. A rope encircled his ankles and he lay face down, a few bloodsmearred shreds of clothing still clinging to his broken body.

With stiff fingers Donnelly untied the rope and then carried the battered, sodden shape to the side of the road. A dick for many years, he had seen death in many forms, but this was different. This man hadn't been shot down or beaten up. He had been dragged on the end of a rope over a road full of jagged rocks. He was all but torn apart.

One of the horses bobbed its head to shake off a swarm of black flies. The harness rattled, the buckboard creaked, and there was no other sound anywhere. Where was Mosey, the cook's helper?

Donnelly placed the body in the wagon, climbed up and untangled the reins. He yelled, "Giddup, there! Giddup, Jerry!" and his voice had no effect. They had stopped for him because he'd blocked their path, but they refused to move now.

He cursed them, yelled at them for five minutes, then got down and carried Lessard to the canoe. When he looked back ten minutes later, with a broad expanse of lake between him and the road, the buckboard was still there. The horses had not moved.

They refused to believe it was murder. They told Donnelly he was mad. It was an accident. "Why in the world," Travis said, "would anyone wish to harm poor Lessard?"

"That's what I want to ask your cook's helper," Donnelly retorted.

It was an hour before Mosey showed up. With an axe and a shovel over one shoulder, he came into camp whistling and kept right on whistling until he saw the strained, hostile expressions on the faces of the men who stood waiting for him.

"Where you been?" Donnelly demanded.

"Why, fixin' the road," Mosey declared, "like Mr. Lessard told me to."

Travis said sharply: "What do you mean, like Lessard told you?"

Mosey put down his axe and shovel and looked scared. "Why, I walked down to the garages with Mr. Lessard this morning," he said, "and rode back with him a little ways and stopped off to fix the road. Lessard, he's fishin' now, in the stream below the dam. Least-ways, the buckboard's down there."

"Why didn't you wait and get a ride back?"

"Gosh, it's most dinner time and I got to be in the kitchen!"

"Suppose," Donnelly said grimly, "you tell us the whole story."

It took Mosey a long time because he was scared. Before breakfast, Lessard had asked him to walk down to the garages. There was a bad stretch of road that needed repairing. He'd gone down, helped load supplies onto the wagon, then ridden back with Lessard to the bad stretch.

"Mr. Lessard said he couldn't wait for me and I'd have to walk back. He said he had to stop at the spring."

"What spring?" Donnelly snapped.

"Why, the one just below the bridge. That old one, off in the woods a ways."

"Below the bridge?" Donnelly repeated slowly.

"Why, yes."

"You and I," the detective declared, "will go down right now and have a look at that spring, Mosey. Maybe Mr. Travis would like to come, too."

Paul Lessard's buckboard was still there in the road. "We'll take the team," Donnelly said, climbing out of the canoe.

Travis looked at him askance. "Nobody but Lessard can make those horses work, Mr. Donnelly."

"Why not?"

"They just won't work for anyone

else. We could make them go as far as the bridge, perhaps, by yelling at them, but it would be easier walking. We'd have to walk from the bridge on, anyway. Jerry wouldn't cross the bridge without Lessard driving."

"Okay then, we'll walk."

It was a long walk and not much of a spring when they got to it. A sodden spongy path led in from the road. There were no footprints, Donnelly noticed, in the soil. He pulled a tin can off a stick, and the can crumbled in his fingers.

He looked around, keeping an eye on Travis and the cook's helper, then shrugged and said wearily: "All right, let's go back. I'm satisfied."

"Satisfied of what, Mr. Donnelly?" Mosey asked.

"Skip it," Donnelly said curtly.

It got dark early that night and Donnelly sat alone in his cabin, wondering how long he would have to wait. At ten o'clock he took out his police positive and checked it. There were still lights in the main lodge.

When the lights went out he put out his own lamp and then, in the dark, wadded some clothes together to form a dummy figure on his bed. Slipping out of the cabin he made his way through the dark, uphill, to a point where he could see almost all the camp buildings.

The night air was cold and he shivered. Out on the lake a loon babbled.

An hour passed. The last light in the camp went out and then, at long last, a shape emerged from one of the smaller cabins.

MOTIONLESS, Donnelly watched. The shape crept down to the lake-shore, along the shore to his own cabin. It moved slowly, furtively, and carried something bulky under one arm.

It slunk to the rear of Donnelly's cabin and peered in through the window, then moved away. Donnelly rose and followed, and the shape led him out to the road.

He had trouble then. The darkness took his quarry and gulped it, and he was forced to trail the man by sound alone. It was a relief when the fellow flashed a light after getting well away from the camp. The light was a bobbing yellow eye in the blackness, easily followed.

It was a new experience for the city

dick. With mud and knee-deep water to wade through, and rocks to stumble over, he had to keep far behind the light lest the noise of his clumsy pursuit reach his quarry's ears. But if he had guessed right, the hike this time would not be over-long. It would end somewhere this side of the bridge.

It did—on a stretch of road ankle-deep in cold water. Ahead, the half-visible shape slowed to a halt, and Donnelly stood still. The water numbed his legs. He remembered having walked through it before, and wondered about it. Now his quarry turned from the road and plunged into the woods. When he followed, he found a path—if you could call it that—underfoot.

He moved more slowly, making noise in spite of himself. But the man ahead ploughed along, apparently suspecting nothing. The light was a weird yellow blob swinging through abysmal blackness. Then it stopped.

Donnelly stopped, too, and stood wide-legged, breathing hard from his exertions. The light winked out, on again, out and on three times in some sort of signal. Donnelly moved forward, careful where he put his feet. A low, shaky voice stopped him.

"Hey! Hey, mister! Where are you?" Almost a whisper.

There were two voices then, and two shapes. Where the second shape came from, Donnelly did not see. It was just suddenly there, in the glow of the light. He crouched, watching.

The two men talked a moment, in voices too low for Donnelly to catch words. The bundle changed hands. Then the light fanned around and bobbed through the dark toward the detective. The glow missed him by inches. Still in a crouch, he stayed frozen, let the fellow go past him unmolested. He was interested now in the other one.

The man with the light went back to the road. The other one, hidden now by the darkness, turned and strode off in the opposite direction, through the underbrush, with Donnelly in slow pursuit. The darkness came at the detective and strangled him; he blundered on, silently cursing the low-hanging branches that tore at his face, the rotted logs that crumbled beneath him and sent him sprawling. Once more he had only sound to guide him. Once, when he stopped,

there was suddenly no sound at all, and his face paled, he stood rigid, one hand hovering over his gun, in expectation of attack. But the sound returned, still ahead of him.

After ten minutes of that, he saw a light, a feeble yellow glow close to the ground. Against it, moving toward it, was the bulky, weaving shape of the man he trailed. The light took form and became the rectangular doorway of a crude low lean-to. The human shape momentarily blotted it out, stooping to enter. Then the light was unobstructed again and Donnelly warily advanced upon it.

His fists were clenched and he could feel sweat moving on his face. What would he find? Four persons—or three graves and a grave-digger?

He watched the light. He had seen it first from a distance of maybe seventy-five yards; now it was fifty, now forty. He moved with a noiselessness that surprised him. The police positive was in his fist. Every bone in his big body ached.

There was no sound. None that he heard, at any rate. He stared at the light and crept toward it, slowly, and closed the gap to ten yards. Then five. And suddenly there was no light. There was abrupt darkness where the light had been, and he stood rigid.

Seconds passed. Off to his left a branch broke. Then, behind him, the darkness quivered to the rasping of a harsh, jeering voice.

"I got you covered! I got a rifle aimed at your head, mister. Keep right on walkin', straight ahead!"

It was the darkness that numbed him, not the voice. The voice was human, but the engulfing wall of pitch was terrifying. He had stared at the light too long, forgetting the empty void that lay in wait around it. Now the void rushed in and he was a man with a sack slapped over his head. A man helpless.

"Keep on walkin', I said! Straight ahead like you was goin'!"

It was not the voice of the man he had followed from camp. It wasn't a voice he recognized. And something in it was queer. You heard voices like that in asylums.

Sweat oozed out on Donnelly's face and he took a slow step forward, stopped, tried to figure what lay in the brain be-

hind the voice. The voice gave him no time to think. It rasped again: "Straight ahead, to the lean-to! Keep goin'!"

THE lean-to, Donnelly figured, would shelter him if he could somehow get around it, get behind it, without inviting a bullet in the attempt. He stepped forward, sideways. There was no path. The forest floor was carpeted with decayed leaves and low, wiry bushes. There was no light. The fellow with the voice could not see him, could only hear him.

"Keep goin'!"

He had stopped without meaning to. Now he sluggishly moved forward again—forward and sideways. Another dozen steps would take him past the lean-to. Then he could lunge for cover, whirl, shoot it out. His police positive would more than match the rifle. It—

He felt the weight against his ankle almost before he heard the chain rattle. His foot, his right foot, scuffed the side of the trap and the steel jaws gnashed together with a clang that hurled out a hundred eerie echoes. Had he obeyed orders and walked straight ahead, instead of veering to the left, his left foot would have felt the bite of those steel teeth. As it was, he lurched clear, tripped over the taut chain and sprawled headlong.

And screamed.

He put all he had into that scream. It was phoney but it poured from his throat so quickly that it sounded like the real thing, like the wail of a man in agony. It ripped through the darkness and climbed up to shrivel the moon. In answer came a wild, bloodcurdling roar of mirth.

Donnelly continued to scream, but pushed himself up on hands and knees, regained his balance and stared with smouldering eyes into the dark. The laughter chilled him. At first it came no closer; it stayed out there in the blackness, hideous because he could not see the source of it. Then it ceased and the voice yelled triumphantly: "I got you! I got you like I told them I would!" And there were footsteps.

The fellow lurched forward blindly, eager to get to the trap. He still had his rifle, but it was no good to him. Donnelly took him by the legs and dumped him, and the rifle spun from his hands.

They went down together and the detective was surprised. The thing that writhed in his grasp was hairy. Huge and hairy and strong as a horse.

Big hands lashed up and clawed at the detective's throat. A hairy face snarled against his. Strong, corded legs whipped up, crossed over his thighs and crushed him down on the fellow's writhing torso. Donnelly hadn't expected that. When you lived in the woods, hunted, afraid of capture, afraid even to venture forth in daylight for fear of being seen, you were supposed to be weak, undernourished. There was nothing weak about the claws that fastened on the detective's neck. They dug deep. Red spots danced before Donnelly's eyes.

He had his police positive, but the fellow had rolled with him into heavy brush and the hand holding the gun was half under him, half tangled in a maze of creepers. He slapped a hand against the man's face, straightarmed it away from him. The claws loosened at his neck, but the face surged up again. Teeth flashed. Donnelly lunged clear and the teeth clicked shut half an inch from his jugular.

Donnelly felt sick. Lunging clear, he rocked back on his knees, whipped his gun-hand free. The snarling shape hurled itself at him and the gun crossed over, crunched home. The blow would have cracked the skull of an ordinary adversary. This one merely shook his head, voiced a bestial snarl of rage and came in for more.

Donnelly straightened to his feet, caught a mop of hair in his left hand and struck again. The fellow gasped, swayed sideways. Donnelly heaved a long, shuddering sigh and put the gun away.

He turned then and walked slowly to the lean-to, scuffing his feet along the ground without lifting them, in case there might be other traps set for him. He got there and having no flashlight, struck a match. The glow showed him a filthy interior, a lantern set on a wooden canoe-seat. Showed him something else, too, but the match burned against his fingers and he stooped quickly to light the lantern.

A low, shaky voice said: "Joe . . . Joe Donnelly."

Donnelly straightened. Light from the lantern licked out at the lean-to's

sloping walls, revealed a mound of supplies in one corner. Supplies obviously packed for a canoe trip. Remains of a fire lay black and charred at his feet; a greasy frying pan still sat on them. And in the other corner, huddled together and staring at him with round white eyes, were two kids. Two sick kids, one a girl.

"Thank God," Donnelly said.

It took him a long while to get them loose. Their arms and legs were trussed with ropes, and they were held to the ground with lengths of rusty chain linked to iron stakes. Their captor had evidently raided a trap line. While Donnelly worked, Steve Andrews just stared at him, incoherently mumbling, and the girl clung to her husband, sobbing a little. They were sick kids, Donnelly realized. Starved. In no condition to do much talking. But he asked one question.

"Where's the guide? Dead?"

Steve Andrews nodded.

HE freed them and picked up the lantern and went out, lugging ropes and chains with him. He put the lantern down beside the inert shape outside and knelt, peering into the man's face. You almost couldn't recognize that face. It had a heavy black beard and around the eyes and ears it was horribly puffed, swollen. Angel Murdock didn't look much like his pictures.

It was Travis, the proprietor of the camp, who came with the canoe in response to Donnelly's lantern-waving. Staring at Ruthie and Steve Andrews, he gasped: "You've found them!"

Later, as the canoe glided over still, deep water, Donnelly relaxed a little.

"Yeah," he said, half to himself, "I found them. I had it right from the first, when I figured Steve never went on that canoe trip." He looked at Steve Andrews. "You never did, did you?"

"No," Steve said.

"No. You were sneaking off into the woods at night. I figured you were on the smell of something, and it could easily be Angel Murdock."

Steve nodded. "We spotted him one day while out fishing. He saw us and ran. Then I tried to find his hideout, but failed. I thought if we made a pretense of going on the trip, as we'd planned, he would come sneaking around

the camp again, for food."

"What happened," Donnelly demanded, "when you went on that trip?"

"He was waiting for us at the head of the lake, with a rifle. He killed the guide, forced Ruthie and me to carry the supplies to his hideout. Then he chained us up.

"We went through hell. Murdock was half insane when he took us. The black flies had driven him out of his mind. He'd sit and talk to us, jeer at us, for hours at a time. Later on he told us that you—" the kid looked at Donnelly—"were at the camp. He was afraid you'd track him down. He laid traps all around the hideout, to get you."

A loon babbled. "What I don't understand, Mr. Donnelly," Travis said, "is how you found the hideout."

"For that you can thank Lessard's horses."

"What?"

"Lessard and I checked every watering place within a radius of ten miles," Donnelly said. "Murdock had to have water from somewhere. The last place on our list was that spring. We were going there this morning, but Lessard was murdered."

"But Lessard did go to the spring. Mosey said so."

"Mosey did his best," Donnelly declared grimly, "to throw me off trail by leading me to the wrong spring. He failed because there happened to be a bridge between the two springs."

"I don't understand," Travis said.

"Look. Lessard was murdered when he stumbled on Murdock's source of water. The horses dragged him home. So, when your cook's helper took me to a spring *below* the bridge, I knew he was deliberately handing me a bum steer. Those horses never would have crossed the bridge without Lessard in the driver's seat.

"So," Donnelly finished, dangling one hand in the water, "I kept an eye on Mosey and sure enough he led me to the right spring. And when we get back to camp he'll find out how expensive it is to play nursemaid to a killer."

The silence came back. Steve Andrews sat staring into space, his wife asleep in his arms. The loon babbled again.

"I still think," Donnelly mumbled, "this is no place for murder. I still think so."

CENSORED IN HELL

BY ROBERT THOMPSON

If one guy gets murdered, another guy has to go to the chair!

I WENT into Jack Stewart's room without knocking, and I knew instantly that something was wrong.

Jack was standing before the bureau, running a thumb lightly along the blade of his pocket knife. He spun about, clicked the blade shut, and tossed the knife on top of the bureau. His strong, dark face was taut, his eyes glowing hotly. I said:

"What's the matter, Jack, more trouble with that Hanley dame?"

"Don't call her a dame," he snapped. "Bea's the sweetest kid on earth." He moved away from the bureau to the sagging wicker chair by the window, and dropped his big frame into it. I stood with my hands on my hips, and asked:

"Well, what's wrong *this* time?"

He didn't say anything for a moment, staring out into the dusk-greyed parking lot behind the rooming house. Then he rose slowly and faced me, his clenched teeth a bar of white in dark features. He spoke quietly:

"Hanley hit Bea today, Tim. Bruised her arm. Actually *hit* her." He sucked in a sibilant breath and said then with venom in his soft voice: "That skunk of a husband of hers hit her for the last time. He won't live to do it again, I promise that."

"Whoa," I said soberly. "What kind of talk is that? So that's what you had in your mind, playing with the knife—"

"Sure," he said tightly. "Murder, they call it. Hell, if you knew what that sweet kid has gone through with that skunk, you'd want to kill him yourself."

"Yeah" I crossed to the window, drew

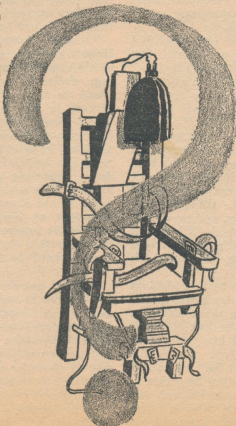
down the shade, and pulled the light cord. Jack blinked a second in the glare from the naked bulb, then picked the knife from the bureau. He snapped out the sharp-edged blade. I said again: "Yeah? It so happens that I like George Hanley. He's a pretty right guy—helped me a lot when I went to work for his firm. If there's anyone in the wrong, it must be his wife. I only met her once, but she left me a bad impression. Why, the very fact that she picks up with another guy—"

"How do you know what Hanley is away from his work?" Jack cut in. "Lots of guys seem okay until you have to live with them, then you find out what they really are. Just because Hanley has a partnership in that wire plant, he thinks Bea's got to stick with him for the rest of her life. He taunts her, won't give her any money—that sort of thing. And then tonight he hit her at the supper table." Jack's lips compressed, and he waved the knife.

"She called me on the phone downstairs and let me know. I'm going out there tonight and have a talk with Hanley. Bea's going out to a club meeting or something."

"Now, listen," I said placatingly, "there's no reason for you to get het up over it. If she wants to get rid of him, let her get a divorce. Then you two can hook up. You're just hot-tempered enough to go out there and—"

"I'm just going to talk to him." Jack clicked the blade in, slipped the knife into his pocket. "I'll talk man to man—ask him to let Bea get a quiet divorce. He's refused her twice al-



ready. I—well, I promise not to get hot-headed unless he gets tough about it.”

“Okay, you big lug.” I jabbed him in the ribs with a finger. “You never actually met this Hanley, did you? You’re going to get a swell surprise. But for the love of Pete hold that temper of yours.”

I jabbed him again and he grinned. I didn’t have to tell him how anxious I was for everything to turn out all right; he knew how I felt about him. We’d been palling together for a little more than a year, since I’d come to the city to take over a job in Hanley’s plant. I had the room directly under Jack’s, and we’d been thinking lately of taking a double room. Now I wondered just how Jack had allowed himself to become involved with a married woman. . . .

“I’m going out there around nine,” he said. “Hanley’s having Lester Morse out for a talk on some plant business. He’ll probably be there, and I’ll talk to Hanley in another room.”

“Les Morse.” I grimaced. “That guy’s been riding me ever since I came here. He’s general super—one guy I don’t like in this man’s town.”

“Well, anyway, with him around, I probably won’t start any fireworks. But if this Hanley is like Bea says he is—”

“Don’t worry,” I said, “he’s not. I’ll run along. Come around to my room later and tell me how you made out.”

“Sure. See you later, Tim.”

I went downstairs to my own room and tried to concentrate on a ham-comedian’s radio program, but Jack and that temper of his kept edging into my thoughts. It was a little after eleven when I heard his step out in the hall. He opened the door, closed it hurriedly, and stood with his back against the wood. His breath hissed through his teeth, and his eyes had a hot, hunted look. He licked his lips and said huskily:

“Tim, don’t mention to anybody that I was going out to Hanley’s, will you?”

“Well, okay, if you don’t want me to.” My brows drew together. “What’s the trouble? You look like you’ve seen a ghost, or a corpse—”

“I’m okay,” he cut in. “I didn’t go out there. Just took a long ride in the old wagon. I thought I’d wait and go out some night Bea’s at home.” He tapped a cigarette out of a tattered pack-

age and lighted it, his hand shaking slightly. He sucked in deeply, opened the door, and said: “I’m going up to get a little shut-eye. See you tomorrow.”

I WATCHED the closing door erase his big frame. My palms were moist with sweat. Jack had lied; I knew that. I was certain he *had* gone out to Hanley’s, certain he’d had trouble. Maybe he had lost his temper and— I didn’t want to think of that knife I’d seen Jack playing with. . . .

I swung my eyes to the small radio on the table. A crisp voice had cut through a crooner’s song:

“Ladies and gentlemen, we interrupt Lincoln Lovely’s program for a few moments to bring you a special news flash. George Hanley, senior partner of the Hanley and Shugrue Company, was found murdered in his home shortly before ten o’clock tonight. Mrs. Hanley and a woman companion, returning from a club meeting, discovered the body in the study. Police state that death was due to a stab wound in the chest, caused by a small knife. The weapon has not been found as yet.

“Lester Morse, superintendent of Hanley’s plant, was taken into custody at his home in connection with the killing. Police state that Morse was supposed to have an appointment with Hanley in the latter’s home around nine o’clock. Morse at first denied he had gone to Hanley’s home, but later admitted he went there and claimed he rang the bells of the front and side doors, departing when he received no answer. It is said that Hanley was prepared to ask Morse to resign as superintendent of the company, and this may be the motive for the crime. Keep tuned to this station. There will be more news of the murder later. . . .”

I pulled out the plug with a curious dry feeling in my mouth. For a moment I stood there, the blood slowly ebbing from my face. Then I went out, climbed the stairs to Jack’s room. He had his own radio on, and snapped it off when I entered. His jaw muscles were bunched, his eyes narrowed and steady. I said quietly:

“I just heard the news flash, Jack.”

“So did I.” He rose from his chair,

his big fist clenching and unclenching. "Well," he said harshly, "why the hell don't you say it?"

"Okay, I will. You *did* go out to Hanley's tonight. Let's have the truth. I hope to God I'm close enough to you to believe you."

He stared at me for a second, and then his breath rushed out in a long sigh. "All right, I went out there, sure, a few minutes after nine. The front door was open a little. I rang the bell and when he didn't answer, I went in and found him. He had blood all over his chest. No knife around—nothing. I beat it and rode around for a couple hours before I came back here. I knew damn well what everyone'd think if they found me with the body. That's why I asked you not to say anything about me going out there tonight. I—what the hell, I was even afraid to tell you, afraid you'd think like the others. It must be that Morse guy that killed him. Plenty of motive—"

"I'm damn glad there is somebody else to hang it onto," I said. "If they didn't grab Morse for it, I wouldn't know what to think. I hope the louse gets the chair for killing a swell guy like Hanley. What are you going to do, stick around until you get a call from—"

There was the sound of knuckles tapping the door lightly. I opened the door and looked out at the woman in the hall. Anyone seeing her for the first time might think Beatrice Hanley was still in her teens; she had a charming, little-girl look about her. Brown eyes, round and soft in a clear-cut, small face, chestnut-brown hair, a small slim body, a faint scent of perfume. It was only when she looked past me at Jack and spoke that the hardness beneath the surface was evident. That glance was full of coquetry, of come-and-get-me. Her voice was surprisingly deep for so small a woman—husky and vibrant and warm:

"Jack, darling! Did you hear?"

"Yeah." He crossed to her, swept her against him, kissed her. I closed the door and said sourly: "Gee, I'll bet you're sorry George is dead."

She swung away from Jack, winding her fingers around my arms so tightly I winced. "I know you don't like me," she said, "but you're not going to break things up between Jack and me. I didn't love George; I admit that. He gave me

only a tiny allowance, taunted me, wouldn't even get a maid. He could have afforded a couple at least." She dropped her hands, and Jack put an arm around her waist. She faltered: "I—I thought I'd be happy if anything happened to him, but seeing him like that—"

She shuddered, and Jack kissed her forehead lightly. I said, lips twisting: "What's the idea in coming here? Do you want a little sympathy, or what?"

She turned away from me, eyes flashing, and spoke to Jack: "They've got Lester Morse out at the house, trying to re-enact the crime, or something like that. He won't admit he did it. Somehow or other, that nosey Lieutenant Dillon learned about—us. He wanted to send a couple of men after you, and I slipped out and came right here. You're wanted for questioning. You see," she hesitated, "I told Dillon you were going out to see George around nine, and—"

Jack made a disgusted grimace. "Did you *have* to tell him that? It'll mean a lot of dirty publicity. They've got the killer; no need to—"

"We'd better go before his men get here," she said. "I—well, I had to tell him. If I didn't, and he found it out later, both of us would have been in a spot."

"Okay," Jack sighed. "Let's go. Come along, Tim. Guess nobody'll mind you being out there."

Bea Hanley said, her husky voice icy: "No, of course not. We all just *love* Mr. Lane."

"Yah," I said, and followed them out and down to her car at the curbing.

WHEN we reached the big red-and-brown cottage, there were three or four cars in the street, and a couple more in the driveway. The line of cottages along the street ended with this one, and further up the hill the thick woods made a black smudge against the night sky. We went up the front steps and into the house. Lieutenant Dillon stood spread-legged in the study, watching us, his freckled face scowling. He was a small man, thin and sober looking in black. He pushed his broad-brimmed black hat off his forehead, and said in an acidulent voice:

"Just where were you, Mrs. Hanley? I almost sent out an alarm for you."

"I went after Jack Stewart," she said.

"I didn't want him to be bullied by any of your men."

"Well, well." Dillon looked around at the silent men gathered in the room. "Ain't that thoughtful of her? Her husband is murdered, and all she thinks of—" He shook his head disgustedly. "Okay, which one of you is Stewart?"

Jack said, "I am," and I glanced at the other men in the room. A couple of them were dicks, big men with square polished shoes, one of them with a cigar hanging from his mouth. There was another bearded man who might have been the M. E., and a small, keen-eyed man who was probably Dillon's assistant. The corpse sat rigidly behind a flat-topped desk near the windows, the white shirt front smeared with blood. Black-haired, with a slim, patrician face, very pale now in death. I swallowed, turning my eyes away to let them roam over the long rows of books against the walls. Dillon was saying:

"Okay, let's hear your story, Stewart. Just a matter of form, that's all." His narrow eyes glittered, and a twisting smile broke his scowl. "We've got the killer, but we need your statement, just for the records, understand?"

"Sure." Jack shifted his feet, his eyes carefully avoiding the corpse. "I intended to come out here tonight—wanted to see Hanley about his getting a nice quiet divorce from Bea—Mrs. Hanley. He threatened to make a lot of trouble before when she mentioned divorce, and I wanted to talk to him about it. I knew she wouldn't be home tonight, and then I decided to wait until another night when she would be." He shrugged. "That's about all there is to it."

I stared at him, wanting to shout, "Hey, you told me you *were* out here," but I kept silent. Bea Hanley looked at the corpse and turned away, lips pressed together. Dillon said in a more pleased voice:

"Okay, swell. I'll have the boys check up on your time as well as they can. Routine, you understand. Now, Mrs. Hanley, let's hear you tell it all over again."

I caught Jack's glance and he colored a little, swiveling his eyes away. Bea Hanley kept her soft brown eyes fixed on the floor and said: "I was going to a club meeting tonight, but he hit

me and—well, I didn't feel like facing the rest of the girls. So I went to a show instead—*Lovers in Paradise*, at the *State*."

I almost smiled at that. I'd seen the picture the first day it played in town a week before. It was a film of love in a nudist colony, and it had been cut considerably by the censors since its initial showing. Bea Hanley continued: "I went into the show about half-past six, I think it was, and I came out about nine-thirty. Then I went up to the Fourth District Voters' Club and met Mrs. Morrill. We came out here in my car and I invited her in for a cup of coffee and—" She shuddered. "We found George. It was—horrible. I called the police and waited here with Mrs. Morrill."

Lieutenant Dillon nodded. "Okay. We checked up on you as much as we could." He held up a theatre ticket stub. "The girl at the ticket window remembers you because you gave her a twenty dollar bill and had an argument over the change. And Mrs. Morrill says you went up to the club at half-past nine or a few minutes after and came right out here with her. And now," he said softly, "let's go in and take a look at Morse. All we need with that baby is a confession, and we'll get that before the night's over. I've seen those hard guys break down before." He stared at me a moment. "Just who are you, brother?"

"Friend of mine," Jack said. "Any objections?"

"Not for the moment," Dillon said, almost cheerfully now. He motioned toward another room, and we trooped after him—Jack, Bea, and I. The dicks and the bearded man stayed in the study. Lester Morse sat on the edge of the sofa in the parlor. A bluecoat beside him was nonchalantly crushing peanuts between his fingers. Morse was a tall man, with a wide, sullen mouth in an angular face. He looked up at me and asked sourly: "Where do *you* fit into this?"

"Never mind that," Dillon said, rubbing his hands together. "Now, then let's have your story again, brother."

MORSE shook his head wearily. "What are you trying to do, make me tell it so many times you'll be sure to find a discrepancy somewhere? I told you I had some business to talk over with George. He wanted to let me go at the

plant and I knew it. I wanted to try and talk him out of it. Well, I'd been with Paul Sale, a friend of mine, since seven o'clock. I left him off a few streets from here and came right over; about a quarter past nine, I think it was. I rang both door bells. No answer. So I went down to the corner gas station and chewed the fat with the attendant till about ten. I figured on waiting there and then coming back here on the chance George would be in. But then I decided to go on home. I got there about quarter past ten and wasn't in more than five minutes when those flatfeet came after me."

"Uh-huh," Dillon said. "We checked up with the attendant and with that Sale guy. You got a perfect alibi for your time except for about ten minutes—between a quarter past nine and twenty-five past. And it's those ten minutes that lick you. Hanley was going to can you, and you had to stop him. The other partner, Shugrue, would keep you on; you knew that. It ain't so easy for a guy your age to get a job, especially a guy that's been canned somewhere. A perfect motive for the murder."

I looked at Jack Stewart. His dark face had little spots of red, and his lips were thinned, taut. Dillon was saying: "So you're it, Morse. You admit you were out here those ten minutes or so you lack for an alibi. So—" Dillon shrugged. "The only conclusion is that you killed Hanley. What'd you do with the knife?"

Morse said insolently: "You've got as much brainpower as a dead flea. You—"

There was a cough at the door, and I turned to see a harness bull with his fingers at his mouth. He coughed again and said: "Pardon, Lieutenant, but there's a guy from next door says he's got to see you. Somethin' about this here Morse guy."

"Send him in," Dillon said. We waited, with Dillon grinning down humorlessly at Morse. A tall, robust man with a pipe clenched between his teeth came into the room. He said in a cheerful, booming voice: "Lieutenant Dillon?" And when Dillon nodded: "I'm Joe Goddard. I was out riding and heard a radio report on Hanley's murder." He saw Bea Hanley, and murmured. "Terribly sorry, Mrs. Han-

ley. If there's anything Lil and I can do—"

"Thank you," she said in a small voice. "I—I'll be all right."

Goddard continued: "The radio announcer said a man named Morse was strongly suspected of having committed the murder between nine-fifteen and nine twenty-five or so." He stared down at Morse. "This is the man—"

"Yeah," Dillon said, "that's the guy that bumped Hanley. 'Why, did you see him around here tonight?'"

"I most certainly did." Joe Goddard pointed the stem of his pipe at Dillon. "I was sitting in an upstairs window and happened to notice a Buick car come into the driveway. I've got a good eye for cars, even in the semi-darkness. I saw this man Morse get out and go to the front door. It was just nine-fifteen. The radio downstairs was on and the Swingeroo Session was just going off. From the bedroom window, I could see both the front and side of the house, and I watched Morse ring both doorbells and then drive away. He was never out of my sight for the five or ten minutes he was there."

I felt my heart constrict. We all looked at Goddard for a moment without speaking, and then Dillon said: "Holy cripes! I get a perfect case against this guy and then you bust it up. He's got an alibi for every minute now. He's in the clear."

Lester Morse rose slowly, swept up a palm and slapped Dillon stingingly across the face. He said acidly: "That isn't all you'll get from me, flatfoot. Unless you apologize publicly, you'll have a lawsuit on your hands for false arrest." He spun, walked out, his sullen mouth twisted down. Dillon fingered his face and said in a hollow voice: "I been on this man's foree for eighteen years, fighting my way up through a gang of back-knifers, and then *this* happens . . ."

Bea Hanley had casually lighted a cigarette and was spiraling smoke toward the ceiling; she seemed to have no particular interest in the proceedings. Jack Stewart looked from Dillon to Joe Goddard, and his jaw whitened with the tension of knotted muscles. Dillon said to the harness bull at the door:

"O'Mara, see that Morse gets out okay." He ran a forefinger down his

freckled cheek and spoke to Goddard: "See anyone else around? But what the heck, of course you didn't. Jerry Dillon ain't the guy to get a break like that."

Goddard sucked at his pipe for a moment. "Yes," he said, "I did see someone else around here, just a few minutes after nine. A car drove up in front and a man got out and went in the front door." He looked directly at Jack and added coolly: "A man about your size, I'd say."

"Ah-h!" Dillon's eyes glinted. "Sure, why not you, Stewart? You and Mrs. Hanley are nuts over each other; you can't deny that. You'd want to get him out of the way so you could marry her and—" He snapped at Goddard: "Look, can't you positively identify the man as Stewart? You were sure of Morse why not him?"

GODDARD gave Jack a slow, calm-eyed scrutiny, and boomed out: "Well, I've seen Morse around a few times, and I recognized him right away. But this Stewart is a stranger to me, and it's hard to place a man you never saw before. Although he does look like the man who went in—" He shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't say definitely, but I will say that the car was a thirty-five Ford. I'd swear to that."

"How long'd he stay in here?" Dillon asked.

"Oh, about four or five minutes, maybe. Morse came around about five minutes after he left. I went out for a ride about quarter to ten; otherwise, I'd have been over here long before this."

Bea Hanley ground her cigarette under the toe of a shoe and said huskily: "No need to hold Jack any longer, Dillon. He had no more to do with it than you did."

"Oh, no?" Dillon purred, and a sudden tight dryness gripped my throat. I could feel the sweat come out on my forehead. Dillon said: "Okay, Stewart, do you own a thirty-five Ford or not?"

Jack said steadily: "Yes, I do." He looked at me, said, "Thanks for not talking, Tim," and then in a rush of words: "Okay, Dillon, here it is. I did come out here tonight to talk to Hanley about a quiet divorce for Bea. I found the door open, went in and found him dead. I beat it, drove around for awhile, then went back to the rooming house.

Tim Lane knew I'd intended coming out here. I—I told him about it after awhile and asked him to keep quiet."

"Well, well." Dillon glanced at me with a sour expression. "Holding back information, eh? We'll see about that. Let's have your angle on it, Lane."

I told him quickly and quietly what I knew about it, omitting the part about seeing Jack playing with the knife. Dillon rubbed his hands together, slid a tongue over his lips, and said: "Okay, okay. I've got the whole works now. Morse is out of it. You're in, Stewart. Everything fits." He nearly shoved his face into Jack's, clipping out: "What'd you do with the knife? Where'd you hide it? Come across, or—"

"Or, what?" Jack asked levelly. His face was white, his teeth set together. "I didn't kill Hanley, can't you believe that?"

"I'm sorry," Dillon said in a voice that said he wasn't sorry. "I'm afraid, brother, that I've got to book you for murder." He nodded to the seated bluecoat. "Okay, Wilson, snap on the cuffs. This guy is going on a one-way ride."

There wasn't anything I could do about it, except watch Jack being taken out. That, and try to stem the questions that seeped into my mind: "Did he lie? Did he—*could* he have killed Hanley?" I swore aloud, and wiped at a sweaty forehead. . . .

At a quarter to one, Bea Hanley and I sat on red-leather stools at a downtown bar, drinking gin bucks. I was starting my third and she was finishing her fifth when she leaned toward me confidently and said: "It's a hell of a thing, huh? First, George is killed. Then poor Jack gets arrested for the murder." She shook her head dolefully, and I said in a dead-sober, irritated voice:

"Do a few drinks always make you this way?" I became aware of her nearness, the subtle odor of her perfume, the softness of her eyes and body. I was a little exasperated at myself, and I said: "Hell, this is a strange combination—us two, I mean. I don't like you one bit and you don't like me, but because a guy we both like is up for murder, we come out and try to forget it together."

"Yeah." She wagged her head, and her brown hair was soft and lustrous in the warm, shaded light. "That Dillon says poor Jack hasn't a chance. It's ter-

rible. Do you—do you believe he really did it?"

"Of course not," I said. "He said he didn't, so he didn't." I twisted the glass in my hand, staring moodily at the swirling liquor. Deep inside of me I was uncertain, wondering if Jack really *had* killed Hanley. I kept remembering his temper, that knife of his. . . . And then I thought of the bull sessions we'd had every so often until three or four in the morning; the two girls we'd tried to pick up that time in the park and found out they were married to the cops who came through there in the cruiser car; the way Jack socked that husky yegg who tried to hold us up; the merriment in his eyes, his slow, infectious grin, the firm grip of his big right hand. . . .

I said quietly to Bea Hanley: "Jack never killed anyone. He couldn't. He's the swellest pal any guy ever had."

"Yeah, but the poor guy's in the clink now." She sighed. "We've got to figure out how Morse did it. He *must* have done it, huh?"

I nodded, looked at her empty glass and her lopsided mouth, and said: "You've had enough. You better hit for home."

"But I haven't any home. I'm just a poor gal without a home." She shuddered. "Can't go back and sleep where George was—" She leaned closer, and the liquor-odor mingled with the scent of her perfume. "You should've seen that picture, *Lovers In Paradise*. No conventions at all, at all. People just take the ones they want, and let it go at that. Swell system, huh?" She smiled at me, the kind of smile I'd seen her give Jack. "Maybe everybody oughta try that, what d'you think, lambie?"

I wanted to slap her for that last word, for her entire manner. I said under my breath: "Like that, eh?" But I smiled back at her, and said: "Tell me about it—the picture, I mean. Maybe we can get some ideas from it."

THERE was the blossoming of a hope inside me, and it sent my blood pounding. I leaned very close to her, and she said: "Swell picture. Nothing like the real thing, I s'pose, but in it the hero grabs off every gal he wants, and the heroine grabs off every man she wants, until they meet each other, and

then. . . . One scene, where the hero goes in swimming with her, and it shows them under water. . . ." She slipped her hand over mine and said huskily: "That scene'd give anybody an inspiration."

I kept my voice low and casual. "First time you saw it—today?"

"Sure, what d'you think, I go every day? I wouldn't see any picture twice, even this one."

I slid off the stool, grasped her wrist, and said through my teeth: "You dirty little tramp! *You* killed your husband!"

Wrath and fear washed the smile from her face and the liquor-glaze from her eyes. She swore softly, and snapped: "Let me go, you damn—"

"Not so easy," I said. I held her wrist, dragged her out to the street and into a cab. Only a couple of people seemed to be aware of what was happening, and they shrugged and went back to their drinks. I heard somebody mutter: "He probably just found out his nice innocent little babe's two-timing him. . . ."

Inside the cab, I said to the driver: "Police headquarters. Fast!"

Bea Hanley started a scream and I clapped a hand over her mouth, holding an arm around her wriggling body. Finally she stopped squirming, and mumbled: "Okay, I'll be good. But wait until we see Dillon. I'll have him slap you in a cell."

"Yeah?" I said. "Honey, you're the one that's getting the cell. Imagine a guy like Jack falling for a dame like you. . . ."

At headquarters, I sat in a small room with Bea Hanley, Dillon, his keen-eyed assistant, and a man with a pencil poised over a writing pad. Dillon leaned back in a creaking swivel chair, looked across a pitted desk at us, and said: "Okay, Lane, let's have the brain wave. I've got a man here ready to write down the whole works." A grimace worked across his thin, freckled face. "But if I'm wasting time, Lord help you."

I said steadily: "You've practically got Jack Stewart in the chair for murder right now. I'm going to prove it was Bea Hanley. She never was a fit wife for a man like George Hanley. She wanted him to spend every cent he made on her. Wanted servants, clothes, a big allowance—all that. Hanley was pre-

paring for the future, saving his money for an expanding business, stinting now for more money in the future. Even at that, he didn't do badly by her—gave her a good home, a car, enough money to get around. But she wasn't satisfied.

"She met Jack and he fell for her. And she fell for him—as much as she could fall for any guy. Played up to him; the innocent, sweet girl—all that sort of thing. But most guys with her were just one-night stands. She even tried to make me, after she'd killed her husband and seen her lover pulled in for the murder. Cool, and deadly."

Bea Hanley said, "B——," and Dillon gestured impatiently. "Okay, get on with the proof."

I sucked in a breath. "She planned the whole thing well in advance. Had the theatre alibi all ready, days beforehand. She even had an argument with the ticket girl tonight so she'd be remembered. And then she picked up a woman at the club to 'discover' the body with her. She had the perfect motive—didn't love her husband, wanted to get rid of him and get his money. A divorce and alimony wouldn't be enough. That's a nice little business Hanley had. I know; I worked for him for a year. He didn't like flash, wanted a quiet home, books, an occasional visit with friends. She wanted everything money could buy. The way to get it was to kill off her husband and sell out his share of the business. She'd have been able to live high for quite a while on the money she'd get.

"So she went to the show tonight, stayed there only part way through the picture, then went home in her car and knifed her husband. She's strong, got him by surprise—easy enough for a woman like her. She probably left her car in another street near the woods and sneaked to the house. Probably left the front door open on purpose, so it'd look like an attempted robbery, perhaps. The fact that the man who loved her was finally nailed with the murder must have bothered her a little, but she soon got over it. Her own safety was more important. She would have let Jack go to the chair without a qualm. The way she figures it, there are plenty of men around, so why worry about one? Any bar will furnish a dozen men for a woman like her."

"Spill the rest of it." Dillon leaned over the desk now, alert eyes shining in the light. "The theory is okay, but we need proof."

"All right. After she killed him, she sneaked back to her car, drove into the city again and got Mrs. Morrill at the club meeting. She must have hung around awhile before she went up to the club, to give her the necessary time to 'see' the picture. You want proof of all this? Have her tell you the story of that picture she claims to have seen tonight, *Lovers in Paradise*."

"**T**HINK I can't do it?" She laughed huskily. "Okay, sucker, here goes." And she told the entire story in detail, often using words that would be expurgated from any movie. When she finished and the man with the writing pad drew in a long breath, I said: "Tonight was the first and only time you saw the picture, right?"

"Sure," she said. "Why?"

"Because you couldn't have gone to the *State* tonight and seen that picture exactly as you told it. The picture was cut after the second day's showing. One of the scenes deleted was the underwater scene. You slipped up back there at the bar, telling me about that scene. There was a little item in the paper the other day about some of the scenes being cut out. Especially a few near the end. The whipping scene and a couple more you couldn't possibly have seen tonight. You had to go out too early to get a chance to see the whole picture; maybe you stayed in the ladies' room for the half-hour or so you were in the theatre, and didn't even watch the show. You made a crack about not seeing any picture twice, so that seems to be a good guess, eh?"

Bea Hanley said huskily: "You're a damn liar. You're—you're trying to make me admit—"

Dillon rose and came around the desk, saying: "I get it, I get it. She says tonight was the one and only time she saw the picture, yet she tells us the story on it the way it was the first couple of days it was shown, before some of the scenes were cut out." He poked a finger at Bea Hanley. "You lied. You went to the *State* tonight, sure, but you also went there either the first or second day, so you'd know the story. Hell, I didn't



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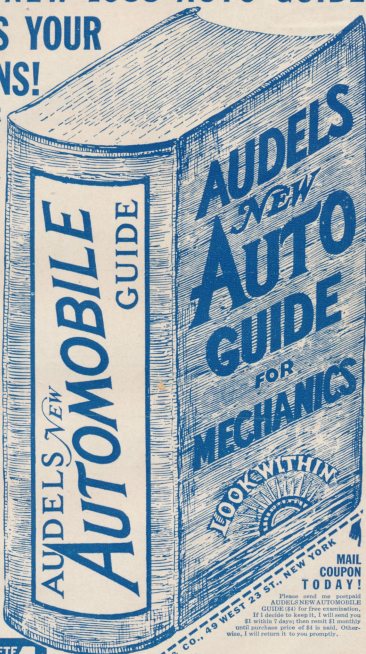
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