

DETECTIVE SHORT STORIES

10¢

NOV.

10 THRILLING MURDER MYSTERIES



**HOMICIDE
HIGHWAY**
an uncanny
long novelette

by
WILLIAM EDW. HAYES

**CASE OF
THE PROMISCUOUS
CORPSES**

chilling mystery novelette
by EDWARD S. RONNS



I Jumped My Pay from \$18 to \$50 a Week!

Here's how I did it

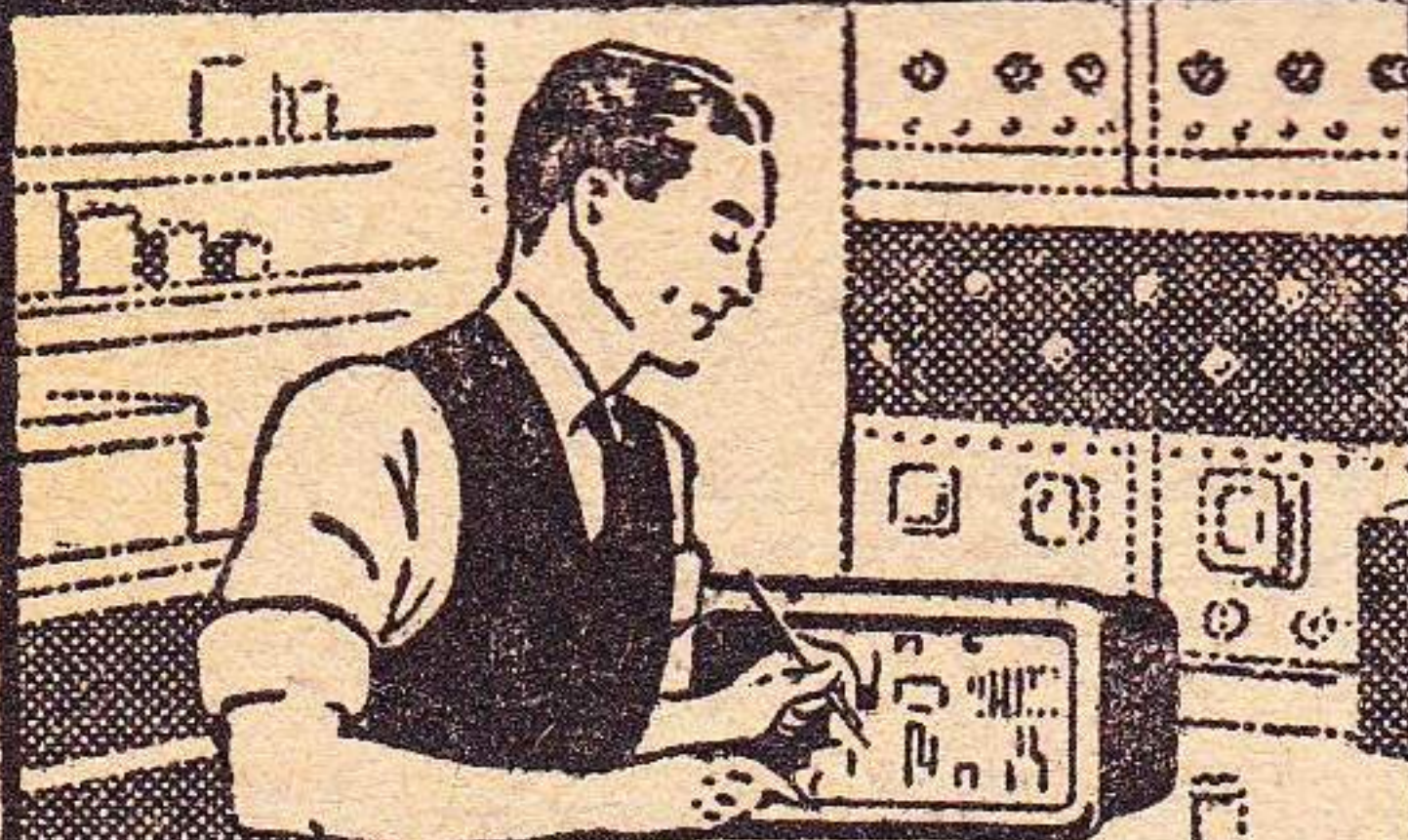
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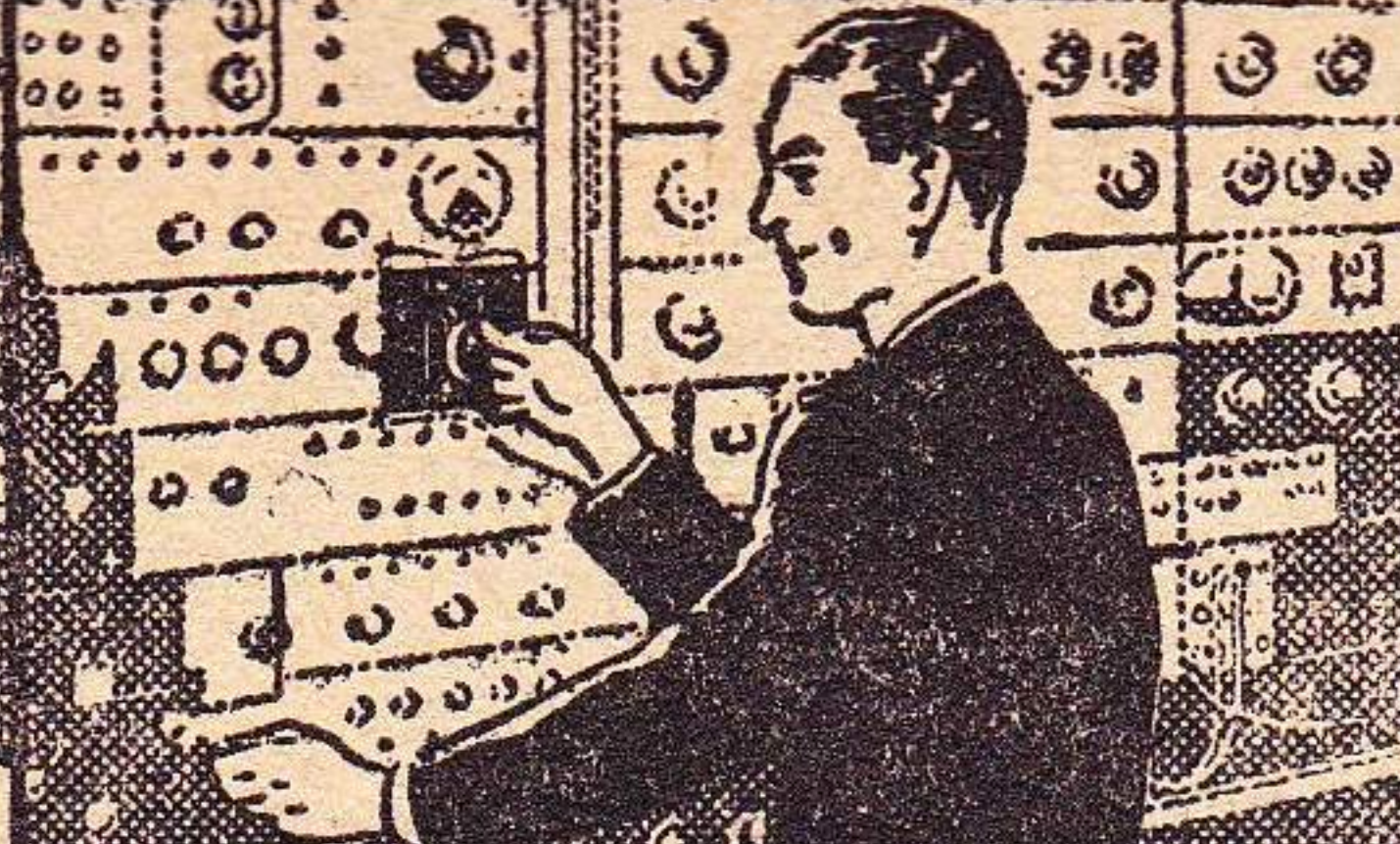
"I had an \$18 a week job in a shoe factory, but desired to make more money and continue my education. I read about Radio opportunities and enrolled with the National Radio Institute."



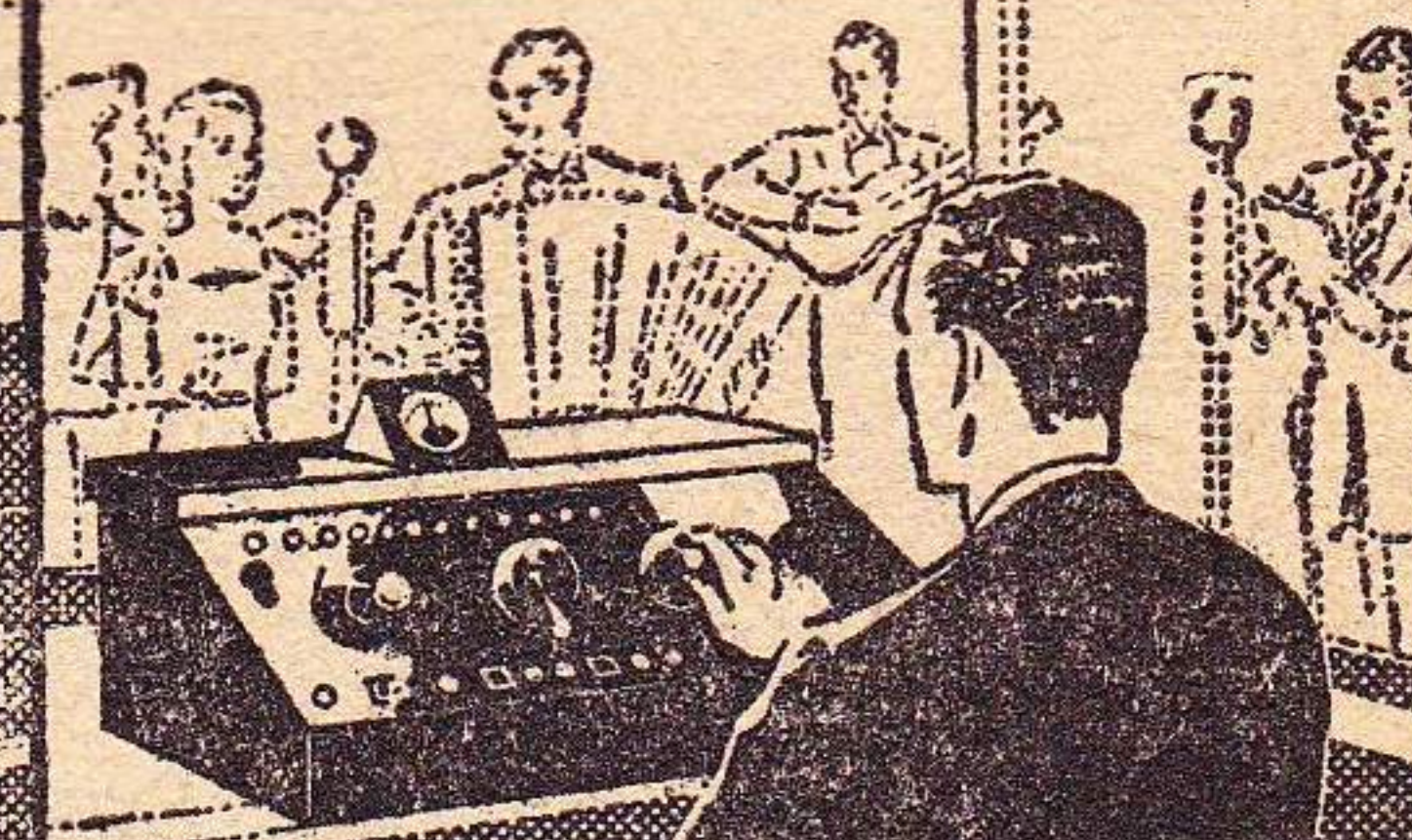
"The instruction I received was so practical I was soon able to earn \$5 to \$10 a week in spare time servicing Radios. This paid for the N.R.I. Course and led to service work paying for my college education."



"Radio servicing permitted me to attend school and work evenings and week-ends. Upon completing the N.R.I. Course I was made Service Manager at \$40 to \$50 a week, more than twice my shoe factory wage."



"Later the N.R.I. Graduate Service Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio Operator. Now I am Radio Engineer of Station WSUI and connected with Television Station W9XK."



"The N.R.I. Course took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay; enabled me to earn funds for a college education. There's a promising future for thoroughly trained Radio men."



Find out today how I Train You at Home to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 25 Years

Here is a quick way to more pay. Radio offers the chance to make \$5, \$10 a week extra in spare time a few months from now. There is an increasing demand for full time Radio Technicians and Radio Operators, too. Many make \$30, \$40, \$50 a week. On top of record business, the Radio Industry is getting millions and millions of dollars in Defense Orders. Clip the coupon below and mail it. Find out how I train you for these opportunities.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make \$30, \$40, \$50 a Week

Over 800 broadcasting stations in the U. S. employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Repairing, servicing, selling home and auto Radio receivers (there are over 50,000,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of the opportunities to have their own service or retail Radio businesses. Think of the many good pay jobs in con-

nection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. gives you the required knowledge of Radio for these jobs. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Yes, Radio Technicians make good money because they use their heads as well as their hands. They must be trained. Many are getting special ratings in the Army and Navy; extra rank and pay.

Beginners Quickly Learn to Earn \$5, \$10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

Nearly every neighborhood offers opportunities for a good part-time Radio Technician to make extra money fixing Radio sets. I give you special training to show you how to start cashing in on these opportunities early. You get Radio parts and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments that give you valu-

able practical experience. You also get a modern Professional Radio Servicing Instrument. My fifty-fifty method—half working with Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out How I Train You for Good Pay in Radio

Mail the coupon below. I'll send my 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio; shows letters from more than 100 of the men I trained so you can see what they are doing, earning. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postal.

J. E. Smith, President
Dept. 1JK1 National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY, TOO

Every man likely to go into military service, every soldier, sailor, marine, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty at pay up to 6 times private's base pay. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. IT'S SMART TO TRAIN FOR RADIO NOW!

THIS **FREE** BOOK HAS SHOWN HUNDREDS HOW TO MAKE GOOD MONEY

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 1JK1
National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Age.....

Name

Address

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10¢

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW WRITTEN ESPECIALLY FOR THIS MAGAZINE!

DETECTIVE SHORT STORIES

Vol. 3, No. 5



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Learn to Earn \$30, \$40, \$50, and Up a Week in ELECTRICITY

WHETHER you are 16 or 40 years of age, Electricity offers you a real future. . . . Don't waste your best years in a low pay untrained job, or worse yet, never sure of even a poor paid job. Get into a real live, money making field where thousands of men make \$30, \$40, \$50 and up a week in the fascinating field of Electricity. Prepare today for a good job in a field that's full of opportunities for trained men.

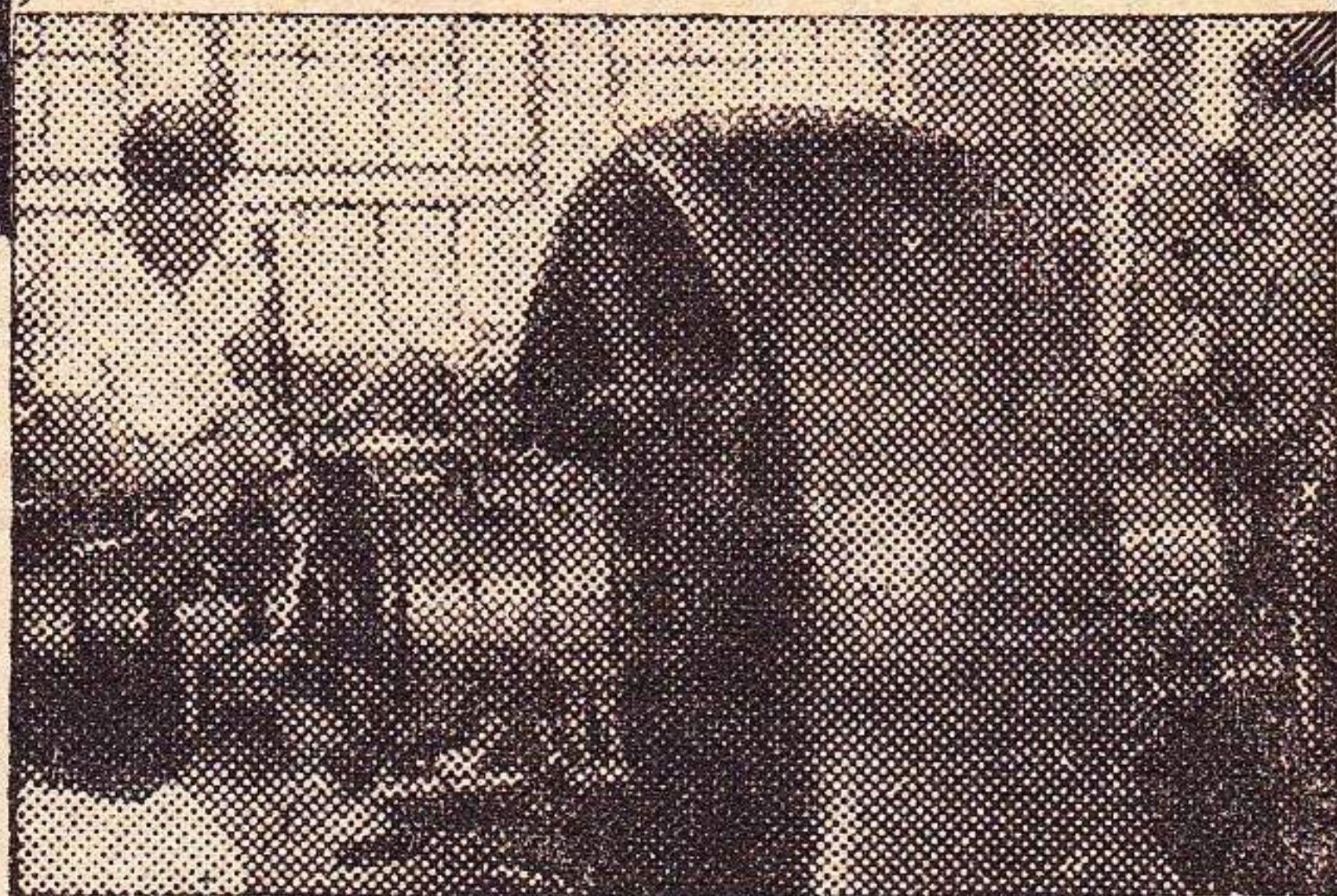
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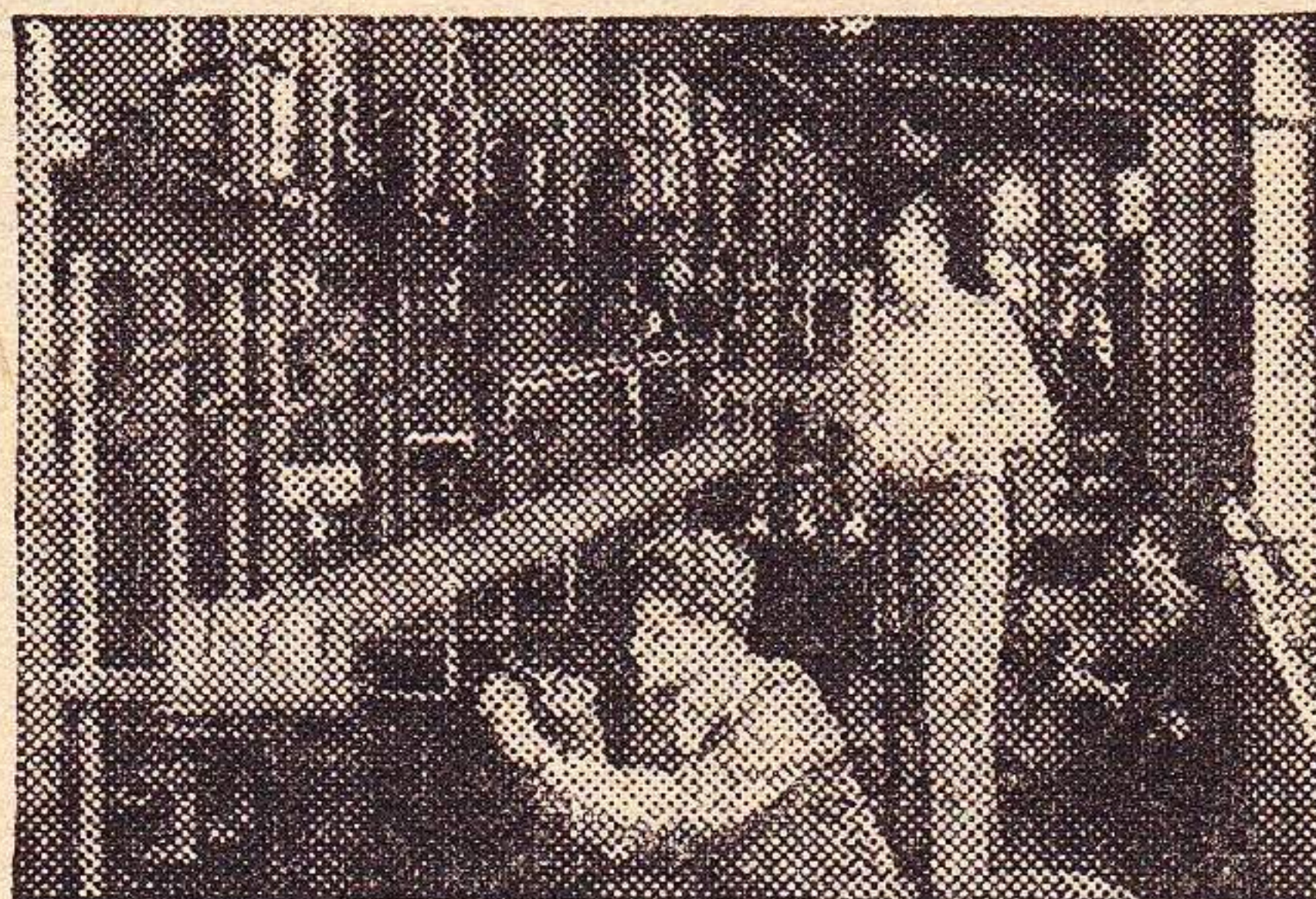
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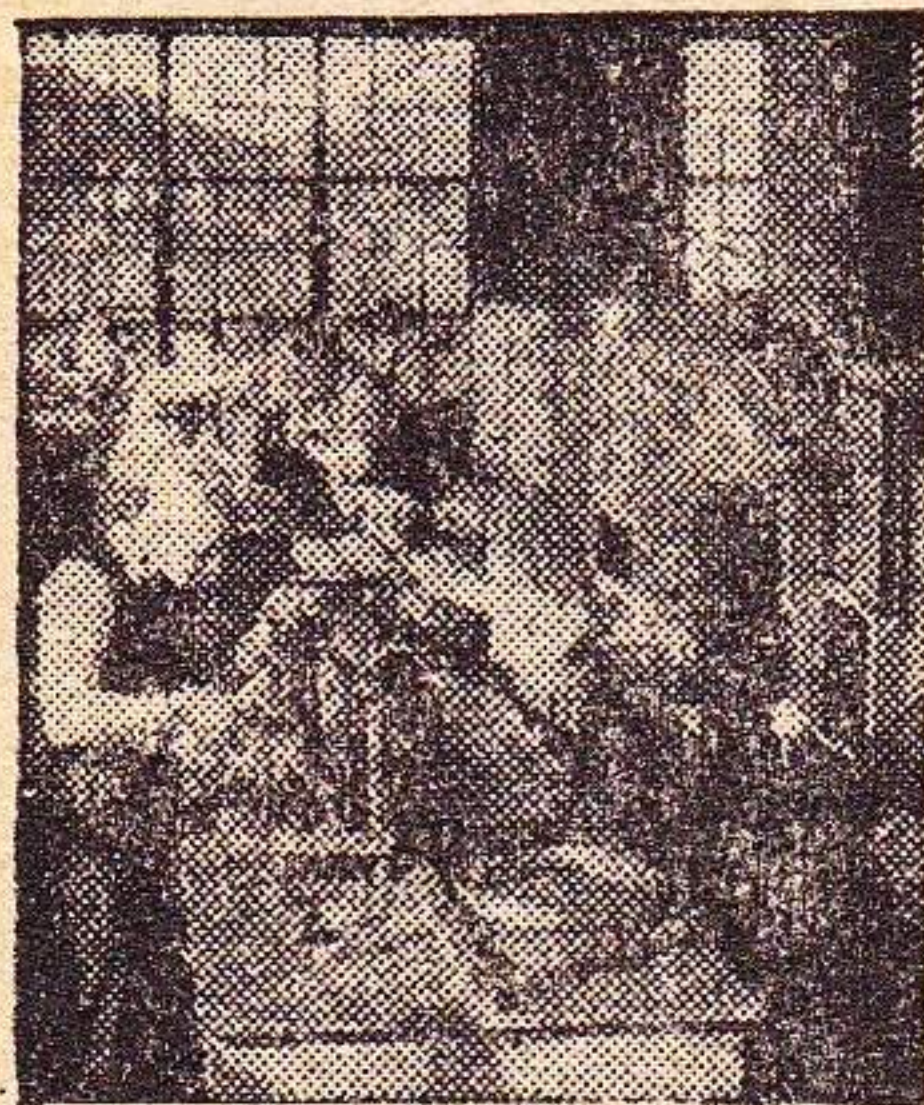
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high pressure you . . . without embarrassment or obligation.

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Don't Look Now!

but if you want to see a real
HE-MAN BODY...



Posed by one
of Charles
Atlas' pupils

WHAT do people say when they see **YOU** on the beach? Then you show what you **REALLY** are—a **HE-MAN** or a weakling! Do girls' eyes give you the silent "ha-ha"? Or can you **FEEL** their admiring glances?

And don't think *clothes* can cover a flat chest, skinny arms, pipe-stem legs **EITHER**! People **KNOW** when a man's got a puny build like Caspar Milquetoast—or when his personality glows with smashing strength, rippling muscles, tireless energy! A fellow like that is **BOUND** to be the life of the party! Do **YOU** want to be that kind of a man? Then listen to **THIS**—

In Just 15 Minutes A Day I'll Prove I Can Make **YOU** A New Man Too!

That's what I said—*15 minutes a day!* That's all I need to **PROVE**—regardless of how old or young you are, or how ashamed you may be of your present physique—that I can give you a body men envy and women admire. Biceps that can dish it out, and a muscle-ridged stomach that can take it. A full, deep barrel-chest. Legs that never tire. A tough, sinewy back. An all-around physique that can laugh at **ANY** kind of rough going.

Today, a wave of **FITNESS** is surging over America! Suppose **YOU** are called to the colors! Will *your* body be the laughing-stock of the company—or will it command the envy of your buddies? Why **RIGHT NOW** many soldiers and sailors *in active service* are using my methods. They know that a **MAN'S** body means "easier going," more fun and quicker promotion!

Would You Believe I Was Once A 97 lb. Weakling?

Yes, I was—a miserable 97-pound bag of skin and bones! But you'd never believe it to look at me now, would you? Through my discovery of "*Dynamic Tension*" I changed myself into "The World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man." I'm **LIVING PROOF** of the miracles "*Dynamic Tension*" can perform—right in the privacy of your own home! **NOW**—will you give my method 15 minutes a day to get the kind of **HE-MAN** build you have always longed to have?

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Charles Atlas

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"Feel like million dollars; have a 44" normal chest—A 2" GAIN IN 4 DAYS!"

—L.A.S., Illinois

"My doctor thinks your course is fine. In 15 days have put 2" on my chest and 1/2 inch on my neck."

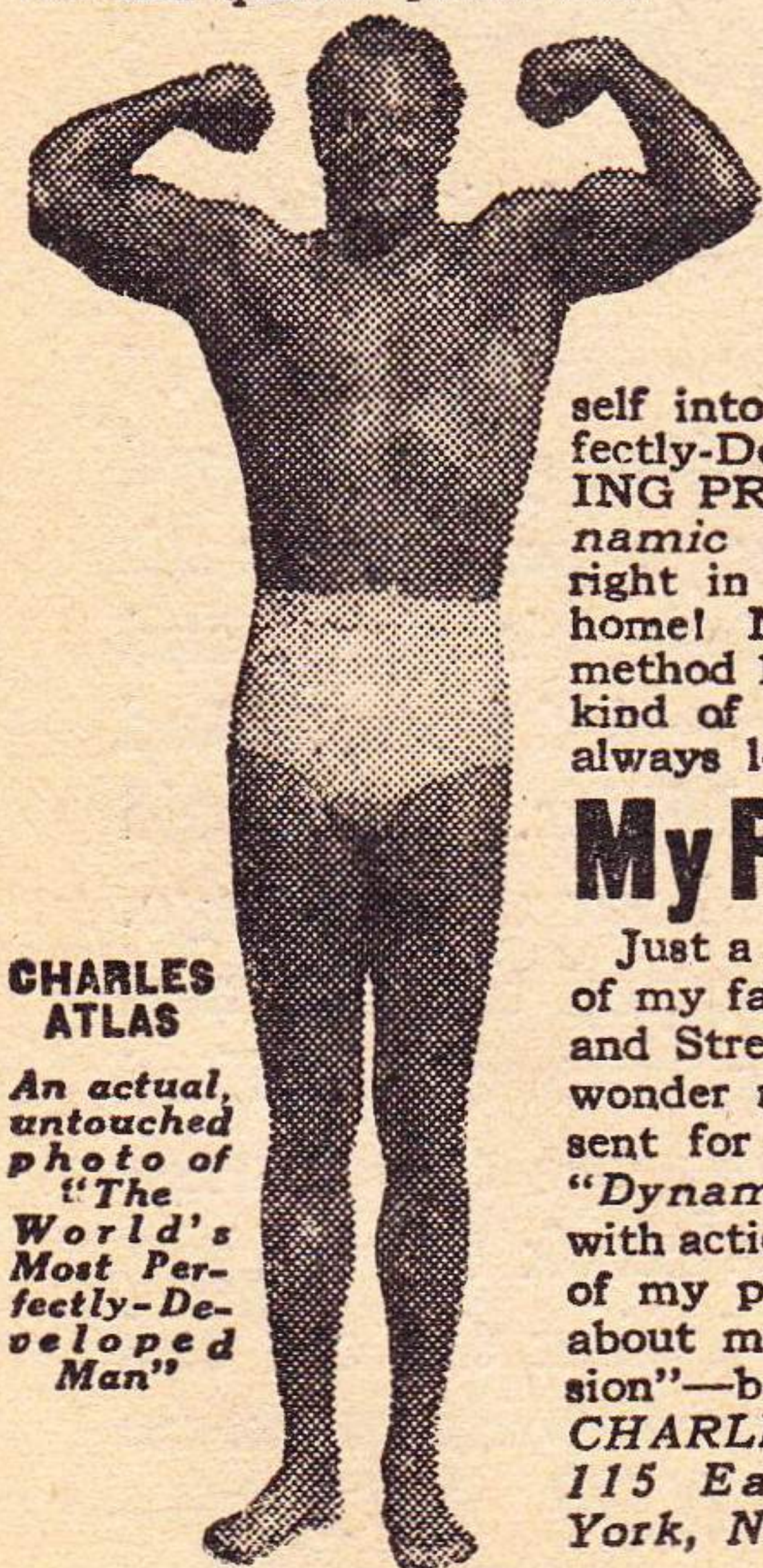
—B.L., Oregon

"My muscles are bulging, I feel like a new man. Chest measures 38 in., an increase of 5 in., my neck increased 2 in."

—G.M., Ohio

"1 1/4" gain on biceps and 1" more on chest in two weeks!"

—J.F., Penna.



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I want the proof that your system of "*Dynamic Tension*" will help make a New Man of me — give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "*Everlasting Health and Strength*."

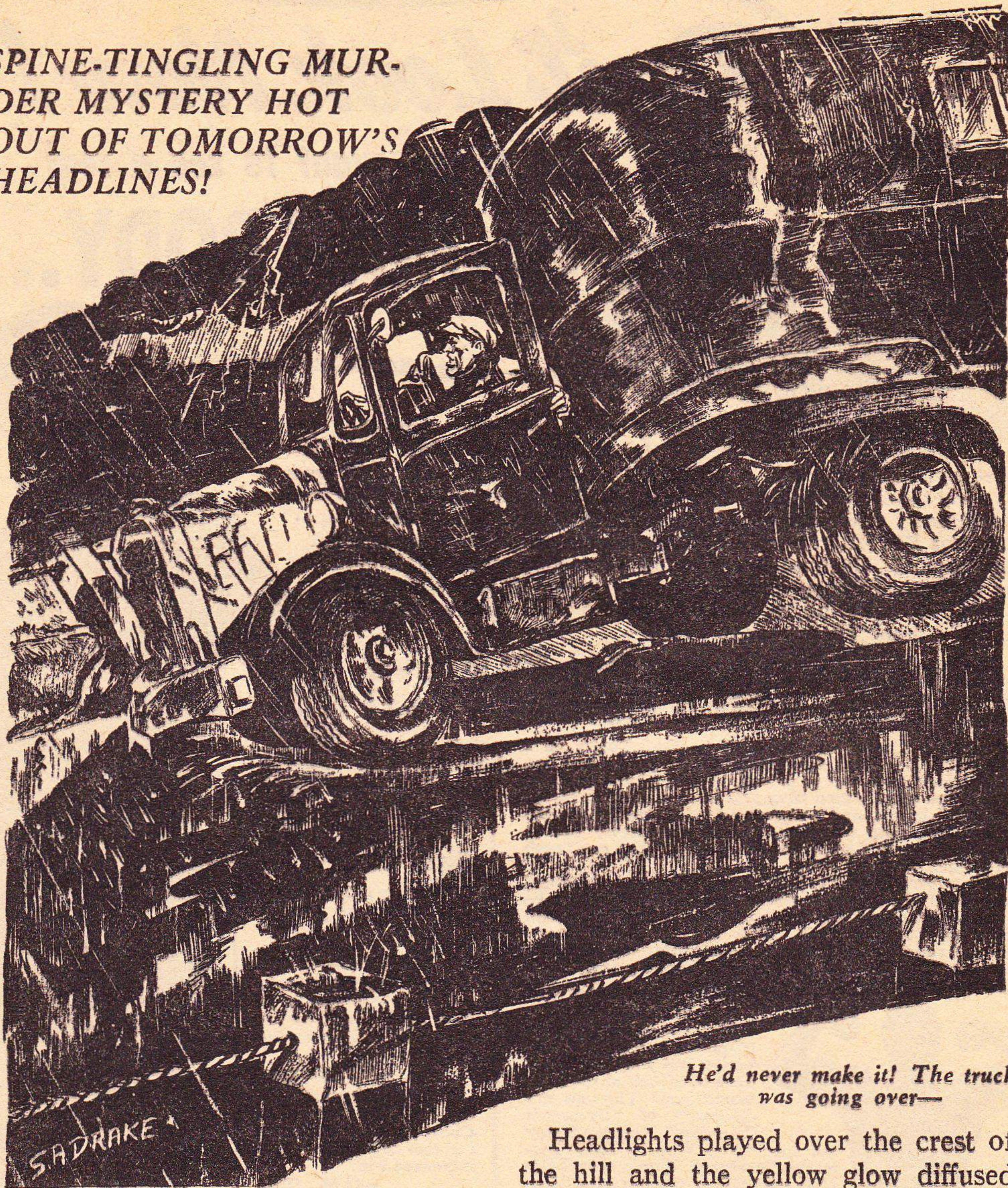
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HOMICIDE

SPINE-TINGLING MUR-
DER MYSTERY HOT
OUT OF TOMORROW'S
HEADLINES!



*He'd never make it! The truck
was going over—*

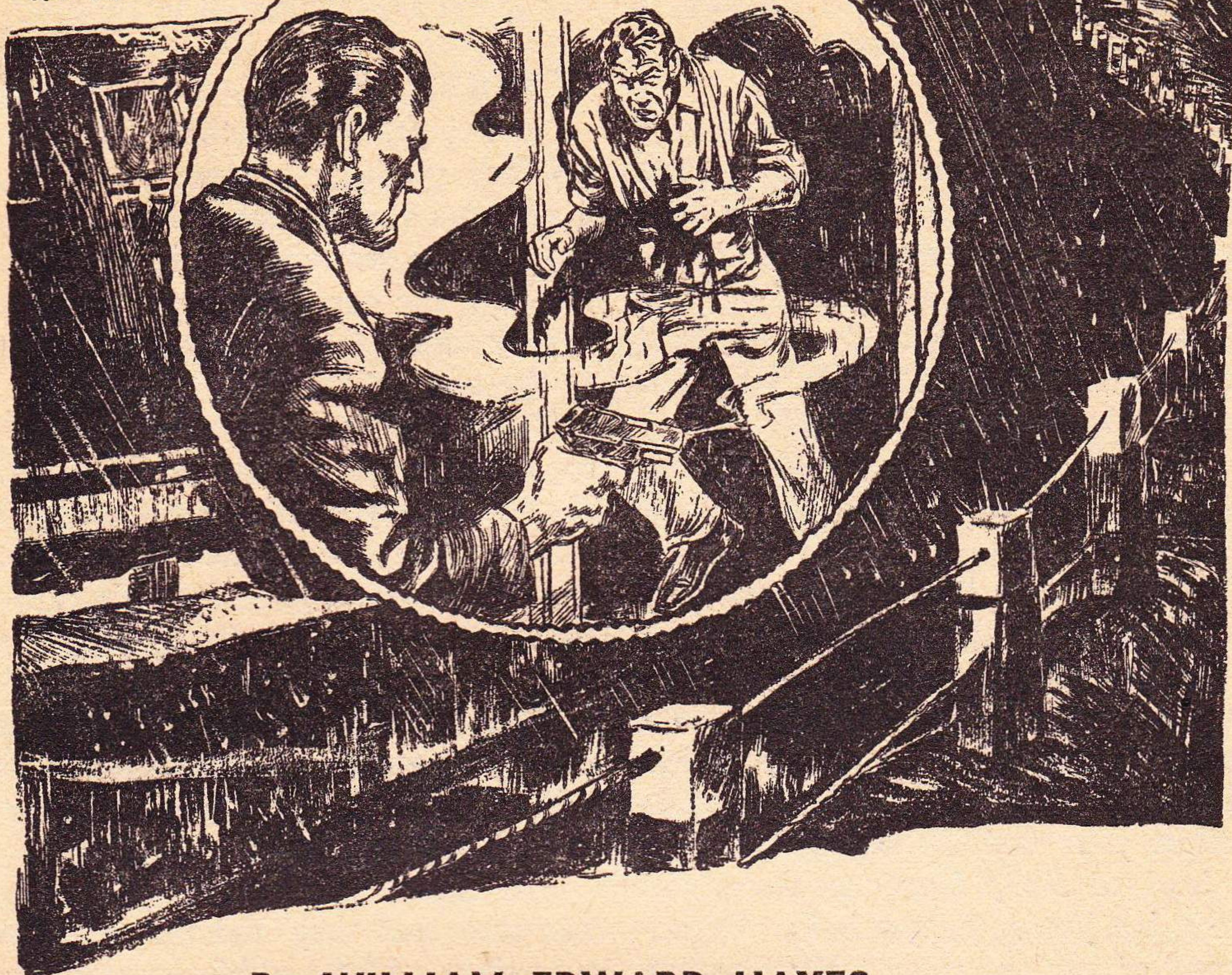
JIMMY RIGNEY stumbled along the rough shoulder of the black road. He trudged with a forward stoop against the telling fatigue of the long ascending grade. His feet burned in worn scuffed shoes, the soles of which had broken through, and the dull ache in his muscles had drawn his wide mouth down at the corners.

Headlights played over the crest of the hill and the yellow glow diffused in the mist. Jimmy paused for breath with the mist against his face, and looked back with a worried frown. And wondered about Joe Miller. Joe should have come along an hour or more ago.

The headlights topped the rise and a big sedan, moving westward, drifted by at slow speed with the driver nestling a woman in the crook of his right arm. Jimmy looked after the car and

WAS THE KID A KILLER, OR A FOREIGN SPY —

HIGHWAY



By **WILLIAM EDWARD HAYES**

Author of "And So to Death," etc.

swore under his breath, because he'd always dreamed of having a car like that, of driving one and feeling its power and its luxury. A guy who drives a truck for a living, and who sees these bright fancy jobs float by him, gets those ideas.

Only Jimmy wasn't driving a truck any more. Mr. Banion had just told him that afternoon how sorry he was, but business wasn't what it ought to be. All of which was a lot of hooey—Mr. Banion simply didn't want to hire a guy that had flopped like Jimmy Rigney had flopped.

The thought of failure did something to Jimmy deep inside. He smote his chest with a tight hard fist. He hadn't flopped. No! He screamed the nega-

tive in his mind without moving his lips, without making a sound. When a fellow admitted to himself that he hadn't made the grade, why then he was licked, and nothing or nobody had ever licked Jimmy Rigney. Not yet!

He found a rock off the shoulder and sat down. He fumbled in his pockets for the limp sack of granulated tobacco, the soiled book of papers. He fashioned a cigarette expertly and touched a match to the twisted tip. The little flare threw his hollow cheeks into sharp relief. He puffed deeply and blew out the flame.

His mind kept going back to that interview with Mr. Banion who owned the Red Clover Line, and who'd given Jimmy his first start. Who'd made

OR VICTIM OF ANOTHER FIFTH-COLUMN FRAME?

possible what every truck driver dreams about—a big battleship of his own, a cargo hauler and a chance to make a living for himself.

"You'd better hit it for the west," Mr. Banion, who was small and stout and dark, had said. "You ain't got much chance here now, Jimmy. You was caught doin' what you shouldn'ta done—caught with not only an overload which the law didn't allow you, but haulin' them explosives, too."

"You don't believe I knew about the explosives, do you?" Jimmy had demanded.

"Jimmy," Mr. Banion had answered, "I think it's just like you said. You're a trucker. A guy calls you up. A guy says he's got a cargo of some household goods boxed, some books an' dishes an' things. You go pick 'em up. You collect your tariff. You already got a load of stuff, farm machinery an' such, but you squeeze this in. On account of you got room. You squeeze an' you get caught."

Jimmy's ears had a way of burning, red hot, when he got worked up inside. He wasn't sure whether Mr. Banion had believed him. His ears burned now and his fists were clenched. If he'd only known what was in those boxes. But you can't break open packing cases in front of a customer, a shipper, and check on contents.

Jimmy had gotten a call to go to a private residence. His mother had taken the call. An ordinary looking house in an ordinary neighborhood. A look of vacancy about the place. The man on the front steps with the boxes. Six of them, heavy as lead.

"I'll have to get these weighed to be sure of the rates," Jimmy had said. The stuff would go at so much a hundred.

Jimmy should have been suspicious when the man gave him a ten-dollar bill, and asked if that would cover the cost.

And when Jimmy said it would the man said, "Keep the change, if there is any."

THIRTY miles out, on his eastward run to Jersey City that night, Jimmy had suddenly become aware that a car was trailing him. He watched through his rear-vision mirror. Then abruptly the car turned off. Another twenty miles, then this long grade up to the crest of the hill.

There the cops had stopped him—cops that came out of nowhere with sirens suddenly blasting open the night. Stopped him, hauled him down from the driver's seat, ripped open his trailer, hauled out the packing cases with caution.

Hand grenades! Nicely packed in straw and excelsior. Consigned to an address in Jersey City that turned out to be a vacant house.

The cops finally let him go, but he was sure that they had watched him ever since. Watched him even as the finance company repossessed his truck for failure to meet his notes—the nice big truck that Mr. Banion had let him have on such easy terms. Yes, Mr. Banion had been mighty good to him. No getting around that. He'd driven three years for Mr. Banion, then when he felt like he'd like to branch out on his own Mr. Banion had agreed to let him have the very truck he'd pushed over the highways for just a little down—that three hundred that he'd saved. It wasn't Mr. Banion's fault that later he had to have all his money, and Jimmy had to go to a finance company and get his truck refinanced. Jimmy couldn't blame Mr. Banion for that. Some of the other pushers hinted that Mr. Banion had charged Jimmy more for that truck than any legitimate car dealer would have charged. But guys get jealous of a fellow that's trying to get along.

Those hand grenades, though. Those

were the things that had finished him. Three days in jail, picture in the papers, driven nuts by the questioning. Fifth column suspect. While his neglected customers called other truckers. Then the finance company—

Jimmy inhaled deeply, tossed his cigarette onto the road. He shuddered from the October chill and turned up his coat collar. He wore a sweater under his coat. Maybe he should have stayed back there in the Daisy Diner to wait for Joe. He'd waited more than an hour, which was a lot of time to use at a diner counter when you've only got a dime to spend. Then he'd walked on—up to here. Up to the ridge over which the cargo haulers dipped to drop down in gear, down that treacherous hill that the truckmen called Dead Man's Dive because a few of 'em had dived to death on the steep descent.

Joe Miller drove for the Pardee Line, and this was his night eastward. The Pardee Line didn't allow their pushers to carry passengers, but Joe was a pal. They'd worked for Banion together. Joe'd give him a lift to Philly. Maybe, at Philly, he could look around and find a job.

Far down the slope, to the west, a dim aura grew slowly brighter. Jimmy watched it and stood up, then sat down again. The mist was thickening, the air colder. He shivered.

Twin lights came into view and the whine of a motor in second told him that a loaded truck was on the climb. He got up again and stood on the shoulder of the road and watched the lights come nearer. The glow covered him, picked him out against the black rocks and the black pavement.

He raised a hand and waggled it, and indicated his direction with a jerk of his thumb. If that was Joe at the wheel Joe would stop. Joe would blink his lights to let him know that he saw him.

The lights didn't blink. The truck crept up the hill, the motor roaring. The twin horns blasted and Jimmy's eyes lit up. He squinted as if to see behind the lights, as if to make out whether that truck was painted blue, with gold letters above the cab.

The grade flattened out and gears changed with a grind, and the lights came up to him. Jimmy ran a couple of steps, waving his right hand urgently. Then he stopped as the lights passed him over the crest, the warm breath of the motor, the smell of hot oil wafted by him.

He blinked to get the blue spots from the lights out of his vision. Then he glimpsed the closed window of the cab, the gilt letters. A Pardee hauler—yes, Joe Miller's job. And Joe was running by him!

"Hey! Joe! It's me—Jimmy—"

HE ran alongside the trailer, stumbled, plowed into the wet gravel at the edge of the shoulder, tore his bare palms and his knees. He felt sick and weak with weariness, and tried to tell himself that it wasn't Joe at the wheel. Joe wouldn't have passed him up. No, Joe was off tonight, and some other pusher was the Pardee jockey, and wasn't taking any chances even if he did know who Jimmy was.

Suddenly Jimmy lurched to his feet, straightened, frowned. The sound of gears changing again. No, that wouldn't be Joe doing that. Going into high gear for the descent of Dead Man's Dive. It must be someone who didn't know what a drop that was. Someone—

Jimmy Rigney stood frozen at the edge of the wet pavement. The red tail lights, and the red and green clearance lights danced with increasing speed. The stop lights from applied brakes didn't go on. The truck swerved a little, seemed about to go off the

right hand shoulder, then righted itself and rode up the middle.

Plunging. Jimmy could tell. *He'll never make it!* Jimmy's lips moved but he made no sound. He shut his eyes, feared to open them. The dancing rear lights. The crazy swerve of the headlights. The high bank on the bend.

The truck was going over! No! Miraculously the wheels were holding the banked curve. Miraculously—

Jimmy knew when the trailer swayed over and crashed the bridge rail near the bottom. He could see it through the leafless trees far below him. He heard the impact, saw the headlight beam tilt off across the valley, swing clear around again.

Then there were other headlights, just a momentary glimpse of them, then the sheet of flame!

The sheet of flame that painted the whole night white, far down there at the bottom of Dead Man's Dive. The flame and the detonation. The earth shaking beneath him with a violent tremor—the blast of something that sounded like all the canon in hell cut loose.

He was running before he realized it. Running, stumbling, picking himself up again. His breath wheezed through teeth hard set. The white sheet of light was gone now, but there was the red glow of lesser flames. And the diffused aura of headlights pointing crazily skyward.

That long half mile. The rain came in a slow, insistent drizzle. A gust of wind twisted across the hill and drove the rain down his neck. His heart hammered at lean ribs and pounded high in his throat. He was weak at the pit of his stomach and his hands and feet were cold.

The smell from the fire at the foot of the hill reached his nostrils. The smell was like powdersmoke in fire-works.

The red flames lighted his face as

he felt the heat. Then he saw, in the glow, the deep crater in the road, the fragment of the truck bed down in the crater with one wheel on a broken axle and the tire stripped from the wheel. Fragments of the huge trailer lay scattered about, twisted, smoking hot.

Jimmy found the cab in the left ditch, one headlight burning queerly. And a small sedan, a V-8, telescoped by collision.

Out of the sedan's wreckage he heard a voice — low and mournful, singing eerily. Singing, "I'll never smile again. . . ."

A radio still tuned in to a station.

Feverishly Jimmy leaped into the deep ditch to the tangle of twisted steel. Little fires burned all around him where the contents of the trailer had been strewn by force of the blast, lighted his way.

"Joe! Oh, Joe—"

His voice sounded strangely hollow and somehow weird, sounded as if it came from some other throat, far removed from the garish scene.

The wrecked cab was a good fifty yards from the ragged crater left by the blast. The glass was shattered in the right-hand door—the door which lay skyward.

Jim cut one hand as he reached up and grabbed and let go again. He found footing on the broken front wheel, climbed along the hood, looked into the cab and had to turn away, sick and faint.

A man lay crushed to a pulp behind the wheel. A formless thing with only a hideous face. Two eyes staring out of that face, one forced a little from its socket, greenish in the wild light from the fires.

Enough of the face to allow Jimmy to know that it had been Joe Miller's face—it had been Joe Miller who had passed him at the top of the hill.

It was a long moment before he

dropped into the ditch. A telephone. He must go for help. Back up the long hill to the diner. That would be nearest.

But that crater in the road. A car or truck coming down—zowie! They wouldn't have a chance. The driver in the sedan. Maybe he was alive. . . .

The radio in the sedan sang, "I'll never thrill again. . . ."

IT was wild, fantastic, unreal. Jimmy scrambled along in the soft mud. The sedan lay on its roof, its wheels twisted and smashed. Water ran through the ditch bottom and washed in through a broken glass. Jimmy knelt in the water and tried to see in.

He heard a weak groan and the muscles in his long arms froze.

He said, "Take it easy, I'll get you out," and didn't know whether anybody could hear him.

The sedan was so telescoped that he couldn't get the side door open. He could only reach in through the window. He couldn't see. The radio went on. The song ended and a carefully hand-cultured voice said, "Ladies, you don't want rough, ugly looking hands. Seriously, now do you. . . ."

"Damn that thing," Jimmy said under his breath. His groping hand touched soft hair — a woman's hair. And immediately it was wet with blood. The low moan came from the woman. There was somebody else beside her.

Jimmy cut a sleeve and his other hand in his effort to get that door open. The sweat came out under his hat brim, poured down his back from between his wide shoulders.

Help. He had to get help. If only somebody would come along. A car, a truck—

He scrambled back up to the road. The Daisy Diner. A long mile and a half up and over the hill. Surely—

He was east of the crater in the road

when the headlights came over the crest and swept down toward him. He began to wave his arms wildly. He didn't realize what a picture he presented. Hands bleeding, hat gone, coat torn, mud to his waist.

The headlights were close when rubber on the black pavement squealed and the twin beams swerved. Jimmy had to leap to miss being struck.

A voice behind the headlights said, "Well look who's here!" And before Jimmy could answer, could say all the things he had in mind to say, a state cop was at his side, gripping his wrist.

And another voice said, "Boy, you blew hell out of things tonight. What you gotta answer for this time looks like mor'n hand grenades. How the hell—"

"Look," Jimmy shouted. "There's a woman alive in a sedan down there. There's a—a pal of mine killed in a truck. There a hole—"

"Take a look, Eddie," one state cop said. "I'll find out what this truck skinner's been into this time."

II

THEY had roped off the road on both sides of the accident. All through traffic had been detoured. Beyond the ropes a few cars were parked on the shoulders. The state cops kept the curious far back from the scene.

The F.B.I. men had come in a blue sedan. There were three of them. Another car had brought a corps of photographers. For more than a half hour now the flash bulbs had been exploding.

A man with an acetylene torch had extricated the woman from the sedan, a little person with white hair who recovered consciousness long enough to cry out for Will. But Will had gone

beyond all cries. The elderly man crushed behind the wheel of the sedan had died instantly. The ambulance surgeon had felt over the woman's frail body and had shook his head and had whispered to one of the state cops, "Maybe she'll live. If she does it'll be another one of those miracles."

The couple's name was Fenner, and they'd been to see a new grand child and had stayed late with their son. They'd been on the way home when the truck hit them. This much the woman had been able to gasp out between the stabs of pain.

Jimmy shivered in his wet clothes. He stood beside the truck cab with a cop pressed against him. The cop had a gun drawn.

Jimmy said, "I'll explain if you'll let me. I can—"

"He's good at explainin'," the cop called Eddie said. Eddie was beefy in build and complexion.

The big sergeant with the blue black shadow of a heavy beard on a freshly scraped face who'd questioned Jimmy that other time when the hand grenades had been taken from his truck. He said, "Yeh." Then, to Jimmy, "When I get through with you this time, bucko—"

A thin man with a dark hat and a pair of quick gray eyes said, "I'll do the questioning." He looked extremely bored with the whole thing. His glance at the sergeant made the sergeant drop his eyes.

"Come over here," the thin man said.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lyon," the sergeant said respectfully.

Jimmy knew that Mr. Lyon had come with the F.B.I. men in that big sedan.

They went in out of the rain, sat in the rear seat of the sedan. Lyon dismissed the cops. He turned on the dome light, sat with his back in the corner. He didn't pull out any gun. He didn't look as if he even carried

one.

The cops hung around outside. Jimmy saw the sergeant over Lyon's shoulder.

Lyons said, "What's your full name?" His voice was soft yet quick. He looked very tired.

Jimmy gave it. James Willard Rigney, age 29. He told his address.

Lyons asked a couple of questions about occupation, how long Jimmy had been out of work since that hand Grenade business.

Jimmy hadn't fully answered when the sedan door opened and the sergeant stuck his head in.

The sergeant said, "This looks hot, Mr. Lyon. One of my men just come down from the Daisy Diner. He asked some questions up there."

"What about?" Lyons asked.

The sergeant looked triumphant. He glanced at Jimmy. He said, "This guy was hangin' around that diner this evenin'. Hung around a coupla hours."

Lyons looked at Jimmy. "That right?"

"I was waiting for—for Joe Miller to come in."

"You mean the driver of the truck that blew up." Lyon's gaze was steady.

"It's like I tell you, Mr. Lyons," the sergeant said with eager urgency. "There's a hell of a lot more to this thing than meets the eye."

"What's your theory now?"

"Well, look. We grab this guy once on a tip we get, an' whatta we find?"

"You find grenades," the F.B.I. man answered.

"Sure. An' we can't hang nothin' on him. His old woman testifies—"

"You're speaking of my mother," Jimmy said with heat. His ears reddened like they always did when he got too worked up inside.

"The ol' woman testifies," the sergeant went on, "that she herself took the call. That this guy didn't even

know where the house was where he went to pick up the boxes. Anyhow we couldn't hang nothing on him."

"Our men gave him a clean bill," the F.B.I. man answered. "Checked his record back almost to his birth."

"That's just it," the sergeant answered. "He loses his truck, he's broke. He's outta work. That's how it looks on the outside. To throw the cops off. But all the time he's workin' with somebody that's getting explosives—"

"That's what we've got to prove," Lyons said. "So far—"

"You give me a chance an' we'll sweat it outta him."

LYONS turned away from the sergeant and faced Jimmy. "You were waiting for Miller," he said. "In that diner?"

"I was desperate to get to Philadelphia," Jimmy answered. "I thought I might pick up a job there. Wanted to take a try at it, anyhow. Joe an' I were pals. If anybody'd give me a lift he would. When he didn't come along I figured he either passed up the diner tonight, or something delayed him. I walked on."

Jimmy told in detail what had happened.

The sergeant said, "I can break that story down. I mean in ten minutes—"

"That'll be enough, sergeant," Lyons said with quiet authority. "If I need help I'll call you in. Would you shut the door?"

The sergeant said, "Yes, sir," and shut the door, and gave Jimmy Rigney a long look with a lot of threat in it.

Again Lyons turned to Jimmy, studied him through those quick eyes for a long moment. He said, "Miller passed you at the top of the hill. How fast was he going?"

"Maybe twenty miles an hour." Jimmy sat up suddenly startled.

"He wouldn't have too heavy a load

to be running that fast?"

"No, he wouldn't. Not there." Jimmy felt his fingers tingle. "A tonnage cargo would have slowed him to where I could have walked faster than he was running."

"But he passed you. And you didn't swing on the running board."

"I didn't know it was a Pardee truck until the cab got alongside. When the driver didn't blink for me I figured it was some other pusher. But when I saw the Pardee name I turned an' ran after the cab, an' yelled at Joe—"

"You saw Joe at the wheel?"

"I couldn't see into the cab. I fell down. Then when I heard the gears change an' the driver was going to take that dive in high—well, that was the last thing in the world Joe would've done."

"Unless he was under some kind of stress," Lyons said. "Maybe in a sweat over something, and not thinking about anything but getting over the road as fast as he could."

"Joe was the most deliberate an' careful guy in the world," Jimmy said. "If anybody could hurry him it'd be because—because—"

"Because what?" Lyons asked sharply. He leaned forward a little.

"Well, I know," Jimmy said. "I knew that guy better'n anybody in the world, an'—well, I can't figure it. No way I look at it."

"When'd you leave home last?" Lyons queried, his voice lower.

"I left about two in the afternoon. Yesterday, since it's morning now."

"Where'd you go?"

Joe told him. First the Balderson garage to run down an ad for a man. Then to a filling station chain to see if anything had come of his application for driving a supply truck. Finally the open road eastward toward the seaboard.

"I caught a short ride with an old guy in a fliver," Joe said. "Then an-

other short one in a panel delivery truck. Finally I hadda hoof it. Got to the Daisy Diner around half past ten."

"There's where you thought you'd meet Joe Miller?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you wait in there?"

Jimmy's ears got red hot. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Lyons without blinking. He said, "I wasn't any too welcome. Like I ain't much welcome around anywhere any more."

"Why?"

"You oughtn't to have to ask me that. Not after the newspapers pulled that Fifth Column stuff. My pictures, an' saying I was suspected of fifth column work—all that. Guys I've known all my life—they give me a wide swing. They look at me funny. That Greek in the diner. He acted like he'd like to have me get out in a hurry. When I couldn't stand it any longer I started walking again."

Jimmy clenched his fists until his nails bit his palms, then he opened them and his palms were wet. There was the dread back in his mind that Joe might've thought that, too. Might've been so upset over seeing Jimmy in the road that he just dived past him, and changed into high on that hill without thinking.

Jimmy dropped his eyes before the F.B.I. man's steady scrutiny. He was conscious of the gray light over the eastern hills, the steady fall of the rain on the sedan's rounded roof. The windows were steamed so that he could distinguish nothing outside them. The sedan had that new smell of a car not long out of a salesroom.

THE door opened suddenly and the sergeant was back.

"It's George Pardee, Mr. Lyons," the sergeant said. "Him an' Marty Banion of the Red Clover Lines. They

just drove down. If—"

"Who sent for Banion?" Lyons asked. "What—"

"It was me suggested it, sir, when I called Mr. Pardee. This man—" a nod to Jimmy, "used to work for Banion, an' I thought maybe Banion could help me get the truth outta him just in case—"

"Bring Pardee over here," Lyons said. "If I want to question Banion about anything, I'll do it later."

Jimmy looked at Lyons then at the sergeant. He turned up his coat collar. Lyons said, "You stay here, Rigney. Pull out one of those little seats."

Pardee was a gaunt, worried-looking man who'd once driven a truck himself. He was brown as a berry with the skin stretched over high cheek bones. He had deep blue eyes and shaggy dark brows over them like protective foliage.

He stooped to climb in, then sat in the other corner of the rear seat.

Lyons said, "You know this man?" and nodded toward Jimmy.

Pardee said, "He's begged me for a job. I ought to know him."

"What time'd Joe Miller leave your terminal yesterday?" Lyons queried.

"Three fifteen," Pardee answered promptly. "It's a reg'lar run he's got. He hooked onto his trailer an' left the yard at three fifteen."

"Loaded with what?"

"Millwork and plate glass," Pardee said. "The glass was cut in pane size for colonial type doors. The trailer was loaded at the factory."

"How much of a load?"

"Here's the billing—duplicates of it," Pardee said. He brought out a sheaf of papers, shoved them over to Lyons. "Twenty-four thousand pounds."

"Twelve tons," Lyons mumbled.

Jimmy's fingers went shut again. That truck never came up to the crest of the hill with any twelve tons in it. Not by a hell of a lot. Not like Joe

was running right there when he passed Jimmy.

"As nearly as we can figure it," Lyons said, "Your man got to the ridge about one a.m. Maybe five minutes sooner. How does that sound in time?"

"All cockeyed," Pardee answered sharply. "Barring tire or engine trouble Joe Miller'd made this hill by eleven-thirty anyhow."

"And he had millwork." Lyons looked at Pardee intently.

"He did."

"Yet that truck blew into a thousand pieces. The flame was seen by farmers as much as five miles away. Across the hills. The blast was felt in the Diner and by three families within a four-mile radius."

"I can't give you the answer," Pardee said wearily. "God knows since I got news of this I've—I've been off my nut. Joe's got a couple little kids, too—"

One of the F.B.I. men in a long black rain-coat interrupted when he stuck his head in at the door. The rain dripped off his hat.

He grinned at Lyons. He said, "The cargo, from what we can pick up of the splinters, must have been a load of T.N.T. Maybe a few shells. Our science men says she must've exploded when she hit that bridge rail."

"But that can't be," Pardee cried. "That trailer was loaded with mill work—"

"Door frames and window sash don't make a noise like that when they blow up," the raincoated man said with sarcasm.

Lyons heaved himself out of the deep seat. "Come along, Pardee. You, too, Rigney." He pulled his raincoat about him and climbed out.

There was a group clustered about the wrecked cab. The dawn light was stronger now over a wet and dismal world.

The cab had been raised by a derrick until it was almost upright. One of the uniformed cops said, "We can get the body out now, men. Where's those ambulance—"

TWO men from the ambulance, and two of the cops started the gruesome task. For a moment nobody paid any attention to Jimmy Rigney. He stood and watched, fascinated by the dangling feet, lifeless in worn, scuffed shoes.

One of the ambulance men said, "I could think of nicer things to do before breakfast," and burped boisterously.

Jimmy couldn't look at the body. One of the cops held a torch and the beam played over the floor boards of the cab. For just an instant the beam was on the pedals, brake and clutch, and on the rubber mat beneath them. Jimmy saw the yellow clay, almost like paint. The muscles in his arms froze. He turned back to Joe Miller's lifeless form, to Joe Miller's shoes. He swallowed.

He was conscious of the F.B.I. men talking in low tones. He heard Pardee's protestations, dull and futile. He reached a trembling finger into the wrecked cab and touched the clay on the pedals. Stabbed a finger against it, felt suddenly someone at his side.

When he turned his heart was hammering. He wanted to cry out. He saw Marty Banion's round little face peering up at him, and his round little eyes were blank. He smoked a cigar, rather chewed the short butt of one.

Banion said, "I been talkin' for you, Jimmy."

"Maybe I need somebody to talk for me," Jimmy answered dismally. He had hidden his clay-encrusted finger behind him.

"You sure you didn't direct Joe Miller to where he could pick up some extra load, Jimmy?" Banion's small eyes narrowed and studied him.

"Mr. Banion, you know me well enough—"

"I know them government men—they gotta make a case, Jimmy. The cops has been pumpin' the hell outta me. All I could tell 'em was I didn't know nothin' about you since—well, since that other scrape. I come when they called me this mornin', in case you needed any help."

The cop with the flashlight came back and turned it into the truck cab. An F.B.I. man was with him. They went over the cab carefully. Then they pointed the light down to the ground. Jimmy followed the beam fascinated. He stood in yellowish clay. But so did all the rest of them. He held his breath when the torch beam circled his way, wanted to hide his own shoes. But the cop suddenly flashed the light out.

"Thanks, Mr. Banion," Jimmy said in a relieved sigh. "You always—"

"Mr. Lyons wants you, Rigney," one of the F.B.I. men said. He stood in front of Jimmy and nodded toward the group at the edge of the ditch.

III

THE evening papers crowded the war into one corner that night. Played high, under eight-column lines were pictures of the blast-scarred wreckage, the crater in the road. There was a picture of Jimmy Rigney pulled of the morgue with a caption that read, "Former Fifth Column Suspect First at Scene." Beneath the picture the cut lines recounted Jimmy's former trouble.

The evening papers lay spread out on Jimmy's single iron bed. The rain with the early October night black beyond the pane, pounded on his window.

The tall girl who stood at the window turned abruptly. Her eyes were

red and swollen from weeping. She wore blue suit and a small blue hat, and her raincoat lay over the foot of the bed. She was Joe Miller's sister, Helen.

The girl said, "I made your mother go to her aunt's Jimmy. When the early editions came out and said you were being held for further questioning, she broke down. And poor Lettie—she's ready for the hospital." The girl spoke of the dead trucker's wife with a low softness in her tone. "She just can't realize—"

"Listen, Helen," Jimmy said abruptly. "You lived there with Joe and Lettie. There wasn't anything wrong lately, was there? I mean Joe didn't seem like he had something heavy on his mind, did he?"

"What're you driving at, Jimmy?"

"I'm trying to figure. This thing—I gotta get inside it. I gotta—"

"That's the F.B.I.'s job," Helen said, taking a step toward him. "There's nothing you can do, Jimmy, but do what they say. They told you to go home and stay there. They told you to be where they could get you if they wanted you quickly again. They—"

"I got a hunch," Jimmy broke in. "Something I saw down there at the wreck. Something—"

"If you saw something the G men didn't see you should've told them."

"Maybe, honey. Only—don't you see! The cops are trying to hang something on me. Let me open my trap about the least thing, an'—but you tell me about Joe. He wasn't worried any, was he?"

"Not that anybody cold see," Helen answered soberly. "I fixed his dinner for him at noon yesterday. Tomorrow is Pete's birthday, and he was saying he'd go shopping in Jersey, in Newark, and get something real cute for little Pete."

He said that at dinner. He left for the terminal about two. Whistling,

like he always whistled. And now—the kids are too young, thank God, to know what it's all about." A tear spilled over, and she dabbed her cheeks with a tiny handkerchief.

Jimmy said, "Look, Helen. You stay here.

"Keep the light on in this room. It can be seen from the street. Walk back and forth between the light an' the shade now an' then. The guy standing over there ever since I came home—he can see the shadow. If you don't mind me takin' your car, like I ask you on the telephone—"

"Please do be careful, Jimmy. What ever you do, don't—" She broke off as his arms slipped about her. "The car's down in the alley, back of the garage. I can't stay here long though, on account of Lettie."

"Just long enough to let me get a start."

Jimmy Rigney didn't turn on any lights downstairs. He crept silently through the lower passage, fumbled in the dark for his black rubber coat, slipped it on, let himself out the kitchen door.

The wind whipped the rain through the tall tree at the end of the porch, showered him as he stepped cautiously into the dark yard. There was a gate at the side of the garage in which he had kept his truck in the old days—in the days when he'd been trying to build a business for himself.

He paused at the gate and listened, and peered into the shadows. The man who had tailed him home had taken up a position across the street in front of the house, but that didn't mean that there wouldn't be anybody back here. His ears glowed red and hot as he thought of those long hours the F.B.I. men and the state cops had prodded him with questions, thought of the bright lights in his eyes, the constant repetition of some of the questions.

THEY had contended that Jimmy hadn't been out on that road by mere coincidence. They inferred a lot of things. They didn't come out and accuse him definitely of anything. They had worn him down into a state almost bordering on exhaustion before suddenly Lyons, the chief, had come into the room and said, "That'll be all, men. Send this man home." Nothing else.

Jimmy approached Helen's small coupe without sound. If any figures lurked in this alley he couldn't see them through the black night. He crawled into the coupe, switched on the ignition. He merely had to let the brake off to start the car rolling on the slight descent. He put it in high so that he wouldn't have to attract any attention by whirring the starter. He coasted a few feet, let in the clutch, and the motor caught almost soundlessly.

He didn't switch on his lights until he came to the first intersecting street. Here he turned left and stepped on the gas.

On the quick trip down to the terminal and warehouse district, Jimmy Rigney constantly glanced into the rear-vision mirror in an effort to determine whether he was being followed. Once a taxi stayed behind him for several blocks and caused a cold sweat to wet his hat band. Then the cab turned off.

Finally, when he turned into Monument Street and rolled between the towering darkness of the warehouses that lined it, he knew he was alone. The street was cobbled here, and dimly lit, the blocks were long with the street lights far apart.

His first mission was a talk with the Pardee dispatcher, old Billy Field, a quiet, worried little guy who'd always been a friend of Jimmy's. Not that Billy might be able to tell him much. But the main thing was to try to trace the movements of Joe Miller's truck, mile by mile, if possible. And only a

guy with Jimmy's background could do that.

Pardee had said the truck, loaded with the glass and the millwork, had left the yard at 3:15 in the afternoon. Jimmy just wanted to check and be sure, then he would try to pick up Joe's trail. He knew a couple of ways he might do it because he knew Joe Miller's easy-going habits, knew where Joe Miller usually stopped.

It was certain that he'd stopped yesterday somewhere against his will, and just where that might be—

Jimmy toed his brake. He came up to the dimly-lit gate on the outbound side of the Pardee terminal. At this time of night there'd be no activity in the yard. The loading platforms on the other side of the yard would be a madhouse with the pickup stuff from over the city being sorted and loaded into trailers which later would be dispatched to every corner of the eastern seaboard.

He hadn't yet come to a stop when a big car came up from behind him, almost out of nowhere, cut around him and slowed to turn into the yard.

The single light on the gate caught the left side of the driver's face for one fleeting instant, and Jimmy Rigney froze in his seat, forgot to step on his brake, almost rammed the rear bumper of the big sedan, then rolled on by the gate into the darkness beyond.

Breathlessly, with heart hammering, Jimmy hugged the curb and stopped and slid from his seat. He forgot to turn off his motor, had to retrace a step to do it. He wanted a better look at the sedan's driver. He wanted to be sure that the beak of a nose was the same that he had seen once before in his life. The nose on the face of the man who'd called him to that out-of-the-way residence to pick up a half dozen cases of dishes and household goods.

How little attention he'd actually paid to that man on that afternoon.

Couldn't remember whether he was short or tall or medium. But he didn't miss on that nose. He'd remember that anywhere.

At the gate his fingers trembled and his knees refused to hold his weight without stiffening them. The light would cover him completely, make him visible to anybody who might be keeping a lookout. But he had to change that. Unless he could wait here until the sedan came out again.

He peered around the brick post of the gate. The yard was empty now of trailers save for the far end, nearest the warehouse proper. Here they loomed dimly in the shadows. Down there by the trailers the sedan had stopped, had turned so that it faced the gate again.

A MAN was emerging from the shadows under the shed. He seemed in a hurry. Features and figure were indistinct. A car door slammed.

Jimmy turned and hurried to his coupe. If he could only get turned to follow that big car. He whirled the starter, began to tool the wheel about when, through his mirror he saw the sedan emerge. And he didn't have to turn. The sedan was coming up behind him, heading out toward Covent Street.

If anybody in the big car noticed the little battered coupe no sign of it was given. Jimmy followed at a discreet distance. Not enough traffic down in this district at night for him to worry about losing the other car.

The sedan turned right into Covent Street and Jimmy followed suit. He was a half block in the rear and easing along with only his parking lights on. He trailed the car for two blocks on Covent and saw it make a right turn into an alley without a name.

His fingers were wet on the steering wheel rim. Should he turn into the

alley or slide by it and stop? Surely that car wouldn't be using the alley to go through to another street. Not unless the driver suspected the coupe that was behind him.

Jimmy eased off to a creep, slid by the alley's mouth, took a quick look down, swallowed to moisten a suddenly dry throat. The sedan's taillights were all he saw, disappearing into a wall in the middle of the block. On the right-hand side.

He parked the car and took the keys. Maybe this was all wet, the wrong way to handle the matter. Maybe if he could get to a telephone and call Lyon's office, and get an F.B.I. man down here— Yes, that would be the trick. First determine exactly where that sedan had gone. Then hurry to a cigar store over on Becker Street. Just a couple of blocks. Back where there were lights and traffic again. It wouldn't take more than five minutes or so.

He thought about all this as he goaded himself along the alley. He stayed in the shadow which wasn't hard since there wasn't any street light at their end of the dark canyon. He almost had to feel his way along because there was no sidewalk, and the pavement was old and broken.

He was following what seemed to be a row of old, deserted brick buildings. Now and then there was a boarded-up door which indicated a truck entrance.

The middle of the block. How to tell. How to know—

Only the barest sound told him—a screeching sound like the closing of a long disused sliding door. And it was a door beyond this wall, not in it. He was under a boarded-up row of windows when he heard it. His fingers felt the windows, followed the wall to the end of the row, then felt the cold ribbing of a steel door. There was rust on the door proper but at the edge there was fresh oil. He knew all about ware-

house doors, knew what to look for to know if this had been in recent use. It had. It had closed only a couple of minutes ago on a sedan that Jimmy simply had to know more about.

This would be the entrance to a cavernous building, and there would be another door inside there that he'd have to get through. But how?

A savage gust of wind drove the rain in a sheet down through the narrow alley. The pelt of it on Jimmy's rubber coat was loud in his ears. His bare hands groped over the door's corrugation. He squatted and felt along the bottom of it, felt his heart tumble as his fingers found a small hole. The door wasn't altogether shut. It couldn't be locked.

Jimmy stuck his fingers under the bottom edge and tried it, lifted without too much strain. If the door was properly greased—

It startled him. It came up soundlessly for so large a thing. He raised it eighteen inches, got down to one knee, listened. He felt a cold draft against his cheek. He could see no lights but he heard a rumbling.

The idling of a motor.

Jimmy forgot caution in his excitement. He virtually rolled beneath the door, grasped it, shoved it back down, shut out the sound of the rain.

He backed against the brick wall and stood with pounding heart in the inky darkness. He stood quietly for a long moment, scarcely daring to breathe.

HIS eyes became accustomed to the stifling blackness and a small dim bar of light became visible. There was another wall with a door and now he made his way toward it, his feet in deep dust. The smell of the dust, other odors in the blackness, were vaguely and disturbingly familiar.

A foundry—yes, a foundry smelled

like that. He remembered now. He had called on two or three as a trucker, to pick up or discharge loads. A foundry!

He groped his way to the bar of light, perpendicular like a slender thread in the darkness. His hands were in front of him and presently his fingers touched the wooden sliding doors. Doors that came together in the center, that slid on an overhead rail. Here was his bar of light.

Anxiously he pressed an eye to the crack. Then he quit breathing.

He couldn't see the sedan, but he saw a truck. The back end of it was toward him, and the rear doors of its trailer were open. And two men were loading something into it—something packed in small wooden boxes, something terribly heavy and dangerous from the way the men handled the cargo. They worked in absolute silence, and they sandwiched between layers of their cargo, huge woolen pads. There was just the one garish overhead light out of sight above the rear of the trailer, and its downward glare gave a queer theatrical atmosphere to the procedure.

Jimmy would have time now. He could see the trailer tags. He made mental note of the number. That truck was being loaded for the road. Its driver could get all the start he wanted. The F.B.I. men could pick up the truck. Then maybe it wouldn't be hard for Jimmy to prove—

Prove what? He felt suddenly as if somebody had thrown a wet blanket down over him. Yes, prove what? That he himself had never had any hand in the carrying of explosive? Well, that would be something. Maybe the F.B.I. men could make the truck driver talk.

But how did Jimmy know that this cargo being loaded was anything other than some legitimate foundry material?

Well, it wouldn't hurt to try. That sedan drove into this building. The guy at the wheel of that sedan had planted hand grenades in Jimmy Rigney's truck. Okay. The same guy couldn't be far away from here once that truck got out on the road. The same guy was right here now. In the building.

All Jimmy had to do was get a couple of blocks away over to that cigar store. In five minutes he could have all the cops in the country surrounding this area. The guy in the sedan couldn't get through—

Jimmy was half across the dusty floor groping once again for the corrugated entrance door when a sound halted him. A sound slightly to his right. A sound any man who'd ever been around motors much should know. The clinking sound of a hot motor cooling.

He had no time to listen for a further *tink*. All at once a round flood of light covered him and he gazed into it with popping eyes. From behind the light came a soft, gleeful chuckle. Nothing theatrical or villainous about it. Just the chuckle of someone suddenly very pleased about everything.

"You got too much sense to move, pal," the voice behind the torch said.

Jimmy's first sensation was bone chilling fright, an inability to get his breath. The torch glow struck a white-washed wall back of him and reflected light over the sedan and outlined dimly the sedan's driver. The features were indistinct, but Jimmy thought he could see a grin.

Jimmy tried to keep fear and panic out of his voice. He said, "I guess I haven't got any sense at all." He stood perfectly still. The torch advanced toward him. "Maybe you'll tell me what—what it's all about—before you—"

"You know plenty now, sonny boy," the man answered. "You know so much

that maybe you'd consider a little deal."

"Deal?" Jimmy surely wasn't hearing right.

Suddenly the voice hardened. "Go in that door. Turn around an' go in there."

Jimmy turned and saw the door. He advanced toward it with a dry throat and mouth, and with knees that wanted to sag under his weight. He turned the white stained knob with the torch beam throwing his shadow ahead of him.

He entered a bare room that must have once been an office. A rat scurried for a hole. Jimmy saw that. Then he half turned. Half turned in time to meet the sweeping, stinging blow that had been intended for the back of his head.

He saw the fist coming, the brass knucks gleaming in the torch light. He caught the knucks on his left cheek. The fist glanced off but that was enough.

Jimmy sat heavily on the floor.

IV

HE never lost consciousness. He toppled over and lay with his eyes closed and felt deathly sick at his stomach. Somebody else came into the room and said, "Where the hell'd you get him, Sime?" and then a toe kicked him in the lower ribs and almost forced a grunt from him.

"He's a wise punk for a truck driver, Arthur," Sime, the sedan's driver said. "I'd chill 'im now if I didn't know the boss right now is tryin' to pick 'im up."

"I jus' come from his house," Arthur said. "I an' Slim. We frisked it. All we scared up was a dame. She was just gettin' out when we got in. Slim tried to nail her but she give a squeak an' disappeared through somebody's back yard. We give this punk's place a friskin', though. We figured we had

time. He wasn't there no place." Then, after a pause, startled, "Sa-a-a-y! The feds. They been tailin' him. Maybe they seen you pick 'im up an'—"

"I didn't pick him up. He came in here. An' nobody was tailin' him, Arthur, or this place woulda been fulla cops by now."

"Let's get to hell outta here, an' take him with us. I don't like this."

Evidently the man called Sime didn't like it either. Jimmy heard his footsteps hard on the sagging floor. Heard the other one, Arthur, pacing back and forth, anxiously.

After what seemed an hour, but probably was no more than five minutes, Sime came back. Without trying to be gentle about it, Sime and Arthur hoisted Jimmy into the sedan. They didn't tie him up. Didn't attempt to gag him. They tumbled him onto the floor in the rear, kicked his legs in clear of the door. One of them got into the back seat and sat above him and the other manned the wheel.

Jimmy listened to the motor on the truck, opened his eyes, startled, listened more intently.

It's with a truck driver like it is with a locomotive engineer. Take a railroad hogger and he can tell by the sound of a bell or a whistle, just about what engine it is on the main. Especially if it's an engine he himself has run for a long time. A truck driver knows the hum of a motor in just that way. Every little piston slap, every rattle and jiggle.

And laying here with the rear sedan door still open and that truck in low gear easing out between the sliding doors, Jimmy Rigney knew that is was the truck that had been taken from him, repossessed, just a few weeks ago. That limp in the motor, on which he'd threatened to work for so long, was still there. That way it had of backfiring because the spark was out of whack at low speed.

The man on the seat said, "That damn' noise, I don't like that, either."

Then the truck was rolling out to the street and the sedan was turning to follow. The rear door slammed, the motion of the car was silent and smooth.

Jimmy knew when they turned onto the cobbles at Covent Street. Every sense alert he counted off the blocks by the bars of light from the street lamps. Then came the quick left and the feel of smooth pavement, and the stop for a traffic light. That would be the entrance to the eastward U. S. highway.

Dust from the carpet under his face tickled the sensitive membrane in his nose. He sneezed in spite of himself just as the car lurched forward again.

The man on the seat said, "Sonny boy's awake," speaking to the driver. It was the thin voice of Arthur. Sime was at the wheel—the man with the nose that Jimmy had remembered.

Arthur flipped his torch switch, spotted the beam on Jimmy's bloody, throbbing cheek. Jimmy closed his eyes against the glare. A wide flat palm slapped him.

"You ain't out," Arthur said. "Come up an' sit beside me an' be sociable. This is sure a purty ride, even in the rain."

Jimmy didn't have time to get up gracefully. The button at his shirt collar ripped away when Arthur's big hand closed at the back of his neck and jerked upward. The movement made Jimmy's head throb blindingly.

HE braced himself back on the seat, then slumped. Arthur chuckled.

"The safety's offa this thing, sonny boy," Arthur said. He poked a gun into Jimmy's ribs. "Just try anything an' I gotta excuse, see? I ain't supposed to harm your fair head, but any ol' excuse'll do. Get me?"

Jimmy told himself he had to be nonchalant about this. He couldn't let

these hoods know how thoroughly scared he was.

Jimmy said, "This wouldn't be what you call taking a ride, would it?"

"Well, in way," Arthur answered, "I'd say it would. A different kind than most rides, though."

"All right if I smoke?" Jimmy queried. "I got the makin's—"

"Sure, go ahead an' smoke."

Jimmy fumbled in his rain coat pocket. He withdrew his hands, empty. His sack of granulated tobacco was gone.

"You got a cigarette?" he asked Arthur.

"Sure."

But Arthur didn't offer him one. Arthur just sat crouched in the far corner of the back seat with his gun in his hand.

Jimmy tried to get things straight in his mind. He peered ahead and saw the truck. The sedan's headlights were on the trailer. The trailer had been painted gray. You could tell it was new paint. But that dent in the back, near the door lock and handles hadn't been pounded out. Jimmy had done that trying to back too close to some machinery on a loading platform. Had rammed a bundle of angle irons that had stuck out over the platform.

What would happen to that truck now that angle irons were suddenly rammed through it? What was the cargo? Where were they taking him? He knew it would do no good to ask questions.

He saw old familiar sights. Passed gas stations, diners, other trucks, cars. The rain came down in torrents. Traffic wasn't fast because of the rain. But the truck ahead moved swiftly. Must have been going forty at least. The car was staying behind it a hundred yards. Keeping at an even pace. Now and then a car would toot and swing out and burn up the road. Now and then a car, trying to pass both truck

and sedan would get sandwiched between them.

Finally the dual highway ended and the black single-lane section of road began. Here the sedan eased in closer to the truck, hugged it so that a car passing would have to pass both. Jimmy saw the clock on the Beebee Diner at the intersection with the North Falk road. It was ten minutes past nine.

He had a glimpse into the diner and saw a Pardee driver at the counter. Nate Cummings talking with the blue-uniformed girl. The Pardee cargo van was parked in the diner yard. There were a couple of cars near it. Jimmy wished he could get Nate's eye. Yell or something. But of course Nate wouldn't hear. He couldn't hear.

The blackness walled them in and the diner was gone. A state police car came around the bend in the sag at the foot of the grade. Jimmy knew it by its lights. If he could only think of something to do to attract its attention. It slid by, a white and black sedan with a radio rod gleaming in the car's headlights.

The climb beyond the sag slowed the truck. The sedan dropped off in its pace. Jimmy could hear the clamor of the old engine in the truck. That engine sure needed work. But it could still pull.

Jimmy suddenly faced himself with the thought that he was soon to die. The cold hand of fear for a moment touched his heart. Then his ears started to burn, and his heart beat steadied, and he watched the dim shape of his guard with that gun held ready. Nothing he could do here about that. These close quarters. He might miss a bullet and get in a sock, but then there was Sime at the wheel. And Sime wouldn't be idle if Arthur yelled.

The truck backfired abruptly and jarred its former owner to an erect tenseness. Sime, over his shoulder said,

"All's clear back there." And Arthur risked a back glance.

Arthur said, "All clear ahead, too." They were on a level stretch with a long view both ahead and behind.

Sime said, "Here we go again boys."

Jimmy saw the truck turn out to the right. There were three mail boxes on posts at the corner. It was a dirt road. The sedan crowded in close and turned too.

SIME said, "The other night Hap hadda pass this road three times an' come back again before the coast was clear."

"Once you get offa the highway," Arthur said, "these bushes help."

The bushes scratched the sides of the gray van. Only a few leaves remained on them. The truck pulled ahead a little and Jimmy saw the road—yellow clay mixed with gravel. He remembered the yellow clay on Joe Miller's pedals and floor mat. And no clay on Joe's shoes.

He said, "Did you guys kill Joe Miller before you took his truck over that ridge an' cut it loose?" And his ears were glowing again, and his fingernails pitted his palms with little dents.

Arthur chuckled. he said, "This punk knows everything."

"That's what the boss was afraid of," Sime said.

And Jimmy felt the shock go through him—the shock that came with the realization that he did know everything—almost.

Joe Miller had died before the truck went down the hill. Joe Miller, mercifully, had never known what happened there. And in the darkness, running after that truck at the ridge, and calling Joe's name, Jimmy Rigney had been close to a murderer. Somebody had been at the wheel, had jerked the gears into high, had steadied the wheel, then jumped from the left-hand door

away from the side on which Jimmy had trotted and fallen. It could easily have been done. That yellow clay fresh and wet, sticking to the pedals—

The sedan's lights went out. Jimmy straightened and saw that the truck, running only with its parking lights, was turning off the road. Buildings were dimly visible—a house, a barn, a couple of sheds. A weed-grown yard.

Arthur prodded him out of the car and across the yard to the dense shadows of a broken porch. No light came from the house.

Sime unlocked a door and opened it, and Arthur jabbed more viciously, sent Jimmy sprawling into the dark room.

Sime's torch showed an oil lamp on a table. He fumbled with a match, touched it to the wick, set the smoky chimney over the flame. The yellow light made Sime's long nose look white and his hollow cheeks look cadaverous.

"Maybe you oughtta have rope to tie this punk up," Sime said.

And Arthur said, "Whatta I need rope for? When I load him into that Pardee trailer it'd be cruelty to animals to have him layin' over that time bomb trussed up. I wanna have him so's he can move aroun' an' try to claw at the door an' do things like that. 'Course, when they find his remains they ain't gonna know where he was—in the cab, or ridin' on top, or—"

"One dam' thing sure," Sime said, "the boss is gonna see there ain't any cab left of this job."

Jimmy watched both men in the lamp glow. He said, "You're talking about Nate Cumming's truck? The one that was back there at the Beebee Diner?"

Arthur laughed again. Then he slapped Jimmy across the mouth with the back of his hand and the force of the blow, the unexpectedness of it, knocked Jimmy over the low iron stove.

His head cracked against the wall.

"I tol' you he knows everything, this

punk," Arthur said.

"He's a wise egg," Sime answered. "You better let me getta rope—"

"You go about your chores," Arthur said.

Sime went out and Arthur came over to where Jimmy sat half dazed on the floor. Arthur tore more of his short collar band as he heaved him up.

Jimmy was woozy and had a hard time holding his balance. But he didn't need it for long. Arthur brought a fist up from his knees and caught Jimmy before he could duck, and Jimmy crumpled. His mouth was bleeding and the strange lights with the awful ache in his head were terrific. He lay on the cold, smelly floor on his side. He kept his eyes shut.

ARTHUR said, "A rope. When I get through with you, you're gonna be glad to sit still." He stood over Jimmy and said, "Get up from there."

Jimmy kept his eyes shut. He heard two other motors in the yard now. That would be the Pardee truck they'd captured, and Nate Cummings probably with a gun in his back. And maybe the boss.

His head was beginning to clear. The question was in his mind, *What do they want with Pardee trucks, and what's the idea of the time bomb?*

"I said get up!" Arthur's toe caught Jimmy a paralyzing blow in the small of the back. Jimmy groaned and turned over, and opened his eyes in agony. His mind was plenty clear now. The gun was still in Arthur's hand. He listened for voices and footsteps. He could hear neither. He heard a sedan door slam, however. They were doing something out there in the yard.

Slowly Jimmy pulled his legs under him. There was a chair by the table near which he'd fallen. He reached over and gripped the chair, and started to pull himself up painfully.

He said, "Don't hit me like that again." He slumped, holding to the chair, kneeling. His head drooped.

"Beggin' for mercy, areyuh?" Arthur said. He slapped Jimmy's jaw.

"Get up on that chair, like a little man," Arthur snapped. He was having fun. He smiled maliciously. His gun was down at his side.

Jimmy made a gigantic effort. He heaved himself up higher, holding to the back of the chair. The blood was running from his cut lips down over his chin. There was a cut over his eye. Blood was warm on his cheek.

He stood with his feet apart and shook his head like a punch drunk fighter. Arthur laughed.

And the laugh froze on his face. For suddenly Jimmy wasn't punchdrunk, or groggy, or weak on his pins. Suddenly that chair was swinging through the air, and Arthur was trying to get his gun up. And the chair was coming down with terrific force.

Arthur tried to shoot and duck. He didn't get a chance to do either. The legs and seat crashed down on his skull and one of the spreader rungs grazed his nose and broke it.

He went down with a sound like a heavy thump on a ripe melon. A nail in one of the chair legs ripped a wide gash down his face, and blood spurted from the gash and from his broken nose. The gun slipped from his hand and slid over the stove.

Jimmy took the gun awkwardly. He'd never used one in his life. It was an automatic and it had a safety on it, and Jimmy didn't know whether the safety was on or off. He went to the door and listened, tried the knob.

He was locked in!

He listened and beyond the door he heard movement. Then he heard a voice that he knew. A man out in the yard saying, "If this don't fix the Pardee boys, an' fold 'em, then—Sime! Be

sure about that driver. An' be sure about the cab. That clay you left on Miller's pedals—damn', that was too close. The dicks missed it."

"But Rigney didn't," Sime said. "I guess we're ready to load him in."

V

JIMMY wasn't ready to be loaded. He went to the door across the room at the left of the stove. He turned the knob but it, too, was locked. The one window in the old kitchen was boarded up. A tread sounded outside. Sime coming for him with the key.

Jimmy gripped the gun harder and blew out the lamp. He went to the door where the key grated in the lock. Sime would see the room was black, but that would be too late. Too late, that is, if this damned gun worked. His finger was on the trigger. They weren't going to show him any quarter. He wouldn't show them any. He didn't know how many were outside, but as long as he had this gun he'd make it account for itself. He knew one man out there that he was going to get alive. He simply had to take him alive, and when he took him he'd find out the rest of this set-up—the set-up that had put the finger of suspicion upon himself, had put him in a spot where he couldn't get a job of any kind at any price.

The door opened hurriedly. Sime said, "Arthur—" and stopped, and Jimmy squeezed the trigger.

THE blast sounded as if the whole back end of the house was coming down upon him. Sime crumpled, clawing at his stomach.

Out beyond the heavier shadow of the porch Jimmy saw the figures against the gray sides of the truck that had once been his. Dim and indistinct in

the gloom. Two men, both startled stiff by the shot.

One cried, "Dam' it, Arthur, if you've killed that punk—"

He looked for Nate Cummings the driver of the Pardee truck. The Pardee truck was beyond his own. There weren't any lights.

He had to do something. He had to—

"Goddam it, Sime, what's goin' on—"

The taller of the two men started toward the house.

So Jimmy did the only thing he knew to do. He said, "Put your hands up. Both of you. I got you covered—"

"Rigney! He's loose!"

The voice came from one man who started to run. The shots came from the other who advanced a step toward the shadows.

The man handling that gun knew his business. He shot at Jimmy's voice and Jimmy reeled back against the wall with a hole in his left shoulder. His ears got red hot then. He didn't know much about this shooting business, but nobody was going to do that to him. He pulled his trigger.

The running man said, "Come on, Slim. The feds—"

Slim fired again into the darkness, turned, took a hurried step behind the other, said, "You heel, if anybody fries for this—"

Jimmy blasted another bullet in the direction of the sedan.

"Nobody'll fry," the panting man said, opening the sedan door.

"You wait for me," Slim said, "Or, by God—" He turned and poured two more shots in Jimmy's direction. Splinters from the door jamb cut Jimmy's cheek. His left arm was useless. He could feel the blood soaking his sleeve.

"If you think I'm waitin'," the man yelled from the sedan seat, "you're—"

The sedan's motor roared, drowned the rest of the sentence. The slim man

leaped on the running board as the sedan moved.

Jimmy leaped out of the shadow and ran across the yard. He shoved the gun into his pants waist band. He was slightly weak and dizzy from that shoulder wound. But he couldn't let that bother him now.

He felt under the gray trailer, pulled a catch, lowered the dolly wheel standards that would support it. Then he fumbled between trailer and cab for the pin. It took precious moments. But he knew that pin. He got it, crawled into his cab, got his motor going.

The road was straight between the bushes and down near the highway he could see the fleeing sedan's tail lights. Now the stop lights went on and the sedan was making a slow turn. A turn toward the east, toward the Daisy Diner, and the hill which marked the plunge downgrade that Joe Miller's truck had taken the night before.

Jimmy Rigney was a maniac of a sort right now. His headlights covered the rear of the sedan as it made its turn, and he wondered why the sedan had not gotten away faster than that.

As he neared the highway his headlights told him. The sedan had slued off the road into the muddy ditch, had apparently stalled, and had only gotten out by the sheerest miracle. He could see the deep scouring of the right-hind rear wheel in that yellow mud, the tire marks of the skid that had put it there.

He tried his left hand on the steering wheel. He could grip the wheel with his fingers but his shoulder throbbed unmercifully. He didn't have much strength in his arm. His foot was heavy on the gas and he took the turn into the highway on two wheels.

THEN he really bore down. The sedan was a half mile ahead of him. It was big and powerful. It ought to outrun him. But this donkey without

a load—well maybe it was a race horse in disguise. In the days when he'd owned it, he'd never tried it out. It would get its try now.

The trailerless tractor fairly leapt through space. Jimmy couldn't look at the speedometer. He had eyes only for those tail lights. Maybe the fleeing men wouldn't expect him to try to follow them. Maybe they thought he was unable to follow. He didn't care a hell of a lot about what they thought.

The tractor bounced, spun wheels in thin air, came down on the wet pavement and bounced again. It sawed from one side of the road to the other. And when the sedan passed the Daisy Diner it was only a quarter of a mile away. Either it had slowed perceptibly, or this kicking cart had the wings of a demon of destruction.

Jimmy passed the Daisy Diner, too. He bounced onto the shoulder and back onto the road again. He wished he had a pair of spurs. Something to dig in with. It was hard sitting, or trying to sit in this seat. He couldn't stay on it—

Something suddenly shattered his windshield. Then he realized that someone in the sedan was firing at him. There was a small break with radiating lines over on the right edge of the windshield. It didn't hurt his vision.

They were on the rise to the brow of the hill. And something was wrong with the sedan. It wasn't taking the hill. It was slowing. He was gaining not by inches but by yards.

He started see-sawing in the road. He could see the spurts of flame from the side of the car now. Could see the dim hand that held the gun.

He pushed his foot to the floor. Rather he pressed it harder against the floor because he'd already had his gas all the way down.

The sedan rode up on the crown of the road. He couldn't hear it but he could see now. He could see the stut-

tered jerking. It wasn't hitting on a free motor. It was missing somewhere.

Its lights sprayed the ridge crest. Another fifty feet—

Jimmy decided on the instant. He couldn't shoot back. He couldn't just drive alongside and say, "Stop, boys!" He could only do what all passenger car drivers constantly say all truck drivers do all the time. He could only do that and hope for the best.

So he did it. He swung wide over to his left, kicked up gravel from the shoulder. Then he came along side and took the fire from the sedan. A bullet tore through the side glass, sent splinters of glass over his face. He swung his wheel hard right now, braced himself, held his breath.

The tractor jumped off the earth when they crashed. The pounding engine backfired as Jimmy's foot came off the gas. The tractor slued and skidded broadside on the wet road. Jimmy got a brief flash of the sedan crumpling and turning over.

The ditch was shallow here. It wouldn't roll far. But this tractor—this man-killing, bouncing chariot of hell!

It spun in the road like a top, then turned tail and climbed back to the left and nosed into the ditch and whacked the sedan again.

Then it was still, and so was its driver. The stop had been sudden. That left arm had gone completely, and Jimmy's right hadn't been enough to brace him for the shock. His forehead clunked against the windshield, the steering wheel knocked the wind out of him and consciousness departed.

VI

L YONS, the F.B.I. man, said. "You're not very pretty to face a lady."

The medico was fixing up the cuts and

the wounds, and Jimmy could only see out of one eye. But he saw Helen Miller, and she'd been crying again.

Lyons said, "If you'd've come to me with what you knew instead of trying to break this thing down yourself you wouldn't look this way."

"I didn't have a chance to come to you," Jimmy answered. His ears began to burn. Then he sat up and looked around, and smelled coffee and realized that he was in the Daisy Diner, on a table, and all the pain in the world was concentrated somewhere up and behind the location of his left shoulder. He lay back down gladly.

He said, "How about Mr. Banion?"

"He doesn't feel well," Lyons said. "Rolling his sedan like you did, you bashed in a few ribs for him. Tell me how you shot through his hood and clipped a spark plug off."

"I didn't shoot at the hood," Jimmy said. "I took a shot at the man that was shooting at me. He was running for the sedan."

"You're not much of a shot, then."

"That's the first time I ever pulled a trigger in my life. I hope its the last. If you go back down the road you'll find a turn into a dirt road—"

"We've already found it," Lyons said. "We've been taking samples of yellow clay all over hell."

"You saw it in Joe's cab?" Jimmy asked, his one good eye widening.

"You're not the only brainy one in this company," Lyons retorted. "You tell me what happened to you after you lost your sack of tobacco rolling beneath a door in an alley off Convent Street. We first found Miss Miller, then we found her car where you'd left it, then we found the tobacco, and certain evidence in a building, so we started to look for you. Almost too late."

Jimmy told his story briefly. Then he tried to sit up again, managed to prop himself with his right elbow. He

looked at Lyons.

"But how about Marty? Banion? What was the gag? I mean since he was behind all this—"

"The gag was simply this," Lyons explained. "Banion was hauling contraband explosives to a spot in Jersey where, as nearly as we can get it, a fleet of fishing boats picked up the cargo and carried it somewhere else. That's where we have to go from here. Run that down. Banion, of course, had a lot of legitimate business he had to take care of, and he needed some trucks that wouldn't attract attention."

"He knew what a hell of a tenacious bird you were, for one, and figured the only way to get your truck away from you quickly was by framing you. He did. His dummy finance company got your truck in a hurry and turned it back to him. About six other birds without your intelligence were hooked for their trucks by much easier and safer methods, so Marty was getting himself a ratty looking fleet that wouldn't rouse suspicion anywhere. That he didn't have to go into the market for."

"But then the Pardee line started to get some of his regular business. He hated Pardee, didn't want to see that business go to him, so got the bright idea that involving Pardee in what looked like a fifth column plot would fold the Pardee boys in a hurry, just like the newspaper stuff folded you. If he could work it, and get the Pardee trucks and business too, he would be the king in the truck line racket, and he'd have this heavy contraband dough."

"Only you tried to pick up a ride, Jimmy Rigney, and you tried to flag a pal. They'd killed your pal, and you just couldn't sit by and take what they tried to hand out."

Lyons shook his hand. Then Helen leaned over him, and Helen kissed him, and somehow the pain wasn't so bad right then.

COUNTERFEIT KILLER

By
LAWRENCE TREAT

Author of "The Guy with the Educated Gun," etc.

He didn't want to arrest crooks, that was Detective Breen's latest, he wanted to give gun-toting kids another chance. Sure, it was a big laugh, especially to Big Town's top killers. . . .



Dennison let loose a pounding jab that knocked the runt against the wall!

DETEKTIVE - S E R G E A N T BREEN was old in service and ripe in experience. He didn't go blazing like hell and glory to make the headlines and get a citation. He didn't enjoy arresting some poor kid with a stunted mind and a warped background. He thought more about reform and rehabilitation than about detection of crime, and he'd been reprimanded for it.

manded for it.

He spent a lot of time in his office and he talked with a kindly, insistent wisdom. But results were meager, and he had no dramatic cases of reformed crooks. Pretty soon he'd be on the retired list, and not much done.

Still, he kept hoping. He hoped that one of the kids he'd saved from prison and whom he took to dinner every week would come through. Just once, so that when he retired he'd known his career had really meant something.

Meantime, he went about his work. Some of his fellow-officers laughed and called him soft. Others understood, and were secretly rooting for him. But he couldn't get cooperation on the scale he needed.

He pored over papers and did a lot of office work. He was checking over the private detective agencies and weeding out the crooked ones for investigation.

He had several lists. One of them he called the "must" list—outfits that had to be broken up, no matter how. The Canning agency was one of them. But Canning was clever and tricky, and so was his number one man, Dennison, and they both knew what Breen was doing. Which made it a tough job.

Breen was sorting papers when he got the phone call.

BIG BOY DENNISON had plenty of respect for Canning and didn't usually argue. But Dennison was sore.

"So what?" he snapped. "So an old man with a police badge wants to get something on the agency. So the next time I see him I'll ram his teeth down his windpipe. I never been jugged yet and Grandpa Breen isn't the guy that can do it."

Dennison bristled with confidence. It was in his big sloping shoulders, his wide jowls and his fat, well-fed cheeks. Canning frowned and felt jealous of that

brutal strength and inexhaustible energy. And sly and tricky though Canning was, he hoped he'd never be on the opposite side of the fence from Dennison. Canning knew just how viciously dangerous the Big Boy was.

Canning leaned back in his swivel chair. He was conscious of his flabby muscles and his heavy little paunch.

"We got to go easy, Big Boy," he said. "We had our license suspended last year, and next time we're liable to kiss it good-by."

"Breen!" bellowed Big Boy. "He's got hardening of the arteries and softening of the brain. He ought to be a truant officer instead of a dick. Heard his latest? He don't want to arrest the crooks. Says they ought to get another chance! Listen—if nobody's on your tail except an old man with a weak liver and a yellow streak in his gut, you're doing all right."

Canning slid his tongue along his pale, flat lips. "Don't underrate him, Big Boy. He's no dummy."

Dennison spat disgustedly. "If I hear that cheap bum's name just once more, I'm going to blow up. Is that what you called me in for? To tell me to watch out for Breen?"

Canning smiled. "I got a job for you, Big Boy, and it carries a little bonus with it."

"How little?" grunted Dennison. He knew what Canning meant by a bonus. Whenever a client was charged for expenses that weren't expended, whoever worked on the case got his share of the graft. The custom made for good will and it kept mouths shut.

"One century."

"Listen!" snapped Dennison. "I smashed up my bus on that last case and I got to pay for it myself because the insurance people won't give me a lousy policy any more. You said you'd make it up to me, didn't you? Well, where do you get off?"

"Two," said Canning. "The whole business'll only take you a couple of hours."

Two hundred would cover the repairs, but Dennison had his heart set on a brand new car. He started to protest; then he changed his mind. "What's the case?" he asked.

"You know Thomas A. Osgood, don't you?" The question was rhetorical, because everybody knew Osgood. He had a skyscraper named after him. "Well, Thomas Osgood Jr. was up at the Club Mardi Gras the other day, playing roulette."

"George Bray's joint," said Dennison softly.

"Young Osgood lost plenty. He gave Bray all the cash he had in his pockets, and then wrote a check for the balance—five hundred. Only he wrote it on the wrong bank, and he forgot to sign the 'Jr.' And that makes it forgery. Canning smirked at his subtlety, and went on. "Bray has too much sense to cash it. He wants fifty grand before he'll give it back, but his price is too high. That's what Osgood came here for."

"What'll he pay for it?" demanded Dennison, still thinking about the car.

CANNING smirked again, reached into a drawer of his desk and chucked a bundle of hundred dollar bills on the glass top. They were tied with a rubber band. "Two grand," he announced.

Dennison picked them up and counted them. They checked. Twenty.

"Bray's a friend of yours. That's why I'm letting you handle this." Canning leaned back in his swivel chair, stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and said, "They're marked bills. Osgood marked 'em himself. He thought it was a clever idea."

Dennison observed "Maybe it is," shoved the roll in his pocket and stood up. "Anything else?"

"Yeah." Canning slid his tongue along his lips. "Whatever you do, take it easy."

"Listen—I told you if you mentioned that heel again I'd blow the lousy roof off this joint. And I'll be damned if you or any other—"

"Who mentioned him?" asked Canning quietly. "You or me?"

Big Boy Dennison stared angrily. His eyes were small, keen, alert under his bulging forehead. "Well, just lay off the cracks about taking it easy," he said. He selected a cigar from the box on the desk. "About that bonus—do I get it now?"

"Why not?" said Canning.

He put two centuries on the desk and Big Boy picked them up. "I'll take care of it," he said confidently.

He stalked out of the room with the cigar in his mouth. He felt as if he could tear people apart with his bare hands. He was strong and he was brainy, and what the hell more could any guy ask from the world? And besides, he had two hundred for himself, and a couple of grand in his pocket to play with.

He played. He put one grand in his wallet and called it "Buick," and five centuries in another pocket for personal expenses. The remaining five hundred he left in the rubber band.

The big detective took a taxi to his first stop, a brown-stone house in the west twenties. He gave the bell marked "Parasetti" a peculiar ring—two long, a short and a long.

"Jack in?" he asked the bottle-nose man who opened the door. "Tell him I want to see him."

Dennison waited in the front parlor while the bottle-nose man trudged down to the basement for Jack Parasetti. Dennison marched up and down the room. If he could settle this up this afternoon, he could buy a car by evening and take that red-head out. He

wanted to impress her. Show a dame that you're in the dough, and she's yours for the taking.

Big Boy swung around as the door opened. Jack Parasetti was a tall thin youth, with a pimply face that he kept rubbing with the palm of his hand. He looked like nothing, but he was an artist in his line.

"Hello, Jack. Got two grand for me?"

"Sure. Usual price."

Dennison took the five hundred in the rubber band, dropped the roll on the table and sat down to wait. Jack went out of the room. He was gone about ten minutes. When he returned, he had a roll of brand new bills. He counted them carefully. They were good counterfeit.

BIG BOY pointed to the money he'd brought. "They're marked with a little black dot in the corner, but they won't give you any trouble."

Jack stopped counting. "Say, how do I know that?"

"If I was planting anything on you, I wouldn't tell you, would I?"

Jack let the idea percolate. He rubbed his face, examined Dennison's money, then rubbed his face again.

When Dennison said "I'm carrying more like that myself," Jack finally made up his mind. "Okay, Big Boy. I'll chance it."

"No chance at all. It's money I got to account for, so I want you to fix up the phony ones the same way. Just in case I get checked up, so I can say I had the same bills all along."

Jack found a bottle of india ink and a drawing pen and put little dots on the corners of all the counterfeit bills Dennison had brought. When the marking was finished, Jack took a five dollar bill from his pocket. "Here's one of the new ones I'm working on. That's just the first pull."

Dennison studied the bill. It was

punk work, but Jack never gave away anything he could sell.

"I'll keep it for a souvenir. So long."

"So long."

Jack waited until he'd heard the front door slam. Then he picked up the telephone and called a number.

"Hello, Bray? This is Jack. . . . Listen, two G went out. Big Boy Dennison. It's got little black dots in the upper right hand corners . . . Yeah." He hung up.

Dennison took another taxi to the Club Mardi Gras. It was empty at this hour of the afternoon. He wandered past the white-topped tables and the empty orchestra alcove. He parted the curtains to the men's room and entered a modernistic lounge. A little man jumped up from a chair. He had a sharp chin, a sharp nose and brown eyes that were small and sad. His head was inches short of Dennison's heavy shoulders.

"I want to see Bray," said Big Boy. "Just tell him Dennison's here."

"You Dennison?"

"Listen, shrimp—cut the smart cracks and tell him I want to see him. I'm an old friend of his, and you're so new here you smell bad."

The runt picked up a phone and spoke into an oversized mouthpiece. One of those hush-a-phone gadgets.

Dennison waited impatiently. He wasn't worried, but he did feel a little uneasy. He hadn't been here in a long while. Still, George Bray was an old friend and he'd never suspect Dennison of passing phony money. And by the time Bray realized he had it, it would be mixed with other bills. The source would never be traced.

The runt put the phone down and started to unlock a door. "Okay. Bray's upstairs."

Dennison halted in the doorway. "What's your name, shrimp?"

"Mackey."

Dennison fished into his pocket and hauled out a five spot. It was the new counterfeit Jack had given him. He handed it to Mackey.

"Just so you'll know me next time, shrimp."

"I'd know you without the five."

"Well, so you'll like me better."

Mackey laughed and examined the bill. Then the laugh faded and the corners of his mouth curled up in sarcasm. "I'll love you," he said.

GEORGE BRAY was sitting behind a big mahogany desk. It had a jade clock, a jade ash tray and a jade ink stand. Bray had black hair and swarthy skin. On his fourth finger he wore a large diamond solitaire. The middle-finger, next to it, had a loose bandage. The adhesive had apparently been rubbed off a couple of times and wouldn't stick.

"Hello, Big Boy."

"Hello, George. You look prosperous. Business good?"

"Not bad, considering I run pretty straight these days. Have a seat."

Dennison sat down at the side of the desk and drummed one hand on the shiny surface. "Who's your new door-man?"

"Just a kid I took on. Breen saw him prowling around trying to work up the nerve for his first stickup. Handed him the usual line about giving him a chance to go straight, and never even booked him."

"Breen, eh?" Dennison was hearing that name too often. "How do you know the runt's not stooling for him?"

"Say, don't you think I had him tailed every second he was out of the place? And in, too. And anyhow, there's nothing he could tell."

"You're a sucker to play Breen's game."

"What's the matter, Big Boy? Breen getting you down? I tell you, he asked

me to give the kid a job. That's all." Dennison's face darkened, but Bray leaned back and laughed. "The kid's all for me, now. Hero stuff. Thinks I'm straight. And what a memory for faces!"

"Well, he'll know me next time."

"Know you?" Bray stooped forward. "Listen, he could see you for two seconds in a crowd on the dance floor, and ten years later he'd pick your mug out of the rogue's gallery."

"I wouldn't trust any half-grown wart that Breen brought around to my place."

"You got him on your mind, Big Boy. But listen—in my line a kid like Mackey's worth a fortune. Spots every face coming and going. And Breen's not a bad egg for a—"

"Breen—Breen—shut up about him, will you?" shouted Dennison.

"Take it easy, Big Boy. What's the trouble?"

"Trouble? Nuts! How could Breen make trouble? He's scared of me. Runs across the street whenever he hears my name." Dennison fingered the jade clock. "That's a nice thing you got."

"Not bad. Keeps time like Western Union."

"Must have cost a lot."

"I got it cheap. Real cheap."

Dennison put his hand on the arm of his chair. "Listen, you got a bum check from young Osgood."

"So?"

"So Osgood hired Canning to get it back. That's why I'm here."

"How much are you paying for it?"

"One grand."

"That piece of paper's worth fifty grand to me. And then some, if I'm cagey."

"Sorry, George, but that's out. I'm buying the check."

"No sale, Big Boy. I got ideas for it."

Dennison stacked a thousand in counterfeit bills on the desk. "I don't like to see you get the dirty end of it, George. I'll show you what I'll do for a friend. One grand of Osgood's. And I'll throw in another grand of my own."

Bray smiled and shook his head. "Why not throw in a pair of roller skates, too? Think I'm crazy?"

DENNISON counted out the other counterfeit thousand and piled it next to the first roll. "Two grand, George. How about it?"

"Not a chance."

"Yeah?" Big Boy's small eyes gleamed. "Remember Pinky Richards? Somebody grabbed him before the cops caught up and hid him out for four days. Then they let him walk out and give himself up, but it was too late by then. His evidence wasn't important any more. He described the place where he was, but the cops never found it, did they?"

"It was just a room. There was music nearby, so they looked through all the night clubs, including mine. But this wasn't the joint."

"No? That back room of yours was repapered, wasn't it? And you had a window boarded up. It's easy to change a room, George, but when you do it fast you don't do it right. If I told that to the cops and they brought Pinky into the back room and there was two layers of wall paper, it would be tough on you. Particularly if you're playing it straight these days."

"Who told you about the wall paper?"

"Just a friend. I got lots of friends."

Bray got up and walked the length of the room with his hands in his pockets. Then he returned to the desk.

"If I sell you the Osgood check for two grand, how do I know you still won't use that information?"

"I kept it under my hat, didn't I?

Never mentioned it till you wouldn't do me a favor. You could wipe out the evidence in a day or two. But you couldn't do it in fifteen minutes, and that's all it takes to get a police wagon here."

"You wouldn't stool?"

"No? Canning would give me a cut on every case in the office if I could get him in good with the cops. And I like dough. You ought to know that, George."

Bray bit his lips, sauntered to his safe and fingered the combination. The bandage slipped back from his finger. Dennison watched like a hawk while the gambling proprietor took a small brown check from one of the compartments. Bray walked back to the desk and sat down.

"Two grand?" he asked.

"Count it."

Bray picked up a bill and examined it. Then he dropped it on the desk and leaned forward, propping himself with the arm that held the check. The bandaged finger was out of sight, below the edge of the desk.

"You're a rat, Dennison!"

"I don't get you, George."

"About six months ago I got stuck with three grand phony. Stuff that Jack prints. It looked like a racket anybody could pull—come in and play for big stakes. If you win, you collect. If you lose, you shove me some queer. So I made a deal with Jack. Whenever he gets rid of a pile of bad coin that isn't in the regular way, he tells me. Get it now?"

Big Boy stalled. He knew double-crossing George Bray was serious, but he wasn't sure how serious.

"No."

"You got this two grand from Jack a half hour ago. And you know about the back room. You're a rat, Dennison!"

A desk drawer was sliding open. It

creaked. Two men who had been motionless became two blurs of action.

Dennison ducked and streaked for his shoulder holster. He weaved forward as his gun whipped out, and flame leapt almost before the gun was clear of his coat.

THE explosion was deafening in the closed room. Bray jerked back as if someone had tapped him unexpectedly on the chest. His face contorted and his body slumped to one side. The automatic he'd fished from the drawer slipped out of his fingers and thudded to the floor. A piece of bandage was stuck in the trigger where it had jammed the firing mechanism.

Dennison watched Bray's hand claw at the desk, the fingers working convulsively. They caught at the jade clock, held it momentarily and ripped it from the socket as the body keeled over and crashed to the floor.

Big Boy thought it was pretty funny, sitting there and watching a man die. As if it were a show and he had a first row orchestra seat. But after Bray had hit the floor there was nothing more to see. The show was over. For Bray, anyhow. A piece of adhesive had killed him.

Dennison stooped down and took the Osgood check from Bray's fingers. It was slightly rumpled. Then Dennison started to put one hand against Bray's heart, but paused as an ooze of blood seeped through the shirt. That had been a good shot. Couldn't have done better if he'd taken five minutes aiming. There was no doubt about Bray being dead.

The two thousand counterfeit was still on the table, all except the one bill Bray had examined. Dennison found it on the floor, placed it on top of the others and paused.

He knew the room was soundproof. Mackey might have heard the shot, of

course, but nobody else.

Mackey! How was Dennison going to handle him? Easy enough to knock him off, but then what? The connection between Dennison and the Mardi Gras would be a cinch to uncover, and the dicks would go to town on the double slaying.

Bump Mackey? Maybe there was a better way. And a guy with Dennison's brains could figure it.

He laughed softly and put his automatic back in the holster. Then he scooped up the counterfeit bills and rammed them in his side pocket.

He stood in the center of the room for a couple of seconds, thinking. Mackey hadn't come up yet. It followed he hadn't heard the shot after all. Oh well.

Dennison went to work. Fingerprints. Wipe them from everything he'd touched. Let's see. Corner of the desk, cigarette case, clock—touched on the back and one side—arms of the chair. He rubbed out the marks with his handkerchief.

The next thing was to frame Mackey. The only question was whether to frame him dead or alive. Dead was safe, but—there was the slug that would match Dennison's gun, and no other. He couldn't leave it here because it was registered under his name down at police headquarters. And anyhow, those planted double killings never really fooled the cops. There was always something a little wrong when they went to work scientifically. Traces of the backfire, for instance, on the hand that fired the gun. You couldn't fake that.

The big detective thought rapidly, and then he had it. The old bean was working at last. Get Mackey's fingerprints in the right places—the knob of the safe, particularly—and plant the marked money on him. Pretty lucky it was marked.

DENNISON'S mind clicked off the possibilities, okayed them. Get Mackey's prints on the safe and plant the money on him. Get him to beat it out of town, too. Then all Dennison would have to claim was that Bray had been killed *after* the interview. Let the cops prove otherwise, if they could. The circumstantial evidence would all point to Mackey. As long as Dennison kept his mouth shut, they'd never get him. As for the gun, easy enough to ditch it in the river. Big Boy could buy a new one, and for enough money he knew where he could get duplicate numbers stamped onto it. It would take an x-ray photograph to show they'd been changed.

Suddenly he grinned. Mackey, whom Breen hadn't picked up when he could have. Dennison would see to it that *that* story reached headquarters. What a laugh!

The jade clock had stopped when it had fallen from the desk. Dennison set the hands forward one hour. Then he picked up the phone, holding it in his handkerchief.

"Hello, Mackey? Come on up for a minute. Bray wants you."

When Mackey entered, Dennison stood behind the door and let the runt step to the center of the room. Then Dennison said, very quietly, "I just killed Bray."

Mackey gulped. "Geez!"

Dennison closed the door and drew his automatic. "Just to play safe," he said.

The little doorkeeper realized it was all up if he didn't play ball. He winced and went pale.

Big Boy approached slowly. The shrimp backed away. He thought his number was up, and he showed it. Dennison herded him towards the safe, made a quick menacing gesture. Mackey staggered back and stuck out his hand to keep from falling. It struck

the safe. Dennison, six feet away, could see the clear imprint of Mackey's hand. Then Mackey, straightening up, held the knob of the safe for a moment.

Suddenly Dennison holstered his gun. "I could bump you," he said coldly, "and maybe I ought to. But the way I figure it, maybe we can work something out."

The runt nodded. "Yeah—that's right. Anything you say. Anything at all. Sure."

"First of all, you didn't see me come in. And you didn't let me out. Got it?"

Mackey nodded. Big Boy considered smacking him one, just for instance, but the shrimp was so scared that Dennison was afraid he wouldn't even remember what he was being told.

"Just so you know how the score stands," said Big Boy. "I'm a licensed dick, see?" He showed Mackey his card and license. "I'm in with the cops. They think pretty good of me and it'll take a lot to convince 'em I killed a friend of mine. And I'll have the best alibi this town ever saw. As for you—you're just a punk that got picked up with a gun on him and got a second chance. Some cops'd like nothing better than to nail you for a good, long rap, just to take it out on Breen. So between the two of us, you'd get it in the neck. You can see that, can't you?"

Mackey looked unhappy, and his sad little eyes blinked. "I guess so," he said. "Geez!"

"So what I'm going to do is give you a chance to lam out. It's that, or get framed for the chair. I'm giving you two grand and taking you down to the station. After that, you're on your own. Got it all straight?"

"I get two grand and can beat it? Say, that's a real break!"

"Sure. Why would I want to see you burn? I'm soft, that way." But Big Boy didn't look it, with his shifty eyes and his bulging forehead. "Now

get over there and take a look at him, so you'll know what you did."

MACKEY was panting as he stared at the body. He began to stoop. His eyes were on the gun with the piece of adhesive, and Dennison knew what the runt was thinking. Grab the automatic and get the drop on Dennison. But Big Boy wasn't that kind of a sucker.

He started to walk towards Mackey who was watching from the corner of his eye. But as Dennison approached, he kicked up a corner of the carpet and pretended to trip. He lurched forwards and knocked Mackey against the desk. Mackey fell with his hands outstretched. They brushed the desk and then smeared themselves in the bloody mess of the floor. Just to make sure Mackey had no time to think, Dennison dropped his automatic and piled on top of the runt.

Mackey lost his head and reacted with a desperate, savage fright. His body twisted and fought. His feet and hands lashed out like a clawing wild-cat. He couldn't hit hard, but he hit fast and furious, and Big Boy had all he could do to protect himself. He heard the thump of metal and he had a sudden suspicion that this was all an act to give Mackey a chance to grab a gun.

Dennison let loose a hard, pounding jab that knocked the runt clear and banged his body up against the wall a few feet away. Mackey half sat and half lay there. His eyes were glassy and he was gasping.

"Sorry," said Big Boy, "but you lost your head."

Mackey's torso weaved. He was groggy and barely conscious. Big Boy reached out for his gun and almost got Bray's by mistake. They looked alike, except that Bray's had the adhesive. Dennison retrieved his own automatic

and stood up. He had to slosh water on the runt's face to bring him to. Then Big Boy repeated what he'd said before.

"Sorry. I tripped on the rug."

Mackey tried to grin, but there was no life to it. "I got scared," he panted. "When you hit me—I got scared."

"I'll say you did. Tried to beat me up."

Dennison laughed at the thought of the weak little fury that had turned on him and how he'd sensed the shrimp's trick to get one of the guns. Then he grabbed Mackey's shoulder. "Come on," he shouted. "We're getting out of here."

Dennison took him to the Grand Central in a taxi, bought a ticket on the first train going west and put the shrimp on board. Mackey still didn't seem to know what it was all about. He was tickled with his two thousand. Kept looking at the bills as if he'd never tire of the sight.

Dennison walked away from the train feeling good. He'd sure cashed in on his brains today. Instead of being behind the eight-ball, here he'd completed his assignment, framed Mackey, made fifteen hundred clear profit and put one over on Breen. All he had to do now was arrange his alibi by phone, and have an automatic with the duplicate numbers left in his apartment so that he could claim it had been there all the time.

He walked to a phone booth and got busy.

After he'd made his arrangements, he called the office. "Hello, Canning? I got it . . . Yeah, left there about an hour ago. The price was right . . . Bray's a friend of mine, that's all. I'll be in later. Got some business to do first."

The business was transacted at the Buick place. They had a new job that had just been checked over. He could drive it out, on a cash sale.

HE paid. He drove the car across a bridge where he took a quick glance at traffic to make sure there were no cops in sight. Then he flipped his automatic at the river. It glinted for a moment and then dropped out of his life. And that was that.

He felt jaunty as he parked, and he strode whistling down the corridor to Canning's office. Little Mackey was the goat. Prints all over, in all the right places, the Osgood money on his person to show the motive, and his admitted presence at the Mardi Gras. He'd seen the body, too, and knew every detail. The memory would be working into his mind now. And to clinch his guilt, he'd taken it on the lam.

Against Dennison, there could be nothing but Mackey's word, without a shred of evidence to back it up. Dennison would be taken to headquarters, of course, and he'd have a nasty hour or two, but he'd walk out laughing. At Breen! Big Boy was gloating.

The smile left his face as he entered Canning's outer office. Breen was there with another plain clothesman and a pair of harness bulls. Dennison scowled.

"Hello, Grandpa," he said. "What a lot of friends you brought."

Breen stepped forward, placed a hand on Dennison's shoulder and said, "I arrest you for the murder of George Bray."

"Bray—dead?" Dennison put on a look of surprise. "I left him in perfect health a few hours ago."

"Can it, Dennison. We got you cold."

Big Boy hardened. "If anybody bumped George, you better ask his doorman about it."

"That's just what I did," said Breen. "He got off the train at a Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street and phoned me to meet him at the Mardi Gras. The evidence was all there, and he gave me the story."

"You're nuts," blustered Dennison. "In the first place, I haven't even got a gun. Haven't been carrying one for weeks."

Grandpa Breen looked bored. "That stuff won't go. We got your gun—No. 435703—registered at headquarters, and that's the one that bumped him. In case you haven't caught on yet, what Mackey did was to switch the adhesive from Bray's gun to yours, while you were so busy holding him off. He rolled from one gun to the other and did it practically in front of your eyes. So the gun you must have ditched was Bray's, and you walked out of Bray's place and left your own gun lying on the floor. With your prints on it, too. And if that isn't enough, explain how Parasetti has five hundred of the Osgood money and Mackey has two grand of the queer that Parasetti gave you. And all of it nicely marked with little dots, too."

But Dennison's brain had suddenly stopped working. The runt—putting one over on him, Big Boy Dennison! That was too much.

"You see," finished Breen complacently, "I trusted Mackey, and so he came through."

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CASE of the PROMISCUOUS CORPSES

By
EDWARD RONNS

Author of "Homicide Up to the Hilt," etc.

Not the menace of a murderer in the morning, no, Craig knew that wasn't what he feared—it was finding the ghastly cadavers, first the blood of a miniature, and then the gore of its full-sized mate. . . .



He leaped at Helen Claney's figure—struck her again and again!

LASSITER'S wide, thin mouth hung open, gaping like a fish. The man's whole face and bearing was fish-like. Small round eyes under a retreating forehead, large staring

pupils, and his mouth, with a jutting lower lip and a long, retiring chin.

"But ain't it illegal?" he asked.

"Sure," said Craig. He spoke with a Shore drawl. "Sure, it's illegal. You

reckon you want to up and tell 'em so?"

"N—no."

"Well, then."

"But it—it's unheard of!"

"Plenty of people heard of it."

"But it's murderous! Those poor, dum things . . ."

"Yes, sure," said Craig again, with vast patience.

Lassiter began to perspire gently; his face was pale. Craig didn't pay much attention to him. He drove the sedan easily, as was his nature, listening to the thud-thud-thud of the tires as they crossed the interstices between the concrete sections of the highway. The sound was replaced by the rattle of gravel on the fenders as he swung into the tree-lined driveway to the Claney place.

The bright blue sky held forth promise of a warm day. It was just nine o'clock. A light breeze washed over the pine-studded Shore, flat as the eye could reach, and ruffled Craig's thick black hair as he stepped from the car. He paused to stare at the big stone barn behind Claney's house. The building was well hidden from the highway. Driving casually by, you would never suspect the presence of that row of cars parked under the elms. Craig made a swift estimate of the number, guessed about twenty. That would mean almost three-score people in the big barn. He wondered grimly just how many of these Sunday morning sport fans were women.

DUCKING a low-hanging branch, he pushed open a small door inset in the larger one and held it open for Lassiter to enter. It was a curious scene for the inside of a barn. It was not a barn at all, but an arena. Cigarette smoke hung thickly in the air, shredded by movement and the babble of men's voices. There was a twenty-foot matted

ring in the center of the vast room, with a low board railing around it and a double row of seats beyond that. Almost all of the seats were occupied.

There was a dead gamecock in the center of the pit. One of the pair of setters-to was walking off with the victor, a bloody Dominique rooster. The steel spur that was heeled to its foot glistened with liquid red.

Craig's lean brown face was impassive as men strolled toward him and greeted him.

"Hi, She'iff."

"Mornin', Brother Craig."

They spoke like that, these people. Their eyes were embarrassed, uneasy at his presence. Some well-dressed, professional men from across the Chesapeake and up Philadelphia way were frightened by the law's appearance, and their faces showed their fear. The natives were just embarrassed. Some of the grim saltiness of the flat tidewater land had entered each one of them.

"You ain't figurin' on bustin' up our Sunday mornin' recreation, are you, Sheriff?"

"Maybe," Craig said.

The men drifted away one by one. Craig moved around the ring with Lassiter constantly at his heels. Although it was just nine in the morning, four mains had already taken place, and a fifth was in progress. Craig scarcely glanced at the rituals in the pit: the weighing-in and the billing of the birds. His gray eyes swept the circle of seats and breath went out of him in a soft curse as he spotted Marc Phelan and Helen Claney, just sitting down beside him. Craig got up with a muttered excuse to Lassiter and circled behind the chairs to where they sat.

Phelan's voice was cool and smooth. "Hello, Sheriff Craig. Come to inspect the vices?"

Craig stood and said: "I thought I told you not to come around here."

"Oh, but—"

"Maybe you didn't believe what I said. It's bad enough that these people bet their shirts on the mains; at least, they bet with each other. They don't need someone to come down from New York and take their goods back with 'em. We don't need your kind around here."

"Bill!" Helen protested.

Craig scarcely glanced at her. His dark gray eyes watched Phelan steadily. The gambler was tall and lean and dark of face. He had dangerous, pale blue eyes that held twin mocking flames deep behind them. He looked away from Craig to Helen Claney and bowed slightly, said:

"I'll see what's keeping your husband."

Craig watched him go in silence. Down in the pit there came a sudden flurry of blood-spattered feathers as two roosters flew at each other. Craig felt Helen Claney's tension as she looked irresistibly toward the slaughter. Her red lips were slightly parted, her eyes wholly fixed on the miniature gladiators, alight with some instinct that made Craig shudder. He sat down in Phelan's vacant seat.

Helen's small fingers gripped his hand. Her voice was quick and nervous, underlying her light attitude.

"Wait until you see the next main, Bill, darling." It's a grudge fight. Claney's Whitehackle is fighting Morton's Red Rover. You know how Claney and Morton despise each other. Neighbors for so long, and hating each other all that time. They're going to settle another of their quarrels this morning by this fight."

"Yes, I know," said Craig. He withdrew his hand from Helen's fingers. It wasn't that he minded a pretty woman touching him; but he liked a woman to be discriminate about it. Helen wasn't. Helen regarded all men with

bright-eyed speculation, as possible prospects. He didn't like her.

SHE said: "Stay with us and watch this one, Bill.

"I'm with Lassiter."

"Lassiter! Is he here?"

"He insisted on seeing this so-called sport for himself. He's got a feeling for animals as pets. You should see his house. Birds and cats and dogs and rabbits. Poor devil, he's probably sick by now."

Lassiter was indeed looking bad. His long face had a greenish tinge under the skin, and perspiration beaded his wide upper lip. He glanced at Craig as the tall man returned and said:

"I—I need some air. I—don't feel so very well."

Craig nodded and watched Lassiter go out of the smoke-filled barn. The setters-to entered the pit, one holding Claney's huge Whitehackle, the other holding Morton's Red Rover. The two birds were being billed, to get them hopping mad. They wore long heels, or gaffles—spurs a full two and a half inches in length. The tiny steel sabers shone wickedly in the smoky light.

A man entered the barn, stood in the doorway across from Craig. It was Morton. He was short and fat in a light brown suit that emphasized his roundness. His face was pale. He dabbed at his forehead with a silk handkerchief and slid into a seat nearby. Marc Phelan, the New Yorker, returned a moment later.

Uneasiness crept along Craig's nerves as he looked in vain for Claney. He should have stopped at the house first; it would have given him an excuse to see Lil, Helen's sister . . . His attention was taken up by Lassiter's appearance. The man looked shaken, sick. Craig studied him curiously, wondering how a man with such an unprepossessing exterior could have such a love for

dumb animals that their torture and death made him so violently ill.

A disapproving roar from the spectators brought his eyes back to the pit. Morton's Red Rover was staggering around, one eye torn out, its breast spattered with blood. It wouldn't fight. The setters-to glanced at Morton for permission and then climbed into the pit and picked up the two birds, placed them breast to breast in the center of the matted circle. Claney's Whitehackle flew forward with a scurry of wild feathers. Its wicked little sabers glistened with red blood.

Morton's bird retreated, staggering. It turned and moved toward the board rail at a ludicrous gait, as though drunk; and then, quite suddenly, it fell over on its side and lay still.

Red Rover was dead.

There was a murmur of puzzlement that blended into applause for Claney's triumphant Whitehackle. Morton sat very still in his seat, gripping his knees with white-knuckled hands. His round face was shiny and pale.

Craig got slowly to his feet, alarmed, although he didn't know of what. There was something wrong here. Murder in miniature. The whole atmosphere of the big barn, with its double circle of taut, blood-thirsty faces, the smell of feathers and the blood-stained matting of the pit—he didn't like it, hated it. The women were worse than the men, he thought fragmentarily. There were a dozen of them; the so-called weaker sex. The shouts and applause came loudest from them.

Lassiter plucked at his sleeve and said nervously: "So Morton loses his grudge fight, eh? I thought Red Rover was a tough bird."

"He was."

"He didn't look so tough. Claney's Whitehackle had an easy time of it."

Craig turned carefully. His lean, brown face was pale under the tan.

"You think so?" he asked. "Red Rover was murdered."

"Huh? Murdered?"

LASSITER looked puzzled. Craig thought: "The man is a complete fool," and tugged his sleeve free and left his seat. Circling the pit behind the spectators, he found the outside door. Bright morning sunlight temporarily blinded him, and then he reached Claney's house and went down a long corridor to the kitchen. It was cool and dark in here—but not cool enough to explain the shivers Craig felt. It was like an icy finger suddenly brushing the nape of his neck. He felt his mouth grow dry.

"Claney!" he called.

The house echoed back his voice. There was no other answer.

"Claney!"

He swore softly and started to the side door, where he could reach the shed that housed Claney's breeding roosts. Sunlight stabbed at him again, until he stepped into the doorway.

"Claney," he said.

The man lay on the straw-scattered floor. He was doubled up in a convulsed attitude, his arms hugging his middle. When Craig knelt and gently turned Claney's head, he wished he hadn't. Claney was not a pretty sight. Incredible pain had contorted his features into a horrible death mask. His lips and face were blue, his eyes staring wildly. A few feathers clung to the dead man's hair and shoulders. There was a long scratch on the leathery cheek. A drop of blood had coagulated at the end of the scratch, on the point of Claney's chin.

A whisper of sound brought Craig around with a faint squeak of his rubber heels. Lil was standing in the doorway, staring at her dead brother-in-law. She was a tall, slim girl with an ash blonde hair and a smooth, oval

face. She wore a cardigan sweater over a plaid skirt. Her eyes were blue and fixed, and the whites showed in a complete ring around the irises.

Craig moved swiftly forward, took her arm and drew her outside. He heeled the shed door shut. He put pressure on Lil's shoulder and forced her to look at him.

She whispered dully: "He's dead, isn't he, Bill?"

"Murdered," Craig nodded.

She began to shiver, slowly. Her tall body quaked from head to foot. Craig cupped his chin forcibly between thumb and forefinger and made her eyes meet his again.

"Lil," he pleaded softly.

The shivering gradually stopped. She stood stiffly a moment, and then color slowly returned to her cheeks.

She whispered: "All right, Bill. I'm all right. Is there anything you want me to do?"

Call Dooly at the county court house. Tell him to bring the medical examiner; Doc Johnson ought to be on hand. Tell him to hurry."

She nodded and went back toward the house.

Craig sat on an empty box and absently wound his wrist-watch. It was nearly ten. Seputy-Sheriff Dooly, a tall, dour-looking man with a large round head, chewed on a long straw in his mouth.

Craig said: "Well, Doc?"

Johnson straightened with a deep sigh from his examination of the two corpses on the floor—the man and the gamecock. Morton's Red Rover was sharing the honors with Claney. Johnson wiped his mouth and said:

"It's plain as the nose on your face, Bill. Potassium cyanide. Both of them."

"But how?"

"Well, it was a smart job. The rooster's gaffle was smeared with a

gummy resin of some kind; looks like aloes. Then the tip of the spur was dipped in the cyanide. The poison will remain stable that way. The way it looks, Claney's face was scratched by the spur and he got most of the dose, enough to kill him almost instantly. What little was left went into Red Rover, when Claney's Whitehackle went for him in the pit."

CRAIG scowled at his fingernails. "It doesn't make sense. Claney's gamecock was the death bird, with the poisoned spur; and Claney gets killed with it."

Johnson shrugged sloping shoulders. "Maybe Claney got careless."

"No, he knew how to handle birds. And if he put the poison on the spur himself, to win the main over Morton's bird, then he'd have been plenty careful."

Dooly said morosely: "Tryin' to trace that poison is gonna be a job, too. Almost every drug store carries cyanide; it's used in photography, ain't it, doc?"

Craig glanced inquiringly at the medical examiner. Johnson shook his head.

"That's ferro-cyanide. It's the only cyanide that won't do this to a man." He gestured with his foot toward Claney's covered body. "No, you shouldn't have much trouble if Claney bought the stuff around here."

Craig said: "That's a job for you, Dooly. Ring up all the drug stores in the neighborhood and find out who bought potassium cyanide and when."

Dooly registered disgust and went out into the sunlight. Craig sighed heavily and got to his feet. There was a clatter of angry and frightened voices coming from the house. Craig had given orders for all the occupants of the barn to remain on the grounds. His face went grim as he trudged up the path

toward the Claney house. The morning breeze whipped a lock of his black hair over his forehead, pressed a cooling hand against his lean cheek. He swore softly at the smiling blue sky.

The murmur of voices stopped abruptly at Craig's appearance. He stood in the doorway a moment, studying the alarmed faces that crowded the porch and the big living room. Others standing under the trees drifted toward him. Craig's gray eyes sought out Helen Claney's hysterical, tear-stained face and Lil's blessed calmness and Marc Phelan's lean, dark dangerousness.

"Where is Lassiter?" Craig asked.

Someone offered the information that Lassiter had become sick and gone home against his orders. Craig's mouth thinned a little. He held up both hands for silence.

"Listen, all of you! Leave your names and addresses—you folks from across the bay—and you can go home. That is, you can all go except Morton and Marc Phelan."

Phelan stood up slowly. His dark face glistened in the sunlight. His pale blue eyes had lost their mocking contempt.

"You can't hold me here like this."

Craig just said: "You heard me."

Helen Claney whispered: "Marc..." She reached out and clutched the New Yorker's hand. "Marc, stay here."

Craig's eyes flickered to Lil; her red lips were curiously twisted. Marc Phelan stood still a moment more, among the people moving around him to get outside; and then he responded to the tug of Helen Claney's hand and sat down again.

Craig's grin was humorless.

LIL said softly: "Craig . . . Bill!" He stopped his long-legged stride down the path and turned to look at her. She stood in front of the huge box-hedge that surrounded the front

lawn. Sunbeams were caught and tangled in her blonde hair. Her blue eyes moved from side to side, seeking to read his face.

"Yes?"

"Bill, I— What are you thinking of?"

"I'm not doing any thinking yet."

"But what *will* you think of?"

"I don't know."

Her eyes steadied on his. "Bill, I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I wish—I don't know what to do. Oh, Bill . . ."

He put his arms around her and drew her tall body toward him and kissed her. She felt limp and empty when he held her. There was a momentary trembling pressure of her cool hand on the back of his neck, and then she stepped back, empty again.

Craig moistened his lips, watching her.

He said: "What was the quarrel between Morton and Claney about?"

He thought he saw relief spring into her eyes.

"Oh, that? They were always quarreling. About everything under the sun. And there was no secret friendship under it; they really hated each other."

"I know," Craig said.

"This time it was about the Patchacoulee River. Morton owns the strip along the bank, where it floods over every spring and washes out our north field. Last spring our cellars here were flooded to the top of the steps. Claney wanted to buy the strip of land to build a small levee; and Morton refused. Then Claney wanted to pay for the construction of such a wall, and Morton again refused—until Claney suggested a cock-fighting main to decide who should pay for the wall. Well, you know Morton. He's the most rabid fan around here; and a wild gambler. He took

Claney up on it. That's what was behind the main this morning. A victory meant a lot to Claney."

Her words tumbled and spilled over each other with the quickness of her speech. Craig frowned a little.

She stopped now, and asked: "Is that what you wanted to know? Do you think Morton—?"

"He could have. How about you, Lil? I mean, where were you during the main?"

She stared at him, suddenly white-faced.

"Bill . . ."

"You misunderstand me. I want to know if you had seen Claney alive, and perhaps talked to him."

"Oh."

"Did you?"

She took a deep breath. "I knew he was in the shed. I saw him go in there. You know I never watch the mains; I don't like them. I was in the house, and saw Claney go into the shed." Her words were quick again, jammed between her white teeth.

"Was anyone with him?" Craig asked.

"Not—then."

"Did anyone go in later?"

She whispered: "Yes. Morton went in and so did Phelan. That was about ten minutes before I saw you go in—and followed you."

"How did Morton and Phelan act when they came out?"

"Morton was all right. Phelan looked frightened."

Craig mused: "That's hard to imagine, about Phelan . . . Is that all?"

SHE thought a moment. "There was that man who came with you; the one who keeps all those pets."

"Lassiter?"

"He followed Phelan. He looked sick when he came out."

Craig shrugged impatiently, staring

at the tall girl. "It looks like Morton, doesn't it?"

She didn't answer or look at him.

Craig said: "About the poison on Claney's spur. Do you think Claney would have put it on in order for his bird to kill Morton's Red Rover and win the main?"

She said: "No." Then she said: "Yes. Yes, Claney would do that. I'm sure he would."

"All right. Is there anything else you can tell me, Lil?"

"No."

Craig said: "Lil. Please . . ."

"There is nothing else."

Craig said: "Where was Helen? She had just come in when I got to the barn. I saw her sit down beside Phelan. Where was she?"

"I didn't see her, Bill." She sounded suddenly breathless. Her white teeth gleamed in the sunlight. "Please, Bill—not Helen. Not my sister."

"Okay," Craig said.

Morton's car was a large touring sedan, with the canvas top folded back into the leather boot. The chrome-trimmed windows were up, and sunlight shone on glittering metal to give the car a sleek, luxurious appearance. It was parked behind the barn among a row of others. Not all of the spectators had taken advantage of Craig's release.

Craig opened the back door and put one foot on the floorboard, looking at the red leather seat-cushions and a plaid rug folded in a corner. The soft wool looked lumpy. Craig made a clucking sound and lifted a corner of the rug, then raised it all the way. Glass glittered. He reached in and straightened up with a small frosted bottle in his hand.

"Ah, hell," he whispered.

Raising the bottle, he took a cautious sniff at the glass stopper. The odor of kernels crept sinously up his nostrils, and he held the bottle hastily away from

him, staring at it. There was a brown stain around the neck that brought a frown over his eyes. He put the bottle down carefully and pawed at the rug. Where the bottle had nestled among the wool there was more of the brown stain. Craig touched it with his fingertips and felt the dampness. A little bit of something crumbled between his fingers.

"Mud," he said aloud.

He started to back out of the car—and a gun was pressed hard into his spine.

Craig stood very still. His face looked wooden.

Morton's voice came cautiously: "You can turn around. Slowly."

The man's gun was a big nickeled .45 revolver. It looked heavy in his soft white hand. The black eye of the muzzle bored at Craig's heart, matched Morton's dark, narrowed pupils. Morton looked like his car: sleek and comfortable and expensive. His round face was flushed, unhealthy from too-easy living.

Craig said: "Now tell me what the idea is, Mort."

"Maybe a good idea."

"Not from where I'm looking at it."

A nervous grin twitched Morton's lips. His eyes jerked to the bottle on the floor of his car. He said sharply: "What's that?"

"The poison."

"Huh?"

Craig said: "I found it in here, just now."

Morton stared. "That's the stuff that killed my Red Rover—and Claney, huh?"

CRAIG nodded. "Your rooster—and Claney. Yes. In reverse order, though."

Morton snapped: "Maybe in time, but not in importance. I ain't sorry Claney's dead."

"Maybe you will be."

"Meaning you think I did it?"

"Well, did you?"

"Hell, no. That idea is insane."

"Yes, I guess it is," Craig sighed. "But how do you explain the presence of this bottle in your car?"

Morton said angrily: "I can't explain it. I'm not even going to try. That's your job."

Craig said: "Most people around here are going to try to do it for me. They're going to think this way: they'll think you caught Claney putting poison on his gamecock's heels and you picked up Claney's bird and threw it at his face, and Claney was scratched and was poisoned. That's the way it must have happened."

"Except," Morton breathed heavily, "that you got the wrong name. I didn't do it. If you want the right party, go see Phelan and Helen Claney. You know how they were carrying on."

"Sure, who doesn't?"

Morton said: "Well, then. Maybe they didn't like being hampered by Claney's presence. Maybe they wanted a little more freedom. Besides," he finished pointedly, "Phelan knew that Claney's bird was going to win the main."

"How do you figure that?"

Morton said bitterly: "He took ten thousand from me, that's how. Just before the pitting he came up to me, grinning like a cat, and offered the bet. I took him up on it, like a fool."

Craig rubbed a finger across his chin. He looked down at Morton's gun, and Morton looked sheepish and stuck it away in his pocket. Craig made no move to take him. He said abruptly:

"Was Claney alive when you went into the shed to see him?"

"Sure, yes." Morton was startled.

Craig looked around for his car, and decided that Dooly had taken it. He turned back to Morton, staring at the man's round, red face, and said:

"Okay, Mort. Stick around. I'm

going to use your car, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind," Morton said; "but don't get killed in it." He thrust his hands in his side pockets and strolled away toward the house.

Lassiter's kitchen was cool and dark with shadows. The green window blinds were pulled down almost their full length, leaving two bright bars of sunlight shafting across the table. Craig followed Lassiter's thin figure down the hall, and jumped instinctively when a parrot squawked from a side room.

LASSITER opened the icebox and took out two brown bottles of beer. He wiped the frost off them with the palm of his horny hand and set them clinking on the table beside two glasses. He drank first, his adam's-apple bobbing up and down as he swallowed. When he was through he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and looked across the table at Craig. Craig hadn't touched his glass.

"Well?" Lassiter asked.

Craig said softly: "You lied to me, didn't you?"

"What about?"

"You said you'd never seen a cock-fight before; you wanted me to take you to Claney's so you could see one."

Lassiter stared down at the foam in his empty glass.

Craig went on: "You've seen them before; you knew Morton's bird was a Whitehackle breed. You were familiar with the terms. You knew your way around, even if it did sicken you."

Lassiter licked his lips. "I like animals. I don't want to see them tortured."

Craig said: "Is that why you killed Claney?"

Lassiter's eyes became round and scared; his fish-like mouth hung open, and breath whispered beerily from his slack lips. His whole body tautened as

he leaned slowly forward over the table.

"But I didn't," he whispered. "I didn't kill Claney! Honest, I went in and found him like that!"

Craig sat very still, his lean face dim and expressionless in the shadows.

Lassiter went on in a babbling spray of words: "You got to believe me. I didn't kill Claney! God, no! He was dead when I went in there . . ." Abruptly the panic died from his voice, and his eyes widened. His lips spread in a smile. He said slyly: "But Morton did. I know Morton did. He's the kind of man capable of murder. The kind of man who tortures animals."

A chilly prickle raised the hair on the back of Craig's neck as he stared at the man. There was madness in Lassiter's voice, madness lurking deep inside in the black shadows. From a corner of his eye he watched dust motes dance in the two shafts of sunlight, and he wondered how things like this could be on such a bright morning.

"You hate Morton," he said finally. "Is that why you planted the bottle of cyanide in his car, under the rug?"

"How—how did you know?"

"The murderer wouldn't be fool enough to leave it there. Not if the murderer was Morton. So it was planted. You planted it."

"Yes, yes. But Morton *did* kill Claney."

"Where did you find the bottle?"

Lassiter licked his lips. "From Phelan," he said. "He threw it into the river and I saw him do it. It floated and when it caught in the mud bank, I got it. . . ."

Dooly was sitting on the steps, glumly watching a small beetle crawl over the toe of his shoe, when Craig came up to him. Dooly flicked the beetle away and watched its soaring flight, a metallic green spot in the sunshine.

"No sale," he said to Craig.

"None at all?"

Craig stood still, and for a moment fear crept into his eyes. Then he nodded and went on into the house. He was unconscious of the forward thrust of his lean jaw as he stepped into the big living room. The iciness that had been congealing slowly inside him seemed to have froze his muscles, chilling him to the bone. He wished that he could see clearly what threatened him, rather than have this feeling.

Lil's blue eyes were fixed on him.

He said: "Listen. All of you."

Morton jerked his head around from the window. His round red face was shiny with sweat. His eyes were wide, running away with a secret fear. Marc Phelan just sighed and looked superior. Helen Claney sat on an arm of his chair and pretended not to know that her dress was of less value than a one-piece bathing suit. Craig's mind framed a word for her, and he repressed it by tucking in the corners of his mouth.

Morton turned with false impatience from the window.

"Well, Sheriff, if you're through running around, perhaps you'll see fit to let me go now. I haven't got all day to waste in this house."

Craig nodded soberly. "Yes, you can go, Morton. You didn't kill Claney . . . Something you said before convinced me of that. I just wanted you around."

Morton's jaw was slack with relief.

"Something *I* said?"

"You thought more of your gamecock than you did of Claney. That isn't surprising. Lots of owners like you have become brutalized by the so-called sport until they lose all sense of proportion. Your gamecock had more value in your eyes than the lives of a dozen Claney's. It isn't logical, then, to suppose that if you *had* killed Claney with the poisoned spur, that you'd have allowed Claney's bird to enter the pit with yours. You'd have gotten around it, somehow. And you wouldn't have given away ten thou-

sand dollars by betting with Phelan, either. Not you."

Craig turned away from him, oblivious of the man's livid anger. He looked at Phelan.

"Next after Morton, I thought of Lassiter. He hated both Morton and Claney, being a nut on the subject of cruelty to animals. I thought he might have surprised Claney in the act of dipping the spur in the poison and flung himself on Claney, afterwards making a crude attempt to frame Morton for the murder by depositing the poison bottle in Morton's car. I had to rule out Lassiter, though, for a reason that would also eliminate Morton, too, if nothing else did. And that is the fact that there were no sales of cyanide made around here. That means an outsider brought the poison in."

"And that," Phelan grinned, means me."

"Yes," Craig nodded. "You."

Phelan said: "Nuts. Claney himself asked me to bring him some. He wanted to be sure he'd win the main."

The sound of Morton's stifled curse hung in the air. Craig took a deep breath and said to Phelan: "You killed Claney."

The dark-haired man's mouth twitched. He laughed, baring even white teeth tight against thin lips.

CRAIG said: "You knew about the poison on the spur, you won money from Morton because you knew that Claney's bird was going to win. Since Lassiter nad Morton didn't kill Claney, that leaves just you. You," said Craig, "and Helen."

He heard the woman's breath hiss as she sucked air. He heard Lil's faintly whispered, sick: "Bill . . ."

Phelan just stared in silence.

Craig repeated: "You and Helen, Phelan. Helen is in it because you don't know how to handle a gamecock your-

self, and you wouldn't dare pick it up, knowing about the poison on the spur. But Helen knew how. She walked in on Claney with you and made out not to have seen Claney did the spur in the bottle. She picked up the gamecock, pretending to examine it, and while Claney stood by she threw the bird, spur and all, at Claney's face. There were feathers in Claney's hair and about his shoulders. That's the only way it could have happened. Claney got scratched by the poisoned spur. He was murdered. You and Helen murdered him."

Phelan's lips moved and he was speaking shakily, but Carig was suddenly not listening to the man's voice. Lil's clothing rustled as she stood up, and then there came the sharp tap-tap of her heels as she walked quickly from the room. And Craig knew now what it was that he had feared. Not the menace of a murderer in the morning, or danger to himself. But knowing deep inside where the trail was leading him—to one of the sisters—he had feared the sound of those heels; Lil's heels, moving out of his life.

It was a relief when Marc Phelan suddenly acted, and danger stepped out into the open where Craig could see and grapple with it. The tall man's face was no longer dark, but dead white; his lips slewed over his bared teeth.

He leaped, not at Craig, but at Helen Claney's figure, sweeping her off the chair with a wild, vicious swing of his arm. Dooly cursed in startled surprise and lunged forward. Helen Claney made a low whimpering sound and cringed in front of the maddened man. Phelan struck her again, and then Craig and Dooly reached him at the same time, and dropped him to the floor.

Phelan's fist lashed out wildly. Craig caught the blow on his forearm, yanked the prone man's head up and then, straddling him, banged Phelan's skull against the wall. The big man abruptly

went limp. He lay flat on his back, his lips twitching, forming words that dropped like hammer blows in the room.

"She did it. It was all her idea. I didn't know she was that serious—about us, I mean. I didn't know she was going to throw the bird at Claney and kill him just so we could be free. I didn't know. She gave Claney the poison idea and got me to bring the stuff down. When we went into the shed I didn't suspect what was in her mind. Afterwards, I tried to help her by throwing the bottle in the river. But I'm not going to swing for what she did. It was all her idea, and I just didn't know—I didn't know . . ."

There was silence. Silence that reached out, thin and taut, spinning a web of tension through the room. Phelan's dark face looked shattered, his eyes haunted. The silence went on. Then through it came a small sound, scarcely recognizable at first, but slowly growing louder and louder until Craig identified it as a woman's sobs. Helen Claney's sobs.

"I didn't think. Oh. I didn't think!"

Dooly made a spitting noise.

Craig said in a flat voice: "Take over from here, Dooly."

He turned on his heel and went out.

HE stood heavily on the porch steps, feeling the sunlight warm on his face. He took several deep breaths. Closing his eyes, he started down the flagstone path. Fifteen paces straight ahead, a sharp turn to the right around the tall hedge, and another twenty paces to the driveway. The sunlight made little transparent worms wriggle around under his closed lids.

When he opened his eyes he was standing in front of his car. He didn't move for a long time after that. A little smile lifted the corners of his lips.

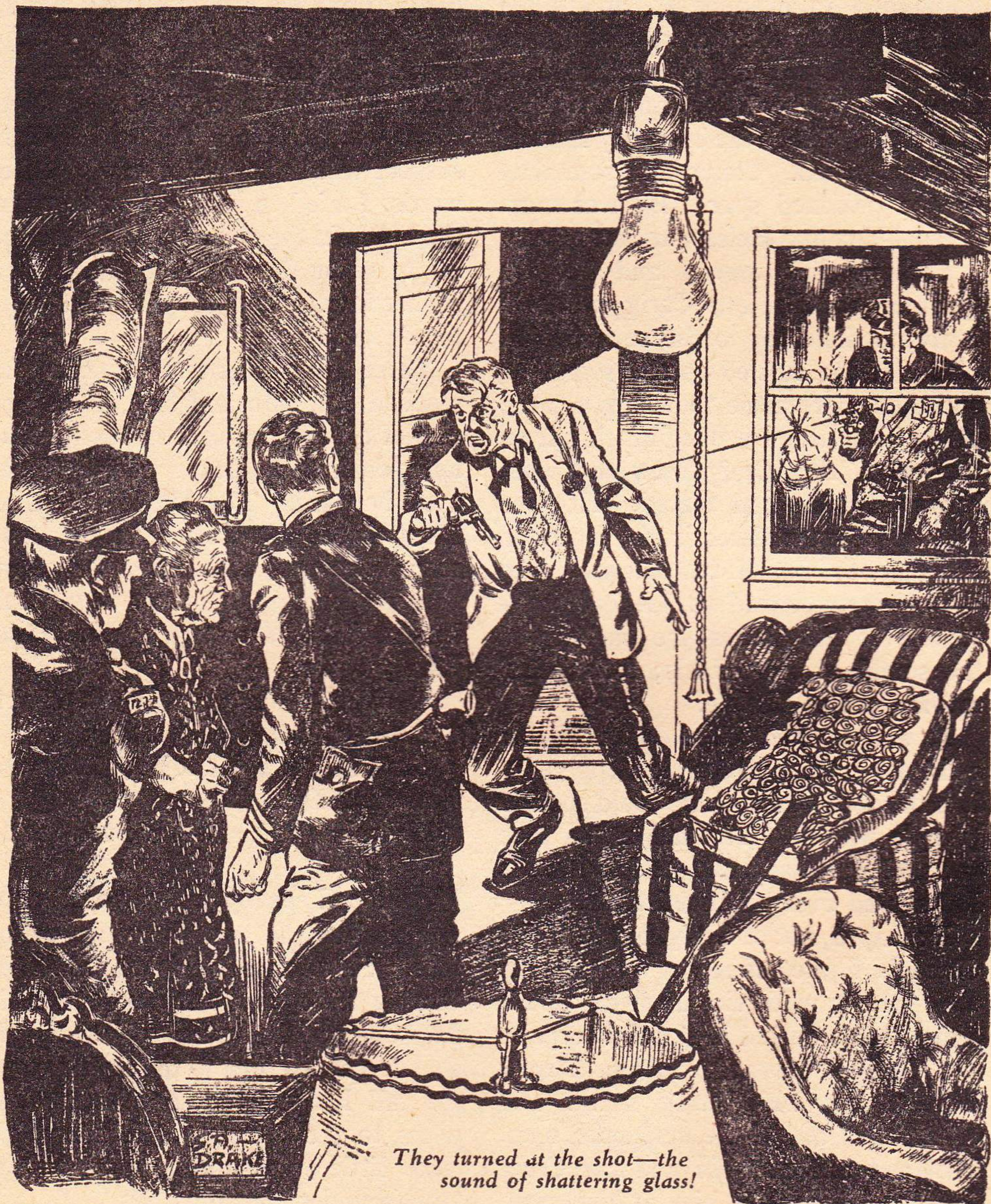
Lil was sitting in the car.

Waiting for him.

MORTGAGE ON MURDER

By
DALE CLARK

If a gun and a tin badge didn't earn a living for Nick Hurley's wife and kid pretty soon now, maybe he'd say to hell with the badge and just use the gun. . . .



They turned at the shot—the sound of shattering glass!

NICK HURLEY dropped his pencil among the heap of paper which littered the kitchen table. He stared greyly at his young, pretty wife warming the baby's milk at the gas stove, and shook his head.

"I'm licked, Joan." He said it tonelessly. "I don't know how I'm going to earn a living for you and the kid, but it won't be with a gun and a tin badge."

Tin badge! That wasn't the way he

used to talk about Hurley's Protective Patrol, and his words brought a quick flush to the young woman's cheeks.

"Nick, it isn't that bad!" she protested. "I know, you're not making expenses yet. But the Patrol is only three months old. We got five more places this week, and if we do as well every week—"

"We won't!" Nick's thinned lips clipped the denial brusquely. More so than he intended; for now he pushed back his chair, took a long step across the little kitchen, and gently closed both hands on Joan Hurley's slim shoulders.

"I'm through kidding myself, hon. The private patrol idea will never pan out in Cortez Heights. There just aren't enough people willing to pay for home protection."

HIS fingers tightened almost painfully on the girl's shoulders. Nick hated to tell her, yet knew he had to. A man with a wife and baby can't go on fighting a losing battle merely to appease his own stubborn pride.

"Five more customers doesn't mean I can sign up five every week. It's the other way around. . . . After all, only so many families live in the Heights. I've contacted 'em all, three times over. I've sold the service to everyone who can be persuaded—and going back to the others again won't help. They've already turned me down flatly and finally."

"Please, dear—" Joan turned back to the stove, just in time to rescue the milk from boiling. Her thoughts raced. Nick had driven himself terribly hard, she knew. Handling the Patrol was a full time job for any man, riding and walking around all night to check up three and four times on every property along the scattered route. And the other, daylight job of selling the Patrol service to the citizens of the suburb—she knew how deeply that had eaten

into Nick's ration of sleep.

Going all night, every night, and almost all day besides! No, it wasn't Nick Hurley's fault if the idea had to fail . . . but it seemed such a shame to give up after trying so terribly hard.

"Maybe things will pick up next spring." Joan looked past her husband's muscular figure, at the papers on the table. The bills! For rent, for groceries and meat, for milk and gas and light—they simply couldn't eliminate any of those expenses. The phone? But Nick needed that for business reasons. Gasoline and oil and minor repairs—but he needed the car, too. Honestly, Joan told herself, not a single item could be cut out of the budget. They might save a nickel here, a dime there, was about all.

But she made the offer loyally, "Maybe if I'm careful we can hold out until spring. If I economize—"

That got him.

"Economize!" Nick Hurley blurted. "Hell, I'm sick of the word! *Economizing* was what got us into this jam in the first place. . . ."

Memory flooded through him, trenching his mouth into a bitter grimace. They'd put off their marriage, and kept putting it off until his name came up on the Police List for appointment. Because Nick Hurley wasn't a guy who'd slip a gold ring around a girl's finger until he felt good and plenty sure he could put three square meals a day in front of her, too. Not until they came back after the honeymoon trip did he find out—the Police Department was compelled to defer those appointments indefinitely.

Economizing, the city fathers called it.

Just temporarily, of course. Nick Hurley was still at the top of the list, and just as soon as they hired any rookie cops—pretty soon, in a few weeks maybe—

Well, the weeks rolled by. And the months. Nick worked at this, that, and the other odd job; but nothing permanent. Employers simply weren't filling the permanent, responsible positions with a young fellow who'd be sure to quit the minute the city offered him a badge and a Civil Service rating.

Summer brought a break, a four month hitch as lifeguard at the municipal pool. Surely by next fall the Police List appointment would come through—a year late, already.

It didn't, though. Instead, the Department was forced to pull its veteran officers in from the outlying stations. In Cortez Heights, now, one radio car did the work of two. Or tried to. Actually, the result was an epidemic of housebreakings and thievery from parked cars. . . .

ANOTHER result, it encouraged Nick Hurley to go into business for himself. If the city couldn't afford to police the suburb properly, he figured individual citizens would get together and support a private patrol service. There were plenty of big homes in the Heights, plenty of people who could easily afford the trifling monthly fee. Nick started out with twenty subscribers, and a big chunk of luck . . . nabbing two thieves the first week.

Or maybe it wasn't so lucky. Because the tide of house-breakings and car pilferings became an ebb tide the instant he nabbed those two guys! Naturally; no cheap crooks picks himself out a territory which is being efficiently patrolled. And were the citizens grateful? Yeah—so grateful they felt they didn't have to hire Nick at all.

Only they didn't say so. Economizing, was the excuse. Everybody was economizing, especially those who needed to least. . . .

Small wonder that word made him scowl!

"No, Joan. I won't let you scrimp and starve to give people protection they won't pay for," he growled. "We'll finish out this month, but that's the end, I won't renew a blamed one of those contracts!"

His holster and cartridge belt hung over a chair back. He strapped it on, cinching the buckle with an angry jerk. From a wall hook, he dragged down the blue coat with its engraved silver badge; then clapped on the stiff-visored blue cap with its shiny silver shield. *Hurley Protective Patrol*, badge and shield said—and what a kick he'd got out of spending good money for this outfit three months ago!

Joan handed him the five-cell flashlight, then stood on tiptoe for his kiss.

"Be careful, Nick."

That's what she always said when he went out on the job, and Nick always had the same reply:

"You take care of yourself, too." He had a guilty feeling every time he walked out, leaving Joan and the baby alone for the night.

The watchman's wife, and she was probably the least protected woman in Cortez Heights! The irony failed to amuse Nick as he marched down the walk to his car.

Cortez Heights was the typical big town's suburb, block after block of residential area with only a tiny business district. Nick took that district first, and he wasn't long at it; only about a dozen of the shops had signed up for his service. He made the routine check-up, trying doorknobs and spotting his flashbeam over the crates and pasteboard packing boxes piled behind the buildings.

There wasn't much chance for trouble downtown, anyway. In the first place, the little Main Street lay right under the eye of the Cortez Heights police station. It would take a pretty dumb crook to try pulling a job within

a block or so of the cops; in the one part of town where the radio car cruised in and out, regularly. Secondly, why would a burglar try to crash these carefully locked buildings when the houses were so much more temptingly easy to crash?

Nick headed his jalopy up the winding Country Club Way. Here, he really looked for something to cut loose some one of these nights. Headlights raking ahead showed an ideal set-up for a cat burglar. Big houses, the kind with silverware and jewelry and spare cash in them. Hillside houses, overhanging steep ravines thicketed with native Californian manzanita—a regular jungle, if your burglar had to jump and run for it. You'd need a posse, or a brush fire, to flush a fugitive out of these arroyos.

Almost to the top of the Country Club Way, Nick swung his jalopy onto the road shoulder and peered down at the rambling roof of a stucco dwelling clinging to the ravine's side. Sarah McCloud wasn't a client of his. But she was an old woman, and she lived alone. And she was so deaf, anybody could kick in the front door without her being a mite the wiser. Further, local legend credited Sarah McCloud with a miser's store of money hidden somewhere inside that front door.

Nick didn't believe the legend. To his mind, Old Lady McCloud was merely a somewhat queered and very lonely woman who believed by herself because she couldn't afford a servant to do the housework. But a certain kind of avaricious criminal would cut her throat first, and hunt for the non-existent wealth afterward. Or, as likely, torture the poor creature to make her tell. . . .

He wasn't paid for the job, but it'd take only an extra minute to make sure Sarah McCloud hadn't been harmed tonight.

NICK got out, pointed the flashlight ahead of him as he went down the steps. These were old, paintless and half rotted. The flagged walk lost itself in a wild tangle of untrimmed grass. Mrs. McCloud could turn a hose on her property, but she lacked the strength to push a lawn mower over the grounds.

It made many people indignant. The idea of letting the place go to seed, just because Sarah McCloud happened to be an old resident who'd built here when you could buy a hillside for a hundred dollars! She ought to have some respect for her neighbors, who'd invested up to two and three thousand dollars in their lots. . . .

But Nick wasn't interested in the landscaping, except to throw his flash-beam around the long untrimmed shrubs. Then, clicking the light off, he reached the front porch. The porch groaned under his weight, but Sarah McCloud couldn't hear that.

He stood close to a window, looked in. A shawled figure sat there, Bible opened on her knees, facing a hearth on which no fire burned. So Sarah McCloud always sat, night after night.

Satisfied, Nick turned away. He'd barely set foot on flagged walk when he heard the scream.

It was a woman's scream, but it didn't come from Sarah McCloud's house. Nick sprinted across the tangled grass, burst through the branches of oleander, and met five feet of brick retaining wall. Mrs. McCloud had never put in that brick, it belonged to the adjoining property. To Ed Kenzie's place.

Nick clapped a hand atop the brick wall, vaulted nimbly, and came down feet first into another world. The yard ahead of him was terraced into shelves of close-clipped greenery, landscaped to the incredible perfection of a wedding cake. Ed and Natalie Kenzie had made a showplace of their Dutch Colonial

home, installing electric bulbs in ship-type lanterns about the grounds; but the lights were only turned on when they had guests.

Nick Hurley stopped short, foolish-faced. He realized now that the scream hadn't been repeated. Below the house, on the level of the lower street, his stare made out the metallic forms of parked automobiles. So it was a party. And the scream had been—well, women scream for lots of reasons. A drink spilled on somebody's dress would explain it.

But as he thought of that, the side door of the Dutch Colonial house wrenched wide open and Natalie Kenzie stumbled outside. Sobbing—or choking, it sounded more like!

"Mrs. Kenzie!" Nick went into a mountain goat act, leaping from terrace to terrace toward the woman. "Mrs. Kenzie, what's wrong?"

She didn't reply. She'd noticed something on the doorstep—a scrap of paper—and she stooped to pick it up. Not until she'd straightened and turned to him did Nick see the tears streaming down her face. Convulsive, hard-drawn breaths strained the fully modeled bosom against the bodice of her emerald green evening gown.

"Snap out of it!" Nick pleaded gently. "What happened?"

THE scrap of paper was a wadded ball in the hand she used to brush the tears from her smarting eyes. "Oh! Can't you *smell*?"

Could he? Nick got it now—a sudden, horrific blast through the open door.

"Judas Priest!" he gulped, and ran into the house. The vile taint grew thicker as he followed the side hallway to the central, handsome front room with its shining pecan floors and colorful hooked rugs. Dance music streamed from a concealed radio, and playing

cards were strewn over three tables—abandoned, as were the highball glasses. The room itself lay entirely deserted, and no wonder.

No wonder at all, with this scalp-lifting reek in the air!

Nick impulsively clutched thumb and forefinger to his nose as he looked around to find the mess of fluid and shattered glass on the brick hearth. At the moment he located it, Ed Kenzie came stumbling into the room—a lank, dinner-jacketed figure with black tie torn loose from its wing collar, and a fire extinguisher clutched in his fist. Glimpsing Nick Hurley, he bellowed angrily—and unnecessarily:

"Some so-and-so threw a stink bomb in here!"

Nick caught Ed Kenzie's arm, and the fire extinguisher. "No! You'll only spread the stuff! Find me a bottle of ammonia, and an electric fan—"

This headache wasn't Nick's, really. Ed and Natalie Kenzie weren't protected by the service, had never signed up for the Patrol. Nick certainly didn't *have* to go down on his hands and knees with a scrub rag and a dishpanful of twenty per cent ammonia solution. But:

"Okay, Ed! You just let me clean this up in here!"

It might be a break for him, Nick thought. It was a chance to show the whole suburb how efficient *Hurley's Protective* could be in an emergency. Maybe a dozen or more families would decide to join when this story got around.

Nick pitched in, abruptly forgetting his decision to drop the whole patrol idea.

"It's a hydrogen sulfide bomb." Nick held out an ashtray filled with shattered glass to Acting-Lieutenant Joe Brigger of the Cortez Heights police station. "They filled an old light bulb with the aqueous solution, is what

happened."

"Yeah. But how'd it get inside the house?" Brigger swung to the guests huddled at the farther, breeze-swept end of the front verandah. "Any of you see where it came from?"

Their heads shook denial. Ella Warren, the banker's wife, announced positively, "The windows were closed. I noticed I don't like to sit in a draught."

"Maybe somebody stood on the upper terrace," John Wheest suggested, "and tossed the thing down the chimney?"

To which Brigger responded. "Oh, nerts!"

"It might have been the side door," Nick volunteered. "Almost anyone could have slipped into the house and managed to throw the bomb from the side hallway without being seen."

Natalie wrinkled her nose. "But surely the smell—?"

"No," Nick shook his head. "They flow ether on top of the mixture and then seal the opening with wax. That prevents any of the odor escaping until the bomb is smashed."

LIEUTENANT BRIGGER recalled, "Stench bombs usually mean labor trouble. Or else racketeers. What about that angle?"

Ed Kenzie and John Wheest were co-owners of the *Cortez Heights Shopper*, which was a throw-away paper consisting of city department store ads interlarded with suburban news items to provide a local flavor.

Both men quickly discouraged Brigger's suggestion.

"It wouldn't be labor trouble," Wheest declared. "I handle the printing end of the business, and I'm the one the employees would have any quarrel with."

It used to be the *Cortez Heights Echo*, Nick remembered. A tiny, struggling weekly paper which existed on two

dollar subscriptions and a minimum of advertising from the local merchants. In those days John Wheest had been the guy everybody felt sorry for—a grim, sunken-eyed young man who lived on the smell of printers' ink, and hardly anything more substantial than that.

Ed Kenzie hadn't been so much better off. Probably Ed had never earned more than twenty-five dollars a week soliciting classified ads for the city morning paper—but he'd been smart enough to see that possibilities of changing the *Echo* into a shopping news sheet.

And now look at the two! John Wheest riding around in a two thousand dollar convertible, and the Kenzies building this Dutch Colonial showplace in the most exclusive part of town.

"Proving," Nick Hurley thought for the ten-thousandth time, "a fellow can set up in business for himself!" If he could only get the Protective Patrol on a paying basis; then he could own a new car, too, and build a nice home for Joan and the baby. . . . And why not? Wasn't home protection as important as department store ads?

Ed Kenzie's voice cut the thread of the private patrolman's thoughts. "——no racketeer, either!" Ed was saying. "It must be some kind of a *personal* grudge, but I'll be damned if I can imagine who'd pull such a dirty trick on me."

"Perhaps some nut," reflected Arnold Warren, the banker. "Somebody with a crazy grievance. It's hard to think a sane person could do a thing like this."

Brigger shrugged his wide shoulders. "Looks like the party might as well break up, and you folks go home." He turned to Ed Kenzie. "We'll keep our eyes open, Ed. I'll have the boys keep tabs on your place for a while, in case the nut should throw another bomb."

Nick stood back, waited while Ed

and Natalie bade their guests apologetic farewells. Until Ed Kenzie could be talked to privately for a moment.

"Oh," Ed noticed him belatedly. "Here, I owe you something for your trouble. How much, Hurley?"

"Not a dime. I was just thinking, it might not be such a bad idea if I looked the place over three or four times a night for awhile—the regular Patrol service."

Lieutenant Brigger overheard, and spoke up. "Figure you'll crack the case even if the cops can't, Nick?"

"I might be lucky. Tonight, if this place was on my route, I'd have been checking up right when the guy slung the bomb."

Kenzie nodded. "It's okay by me. You do that, Hurley, and send me a bill at the end of the month."

ONE more customer, anyway! Nick turned away with an elated smile. The smile didn't last, though. An expression of uncertainty froze onto his face.

He'd just noticed Natalie Kenzie and John Wheest standing shoulder to shoulder at the verandah steps. He would have sworn he saw Mrs. Kenzie thrust something into her husband's partner's hand. A crumpled scrap of paper, it looked like. . . .

The two drew apart, suddenly conscious of his scrutinizing stare. Natalie laughed; said, "I'd have set you three tricks, doubled," to Wheest. "So you see, it's an ill bomb which doesn't blow somebody some good. . . ."

Nick marched past them, thoughtfully. Not for a moment did he believe they'd really been talking about a bridge hand. Only, it wasn't any of his business! His private patrol badge entitled him to a flashlight and a gun, but not the privilege of prying into people's private lives.

And suppose the crumpled bit of pa-

per had nothing to do with the stench bombing, after all? "I'da just be getting myself and everybody else mixed up in a lot of hard feelings," he told himself.

The next bomb burst within ten minutes, but Nick didn't find that out until half an hour later. He'd finished his Country Club check-up when the police radio car sirened alongside.

"Hi, fella! Follow us down to Arnold Warren's place. Somebody threw another of them skunk pills there, too."

Nick had a glimpse of a third man in the machine with the two officers. A roly-poly figure topped by a round, frightened face—he recognized Walter Stahl. And Stahl, Nick remembered, had owned an interior decorating business until Warren's bank foreclosed his loans.

"*He* did it!" The banker met them at the curb in front of the house. "There's your man, Lieutenant! He's been making threats against me for more'n a year!"

Brigger questioned the top at the wheel. "Well, Al?"

"We picked him up at the rooming-house. Been there all evening, he claims. The landlady says the same." Al's thumb jerked at the speechless Stahl. "We brung him along, if you want to ast him yourself."

"What's the use, if he's got an alibi?" Brigger took a deeply chewed cigar from an unsmiling mouth. "Hello, Hurley. Want to get busy and clean this up, like you did for Ed Kenzie?"

Nick Stared. Why should he? Arnold Warren wasn't paying for *Hurley Protective Patrol* service; moreover, Nick didn't like the banker. Few people did.

"I've got my regular clients to look after, Lieutenant."

"I'll tell Al and Barney to keep an eye on your beat. Go ahead here. Favor to me," said Brigger blandly. It

didn't hurt a private patrol to be friendly to the cops, his manner indicated plainly. "Your clothes are stunk up already, so what can you lose?"

"Okay, I will. Strictly as a favor to *you*, personally." The second bomb had been tossed into the garage, anyway, and Nick could give it a quick going over with the ammonia solution. . . .

"Say, Brigger." Moments later. "I don't think the thing was *thrown* at all. Just left here where his tires would run over it."

ARNOLD WARREN snarled, "I told you! Now, what's Stahl's alibi worth?"

"Plenty. It's the same kind of a bomb that got thrown at Ed Kenzie's house, and it's a cinch there aren't two guys tosing 'em. If Stahl didn't do that job, he ain't responsible for this, either," the Lieutenant observed.

"You're going out of your way to protect him!" The banker stormed away into the house.

"Brigger. Look here."

That was when Nick found the postcard on the garage floor. A penny postcard, that anybody could have bought in any postoffice; it hadn't been cancelled, or sent through the mails, of course.

A. Warren, it was addressed in straggling, pencil-printed letters. This don't smell any worse than plenty of your deals, you rat.

"The bank's foreclosed plenty of mortgages besides Walter Stahl's. It might be any of dozens of poor devils."

"It *might* be," Joe Brigger growled. "Or it might not."

Brigger's eyes were hard, surrounded by furrowed formations of frowning flesh. "Ed Kenzie never foreclosed a mortgage on anybody, and don't forget, he was handed this same dose. The postcard could've been left to hide somebody's real motive."

Nick knew suspicion on a man's face when he saw it, and Brigger's broad countenance was as meaningful as a thundercloud. "Huh?" Nick blinked. "Say, what's on your mind?"

The Lieutenant shrugged. "You seem to be pretty damn' familiar with what goes into these bombs!"

Nick swallowed. "Sure, I am. I passed the police exam, didn't I? What to do about stench bombings and drownings and accidents—it's all in the official first aid manual. Every rookie has to bone up on that stuff."

"But you didn't get any police job. You been nickel-and-diming along with this patrol racket, barely scaring up enough customers to make a living."

Brigger's lips gripped the cigar hard.

"It might be a hell of a temptation to really *scare* them! An epidemic of stink bombs could frighten plenty of suckers into thinking they needed some 'protection'." He laughed hardly. "I noticed you didn't waste a minute before you put the bee on Ed Kenzie—"

Nick's hand shot out to capture a fistful of the other's coatfront. "Cops don't come big enough to talk this way to me!"

Joe Brigger stood rock-firm, ignoring the younger man's hand on his chest as he would have ignored a fly trying to bite through his Number Ten shoe-leather.

"You're not hired to guard Kenzie's place. It's a hell of a coincidence, you running in there the minute the bomb busted."

Nick dropped his hand, stepped back, tried to match Brigger's stony calm. "One of the women screamed, and I was right next door at the time, in Mrs. McCloud's yard. Naturally, when I heard a scream, I started to investigate—"

"Hold on," the Lieutenant interrupted. "Is Old Lady McCloud paying for patrol service, then?"

NICK gulped. "No. . . . She's an old woman, all alone by herself, and I've been keeping my eye on her place without charging her. Say, you *believe* me, don't you?"

The cigar quivered under the pressure of Brigger's teeth.

"Maybe; I hope you're on the level, kid. It's gonna be my job to make sure about that, though." The way he said it, you'd imagine he was going to have the whole plainclothes force using bloodhounds on Nick Hurley's trail. "Meanwhile, if any more stink jobs happen, you'll have first chance to clean 'em up."

"Try and make me!" cried Nick hotly.

"You get tough about it, sonny, and you're liable to sit in jail while I make a good long investigation of this whole mess."

Brigger stepped aside, gestured.

"On your way, Hurley. You got your warning, and for your sake I hope the one warning is enough!"

Nick stalked stiffly to the curb and his jalopy.

"Sweet, isn't it?" The thought raged as he jammed his toe on the starter. "I get thrown in jail unless some other guy quits throwing bombs!"

But it'd be even worse if the other guy *did* quit! Because then Lieutenant Brigger would naturally assume his warning had been enough—it'd look as if Nick Hurley must be the guilty man, for sure!

Nick's stomach did a dismayed barrel-roll under his ribs. If Brigger ever felt sure about it, there were plenty of quiet ways the Police Department could put a private patrol out of business. And as for Nick's police list rating—a hint from Brigger, and they'd find a "mistake" in the examination records. A mistake big enough to move Nick Hurley's name from the top away down to the bottom, failing end of the list.

"I'm sunk, either way. No matter what happens, more bombings or not—"

The postcard, though. He cooled off enough to remember, whoever put that bomb in the garage wanted Warren to know why. And it stood to reason, there must have been a similar explanation left at the scene of the first bombing.

"That's what Natalie picked up and hid," Nick thought hotly, "and slipped to John Wheest afterwards."

He headed downtown, to a sidestreet off the main drag. *Interior Decorator* was still on the downstairs window—it had been Stahl's shop, but Stahl had moved out, of course, and now Wheest occupied the second floor studio apartment.

Nick climbed the outer steps, but the doorbell went unanswered—though, from the street, he had seen lighted windows upstairs.

Briefly, he thought of going straight to Natalie Kenzie. "She'd deny it, though. She'd have to, talking to me in front of Ed." He'd better make his patrol round once, and stop here again later on, Nick decided.

LATER on, around midnight, he climbed those steps again—and sniffed the thick hydrogen sulfide fumes even before he reached the top of the stairs.

The third bomb!

Nick was the first to find it—Wheest still couldn't be at home. Wheest would have notified the police. And the police would have picked up Nick Hurley before now, had Brigger known.

Yes, he must be the first. . . .

Mechanically, Nick gave the door-knob an experimental twist. The door wasn't locked, either: it yielded readily under the pressure of his hand.

He stepped inside.

A glance told him, the bomb wasn't in the modernistically furnished front

room. He marched across the matting-clad floor, pushed open a second door. A bedroom. The fumes made him cough while he stood there, used one hand to hunt for the wall switch. It clicked on.

"Hey!" Nick choked. "Hey, Wheest!"

But the huddled figure under the bed coverlet lay unstirring still.

Nick darted into the bedroom.

"Wake up!"

He shook the pajama clad shoulder. It wasn't any use. John Wheest didn't wake up. Wheest would never wake up again in this world, Nick suddenly knew as he bent over the rigidly set face.

Nausea came, induced by the horrible discovery and by the densely fogged air.

He fought the sickness down. The bomb must have been tossed in here after John Wheest was in bed and asleep, but where was it? Nick stared around the room, then dropped to his knees.

"Oh, my God. . . ."

He saw it now, a pool of yellowish liquid under the bed. No bomb, though, no broken glass. . . . A drop splashed down. Nick sprawled, had to poke his head under the bedrail to find it. In the coil bedspring!

Devilish crafty, the warped brain which figured this out! Nothing would happen while the victim undressed, nothing until he got into bed—

Then the weight of his body on the mattress was supposed to squeeze the metal bedspring and smash the fragile glass.

That was how it'd been *supposed* to work out, Nick imagined. With the idea of causing the victim a maximum of inconvenience, chasing him out of the apartment clad only in pajamas. . . . But John Wheest failed to crush the bomb when he climbed into bed, the glass didn't break according to plan!

It merely got partly turned around. Then some move of the sleeping man did the trick, jostled the bedspring in such fashion that the wax seal got scraped from the metal base of the bulb. And out dribbled the contents, drop by drop.

If the fumes had only wakened the sleeper! But the effect had been exactly the opposite, drugging and overpowering him—and, since hydrogen sulfide is a poisonous gas, finally killing him.

Murder!

NICK HURLEY built the whole case up in his mind in the moment it took another yellowish drop to fall. And it was a case against himself—in the eyes of Lieutenant Joe Brigger—he knew that.

"The cops'll think Wheest's death was accidental, all right, but I'm supposed to be responsible for the accident!" Nick clenched his fists, groaned aloud. "Unless I do something quick, before tomorrow—"

The sweat cropped onto his face as he realized what this kind of thinking meant. *Tomorrow*. He'd already instinctively decided not to notify the police tonight.

Well, how could he? It wasn't just a craven fear that Brigger would arrest Nick Hurley the minute this murder became known. Brigger couldn't really prove a thing. . . . But Nick couldn't disprove a thing, either.

The case would be one of those affairs that fall through for lack of legal evidence, yet leave a dark cloud of suspicion over the rest of a man's life. Over Joan's life, too, and the baby's!

"I got to find out who's pulling this stuff." Tonight! For tomorrow, when the murder became known, the maker of the stench bombs would crawl into his hole, and pull the hole in after him permanently.

He remembered the note, the scrap of paper or postcard Natalie Kenzie

had given Wheest. It sent him stumbling to the clothes closet, frantically searching the pockets of the victim's dinner clothes.

No luck here.

Nick whirled around, to the bedroom bureau. John Wheest had emptied out his pockets. Keys, coins, a billfold, and a watch lay on the bureau top.

On the other side the room stood a writing desk, a chair, and a wastebasket. But the basket was empty, and Nick's hurried investigation of the desk revealed no crumpled paper. He even dropped to his knees again, to peer under the desk and the bed and the portable gas heater. . . . By barest chance, the paper *might* have been lost on the floor when John Wheest emptied his pockets.

It wasn't on the floor, anywhere.

Nick's stare suddenly fastened on the gas heater. Turned on, wasn't it? He put his ear close, twisted the lever this way and that, and could hear no hiss of escaping gas. Apparently the whole gas line had been disconnected.

His stomach revolted, his head swam with the toxic stench in the room. He stumbled out of there, into the front chamber. Two cups, saucers, a glass coffee-maker on an end table, nearly got upset as he lurched about the place. Nick's hand grabbed, caught the coffee-maker just before it toppled.

The lukewarmth of the glass vessel telegraphed a message to Nick's dizzied brain. He concentrated his stare painfully on the end table, with its cups, saucers, spoons, napkins; grunted as he made out the dab of rouge-red on one of the rumpled linen squares. So the guest to whom John Wheest served coffee tonight had been a woman!

Nick turned away, this time into the kitchenette. But his efforts to light the gas stove were in vain. The stove, like the bedroom heater, apparently had been disconnected.

NICK struck his fist jarringly against his left palm, trying to think. . . . His decision took him to the apartment telephone.

"Hello! I want to speak to Mrs. Kenzie, please."

But the answering voice was still Ed's. "Natalie isn't here."

"She's . . . not home?"

"Somebody threw a stench bomb at us, and the whole house reeks of chemicals and ammonia. I got some oil of rosemary from the drugstore to spray around. But it gave Natalie a headache, so she went to spend the night next door."

"Next door. You mean, with Mrs. McCloud?"

"Right," Ed said. "Oh, who's this calling? I'll tell her to phone you back in the morning—"

Nick dropped the receiver into its cradle. The instrument wasn't any more use. Sarah McCloud didn't have a phone, was too deaf to use one.

A man couldn't help feeling sorry for Natalie Kenzie. She tried to deny the truth, of course. Her reputation was at stake! Young, attractive Cortez Heights' wives simply did not pay night hour visits to men in bachelor apartments. . . .

Standing in Sarah McCloud's doorway, her comely figure tightly swathed in its negligee, Natalie shook her brunette head stubbornly.

"No, you're wrong. I couldn't bear that vile odor, so I came here. It was Ed's suggestion—"

Nick said, "But you didn't *stay* here. You slipped away to meet John Wheest."

"That isn't true."

Nick shrugged. "But I've seen Wheest. It seems you found a note after the bombing tonight. You gave that to him, but he returned it when you went to his apartment tonight."

He bluffed boldly—the only way to

bluff! Hand outstretched, "Let's see that note, Mrs. Kenzie!"

She could have stood by her guns. Nick Hurley had no authority, no legal right to enforce the request. She could have slammed the door in his face . . . but Natalie was only a suburban housewife, after all. And a badly frightened one.

"You won't—tell Ed?" she faltered.

"I won't tell Ed."

Her hand slipped into the negligee folds, she surrendered the crushed penny postcard almost as if glad to get rid of it.

Nick splashed his flashbeam onto the roughly pencil-printed message.

ED KENZIE—it followed the same curt style as the other card in Warren's garage, had obviously been printed by the same hand—THIS DON'T SMELL ANY WORSE THAN A MAN WHO WON'T PAY HIS HONEST BILLS, YOU HEEL.

Natalie Kenzie sighed, "I don't want Ed to know. . . . He's so hot-headed, so unreasoning about some things. He'd be sure to give it to the police."

She was trying to protect the author of this note!

"You know," Nick stared, "who wrote it!"

"Of course. There's only *one* bill it could possibly mean. The man behind this is Walter Stahl."

THE intake of Nick's breath signified disappointment. It couldn't be! The police weren't fools — Brigger wouldn't have taken that alibi at its face value unless he knew Stahl's landlady could be relied on to tell the truth.

But Natalie knew nothing of the alibi. She went on, "You see, Stahl did the interior decorating when we built the house. He lost his business just then,

Arnold Warren foreclosed, and the bank collected the money we owed Stahl. Legally, perhaps, Warren was entitled to it. But Stahl couldn't see it that way. He felt the mortgage covered only the materials from his shop, he said his personal services were'nt mortgaged. And he was very bitter when Ed paid the bank the whole bill."

Nick said, "You agreed with him?"

"Well, I'm a mere woman who doesn't pretend to understand business." She shook her head. "But I know Walter Stahl did the work for us. The bank didn't. And Stahl certainly needed the money more than the bank did. . . . It seemed to me Ed should have paid him, and let Arnold Warren attend to his own bill collecting."

She moistened her lips.

"So, I was willing to forgive one stench bomb—under the circumstances. That is, if John Wheest would talk to him, if Stahl would promise not to make any more trouble. Wheest has been quite friendly with him. The key to the apartment also unlocks the shop downstairs, and he's been letting Stahl go in there. . . . Because Stahl can get odd jobs, chairs to upholster and the like, only he hasn't any place to do the work, and even his tools were lost in the foreclosure."

Nick tried vainly to digest this information. Stahl couldn't have thrown the bomb into the Kenzie house, and he *wouldn't* have hidden another bomb in Wheest's bedspring. Not if he and Wheest were really friends.

"And that's all there is to it," Natalie declared. "I didn't have a chance to talk to John before the party broke up, so I went to his apartment afterwards."

But there was so much more to it!

"And when you got there—" he was

sparring for time, trying to think the thing through — “he offered you a drink?”

“John Wheest!” she stared. “He never uses liquor. I don’t suppose there’s a drop of liquor in the place.”

“A drink of coffee.”

“Yes,” her voice sounded troubled, “but don’t get the idea it was a social call. He had the coffee on for himself when I got there, and I didn’t even stay long enough for a second cup.”

“Think carefully, Mrs. Kenzie. The coffee. Did he make it on the stove—?”

“He used an electric plate. The stove wouldn’t work. He joked about it—he’d paid the bill by check, and maybe the gas had been turned off if the bank refused payment. . . .” Her voice choked off; she bit her lip nervously.

Nick grunted. “Warren’s bank again!”

“What difference does it make? John was only joking!”

SHE sounded worried, though. As if she’d made a bad break there, had said the wrong thing entirely. And Nick thought grimly, many a truth is spoken in jest.

He let it pass.

“One thing more. While you were drinking this coffee, the doorbell rang. But you didn’t answer it—you didn’t want anybody to find you there?”

“Mr. Hurley.” She didn’t guess that he was only trying to fix the time of her visit. She was nettled, angry. “Please get it out of your head that there was anything *wrong* in my going there. I only tried to do poor Walter Stahl a favor. Heavens! It’s entirely luck that I happened to find this note at all. . . . We were playing progressive bridge, and the low-score table happened to be at that end of the room. When he came to mixing the drinks, Ed ran out of charged water, so he went downtown

after more. The Warrens came late to the party, and so we four started after the others. Then, when the bomb was thrown, everybody ran for the front door. They were all crowded in front of me, so I turned and went out the side hallway instead! If I’d been sitting at a different table, none of this would have happened at all. Can’t you see how innocent—”

Knuckles rapping briskly on glass jerked Nick half-around. Then he saw it. The blurr of a face behind the darkened pane of the parlor window. Sarah McCloud! But her old, deafened ears couldn’t have overheard a syllable of the conversation. What the devil did she hope to gain by spying on them—and what did she mean, waving her hand at him?

Too late, he found out her meaning. Solid, blocky figures materialized out of the night—Al and Barney, the radio car cops.

“Okay, Hurley! Come along quiet!”

“But—?” he gulped.

“Tough luck, buddy. Your little joke on John Wheest misfired. He’s dead.” Their big, beefy hands closed, a pair on each of Nick’s arms.

“*John . . . dead!*”

Natalie stumbled backward, slid slowly downward in a faint. It was Sarah McCloud who got there in time to catch the younger woman as she fell.

Arnold Warren had found the body. He was there now, with Lieutenant Brigger, his thin banker’s lips grey and twitching. It made Nick wonder at the man; Warren was surely never the individual to be greatly shaken over a fellow creature’s fate. Cortez Heights always thought of him as a kind of dehumanized adding machine, with compound interest in his veins rather than good red blood. He had a cash register, people said, instead of a heart.

But Arnold Warren quivered, his voice was broken: “My God, if I’d

only known. . . . I could have saved him. . . . I was here before, more than an hour ago. I rang and rang the doorbell, but he didn't answer. Poor John was dead to the world then, but if I'd only rushed in—a pulmotor might have pumped life into him again!”

BRIGGER said mechanically, “I’m afraid pulmotors don’t save guys who are full of poison gas.” He started. “Say! Didn’t you *smell* the stuff?”

Warren shook his head, lifted and dropped his thin hands. “No. That’s why I think I might have been in time. The infernal bomb couldn’t have been open very long—its odor hadn’t escaped from his bedroom then.”

There was a queer, oppressive silence.

Nick Hurley broke it with, “It didn’t take long for the odor to escape from Ed Kenzie’s front room. It was terrific at the side-door, clear at the other end of a long hallway, in half a minute’s time.”

“Of course, they opened the front door. There might have been a draft through the hall.” Brigger’s jaw squared itself. “Still . . . enough of the stuff to knock a man out so he wouldn’t hear a doorbell! It’s damn’ *funny* you didn’t get at least a whiff of it!”

Arnold Warren stiffened. “You don’t have to take my word for it. Ask Ed Kenzie.”

“Was Ed with you?”

“Not exactly with me. He got here while I was ringing the doorbell, though.”

Brigger’s eyelids fluttered lower, and stayed at half-mast. “Why the hell didn’t you say so?”

“We came on business,” Warren got out defiantly, “and I don’t make a practice of dragging the bank’s business into public conversations.”

“What kind of business?” Nick’s pulse jumped. “Just what shape were Wheest’s affairs in, anyway? Have you

been refusing payment on any of his checks, or . . .?”

Lieutenant Brigger blazed at him, “Shut up! I’m able to handle this without being told by a night watchman!” But he took the help, anyway. “Well, Warren, what kind of business?”

The banker said, plainly under protest, “We wanted his endorsement on a note, that’s all.”

“Whose note?”

“Now your’re asking me to discuss the bank’s customer’s affairs in public.” His stare darted at Nick Hurley. “In front of bystanders who aren’t even members of the police force—”

Brigger gestured, “For the *luvva* Pete! It’s gonna be discussed in court.

“You never heard of a *private* murder trial, did you?”

“Ed Kenzie’s note.” Warren swallowed. “Not that Ed’s credit isn’t perfectly good! It is. Only, we like to have a co-signer, whenever possible.”

“And now John Wheest is dead, he can’t sign the note for you—” Nick’s voice vibrated with contempt—“and you’re all broken up about it!”

The Lieutenant spun around on his heel.

“Didn’t I ask you to shut up?” Then, illogically, he added: “Comes to that, you got plenty of explaining to do yourself! Suppose you get started!”

“Wait a minute. Before you accuse me of peddling these bombs—” Nick fumbled in his pocket. “No, I haven’t got it. I must have dropped it there on the porch when you guys grabbed me.”

“Dropped what?”

“The post card. Mrs. Kenzie found it after that first bombing. She didn’t say anything—she thought Stahl wrote it, and she didn’t want to make trouble for the poor devil.”

“Stahl!” shrilled Warren. Triumphant.

BRIGGER'S face darkened. "I thought we settled that angle once tonight."

"You're making a mistake—the mistake of your life," the banker told him, every syllable vindictive. "Walter Stahl is a dangerous lunatic! He hates all three of us. Me, because I collected a just debt from him. Ed, because Ed rightfully turned over a sum of money to the bank. . . . Wheest, worst of all, because John took over his apartment—and Stahl, in his twisted mind, imagines he still owns every stick of the furniture here."

Nick Hurley argued, "No, you're the one he hates *worst* of all. If he'd set out to coldbloodedly murder anyone, Warren, you'd be dead."

"But he didn't set out to. The killing was accidental—"

"Intentional!" Nick bit off. He grasped Brigger's arm excitedly. "Come on, I'll show you!"

Two strides carried him to the bedroom door. He reached in, snatched the keys from the bureau top. "Al, Barney, you stay up here and see what happens. Come along, Lieutenant."

He led the way downstairs, unsnapping the big flashlight from his belt as he hurried. The beam pointed around, came to rest on the adobe earth along the side of the building.

"You see that? The scuffed place?"

Brigger barked irritably. "What the hell are you trying to prove, anyway?"

"Doesn't it look like someone has jumped? From the landing at the top of the stairs!"

Nick bumped shoulders with Arnold Warren as he turned, heading for the shop's front door. He fitted the key. "Natalie Kenzie told me about this. The same key fits both doors."

Arnold Warren gulped, "Well I'll be damned."

"You knew it. The bank foreclosed on this property. You rented the up-

stairs to Wheest, he couldn't have got the key anywhere except from you," Nick growled.

"It slipped my mind. I should have had this door padlocked, come to think of it. Everything down here belongs to the bank."

Nick had the door open. "I'll be at the back." The flashbeam probed ahead, through musty air, over denim-covered objects—chairs, tables, the small stock of goods which had been Walter Stahl's. "When you foreclose, don't you put the stuff up at auction?"

"The bank had to bid it in." A cry burst from Warren's throat. "*What the devil's this?*" He stumbled ahead, to the work bench behind the partition at the rear. A strip of brocade cloth glittered goldenly as he clutched it, hurled it aside. A padded chair, partly disembowled, showed coil springs and tufts of burlap wrapped packing. "Somebody's been working here! Without paying the bank a penny of rent!"

"Take it easy there!" warned Brigger. He'd spotted something a lot more to the point than brocade and coil springs. Bending over the bench, he urged: "Let's have that light!" Hands close to the flashlight, he examined the two Mazda bulbs.

NEW ones, but useless for illumination now—holes had been drilled into their screw-bases.

"Judas Priest, here's where those bombs came from!" He eased the bulbs back onto the bench. "Hurley, *how come* you knew all this?"

"I didn't."

"You didn't, huh?"

"That wasn't what I brought you down here to see at all." Nick aimed the light away, raked one sidewall vainly, brought it to bear on the other.

"There's your answer. Those meters."

Arnold Warren said thickly, "I re-

member now. The door wasn't padlocked so Wheest could let the gas and electric men in here. The shop and the apartment always went together, with just one service for both."

"Exactly." Nick walked to the side-wall. "If I pull this main switch, I extinguish all the lights upstairs." He pulled it. Someone shouted overhead—Barney, by the sound of it. "You see." Nick restored the switch to its original position.

Brigger puzzled, "So what?"

"So it was the gas heater," said Nick Hurley. "I should have known that all along. Well, anyway, from the time Natalie Kenzie told me Wheest cooked coffee on an electric plate because the gas stove wouldn't light! Actually, I didn't figure it out until Warren explained about not smelling hydrogen sulfid the first time he came here to-night."

He pointed at the gas meter, carefully *not* touching it.

"The stove wouldn't light because the fuel had been shut off down here. And I'll tell you why. It was so the gas heater in the bedroom could be left on, so John Wheest could go to bed without noticing that it *was* on Well, Brigger?"

But Brigger was speechless.

Arnold Warren supplied the answer. "Someone opened the gas line—after he was asleep?"

"What do you think?" Nick shook his head. "No sane killer would try to commit such a crime with hydrogen sulfid. Chances are, nine out of ten, the horrible stench would arouse his victim. The gas, though, is relatively so much more nearly odorless that people accidentally die of it right along."

Brigger stared. "But that gas is shut off, same as it was when Wheest couldn't light his stove!"

"Sure. Follow the killer every step of the way." Concentration furrowed

a frown across Nick Hurley's face. "He had a duplicate key, and he knew Wheest would be at the bridge party tonight. He could safely come here to close the gas line and turn on the bedroom heater.

"Step number two, he used up two stench bombs so it'd look plausible that Wheest had accidentally been killed by the third one.

"Step three, he came back to open the gas line after Wheest was in bed.

"Fourth step, he had to go upstairs and slip that third bomb into the bed-spring under Wheest's dead or unconscious body. He had planned, no doubt, to turn off the heater and restore the gas service to normal. But he saw the coffee cups—*two* cups. That coffee had been made on an electric plate, and whoever drank from the second cup knew it! So the gas had to remain disconnected."

BRIGGER rumbled, "I'm following the steps, but whose steps are they?"

"One more step—a big one—a jump. He almost got caught coming out of the apartment, he had to jump from the landing and run around the building. So he could come up the steps again while Warren was ringing the doorbell." Nick filled his lungs with a long, nervous breath. "It must have been Ed Kenzie! He went downtown after charged water—he had the opportunity to fix this gas thing, and plant a bomb in Warren's garage. He sent his wife to spend the night with Sarah McCloud so he'd be free to—"

He heard the front door opening. Nick swung around. So did Brigger; with a gun in his fist. He lowered the gun, looking a little silly.

Sarah McCloud stood there.

"Nicholas Hurley," said Sarah McCloud shrilly, "I may be deaf, but I'm not blind! I've been watching you for

a week now, and I was watching for you tonight!"

"What?" roared Lieutenant Joe Brigger.

"You can't fool me, Nicholas Hurley. You've been around my place every night for three months, you and your flashlight." Her grin broke wickedly. "Spying on me, weren't you? Trying to find out where the old woman had her money hid?"

"God God!" said Nick helplessly.

But she'd had her joke. "No. You've been looking out no harm comes to an old lady, bless your heart! But that's not why I'm here. From my window," cried Sarah McCloud, "I can see over the oleanders down to Natalie Kenzie's side door. I was looking for you, but I saw Ed Kenzie playing postman to his own house."

Her hand came out of her apron pocket—she waved the crumpled postcard.

"So when I found this on my porch where you dropped it, I had a heart-to-heart talk with Natalie—"

The shot, the shattering glass, exploded through her sentence. Nick jumped like a sprinter from his marks. Joe Brigger came behind him, bellowing: "Gangway! *Let a cop handle this!*"

Another shot boomed. Nick struggled to reach Sarah McCloud, dully amazed that she was still on her feet. Brigger's gun blew flame and cordite fumes toward the shattered side window.

"Quit! You wanta kill me?"

It was the voice of Barney, the cop. It stopped everything, the sight of Barney's broad face peering in the window.

"Ed Kenzie," he said. "He came upstairs, he turned pale as a sheet when the lights went out and I told him you

was down here about the murder. He came out in a hurry, and I tailed, and when he shot in here—well, that second shot you heard, it looks like I got him."

Brigger trembled. "You damned fool, sticking your head in that window, it's plain luck and lousy shooting I didn't blow it off your shoulders."

Sarah McCloud said, "There's a lady present."

"You *heard* him?" Nick gasped.

"Maybe I didn't exactly hear, but I saw the look on his face!" she snapped.

Yes, for Warren was aiming the flashlight at the group. "It was the insurance. They had a partnership policy, which ever one of them died first." He shook his head. "Ed lied to me, John Wheest wasn't going to sign any note, and I wouldn't loan the money without he did. Banks can't take chances on a fellow that loses his shirt playing the stock market, the way Ed did."

OVER the breakfast coffee and the newspaper headlines, Joan Hurley looked at Nick. "Poor Natalie Kenzie . . . Ed dead and disgraced, and he'd even mortgaged the house to gamble with."

"Maybe she's lucky. He had her life insured, too. She might have been next, if he got away with this."

She sighed. "Maybe. Anyway, the phone's been ringing almost steadily for an hour. The whole town wants you to patrol their back yards from now on."

"Tell the whole town no."

"No!" she stared.

"Brigger phoned Headquarters. Did you ever hear of a special investigator assigned to the D. A.'s office?" said Nick. "Because if you didn't hon, I'm it."

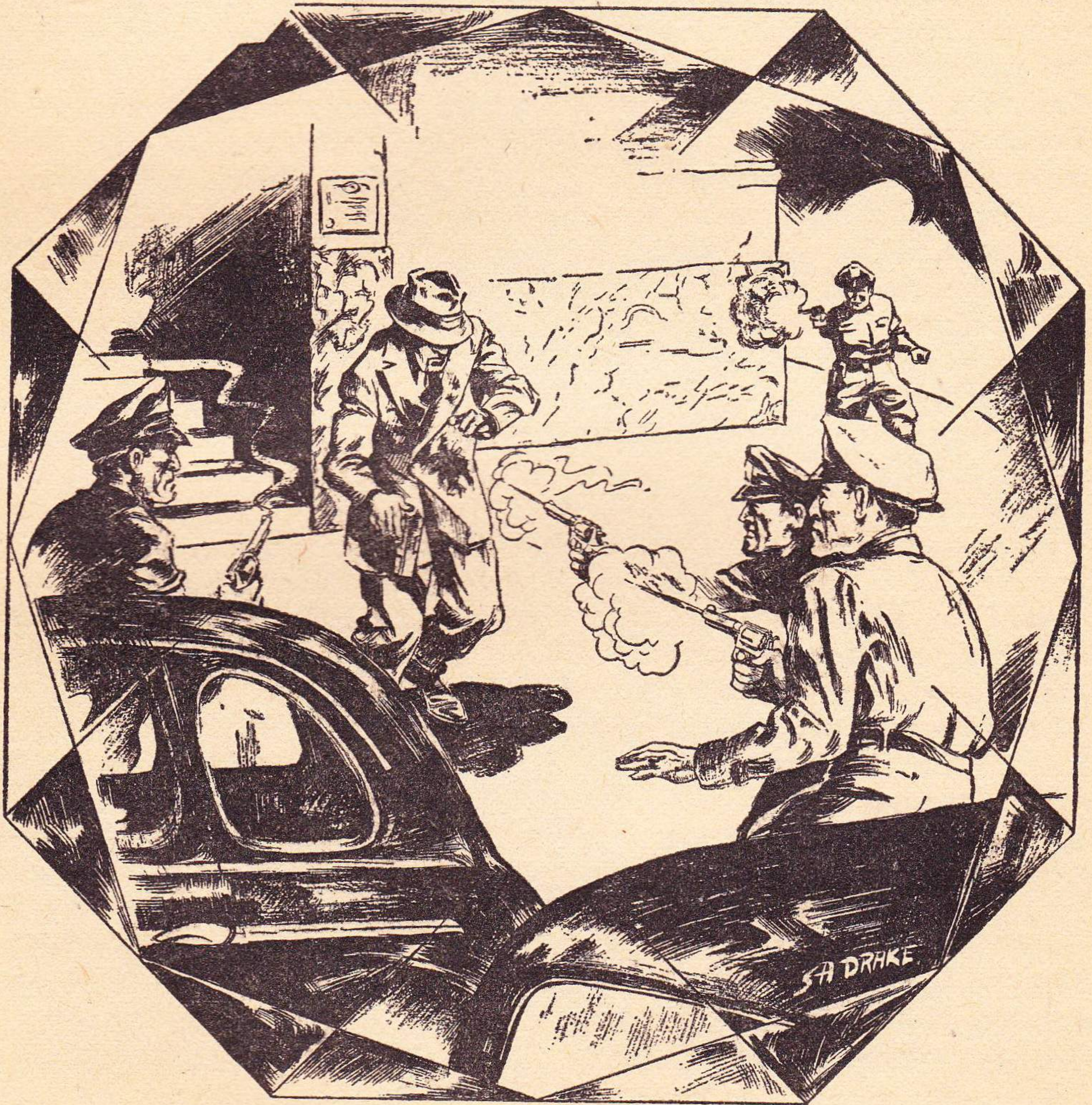


HOT ICE FOR HITLER

By
BRENT NORTH

Author of "Crime Cavalcade," etc.

Oh, no, Hitler won't be slaughtering any more women and children, but my boy friend's in the pen, and probably the next time I get into a crowd the guy next to me will have a gun in his pocket and a bullet for a stoolie.—What am I, a sap or a savior?



Someone yelled stop! And then the air was split with gun-chatter!

I'M not saying that if Larry had put the proposition to me—come right out and said, "This is the way it goes, baby, and if you want to, okay, if you don't so long—I'm not saying I'd have turned it down cold. Because

I'm as big a sucker and maybe even sappier than the next one.

But that's the way it is when you're nineteen and in love. Even if the guy turns out to be a heel and a crum and a two bit crook. It don't make any

difference, and the best you can do for yourself is pray he'll stay out of jail.

I was nineteen, like I say, and cornfield innocent. Sure, I'd been in the big city a year and I had a job in a beauty parlor and I'd learned how to say "no" without being self-conscious about it. But I wasn't smart—just wise crack smart. I didn't know what the score was.

For instance, I'd never met a crook before. I'd read about stickup men and murderers in the newspapers, but they were something in another world. The headline world, and that had nothing to do with me. My idea of a big time lawbreaker was Frankie, the Columbus Avenue bartender, who kept his joint open an hour after curfew rang on Saturday nights.

Maybe that's why I didn't spot Larry for what he was, why I was so unsuspecting, even after a two year old would have caught the angle.

Sure, I thought it was a little odd he had to see a friend so late at night, especially on Madison Avenue and Forty-Third Street, where they don't have any residences, only swanky shops and office buildings. And I thought it was a little strange he should ask me to wait in the car and keep the motor running.

BUT it didn't add up to anything in my mind. I sat at the wheel and looked up at the moon and I thought everything was great. A cop walked by, kind of a pleasant looking fellow with a broken nose, and said: "What are you doin' here, sister?"

He came over to the car, took a good look at me. I figured he was flirtatious. So I answered, "Waiting for a friend, just stepped across the street for a minute." And then, for some reason that I still can't understand, I added, "A girl."

Broken-nose took his foot off the running broad. "Okay, only it isn't safe

for a girl to park here so late. The neighborhood is deserted, and if a strange man came by and bothered you, there's nobody but me around, and I might be at the other end of my beat."

I smiled. "Thanks, officer. I'll be shoving off in a minute." A nice guy. He strode off with a grin and I watched till he stepped into the doorway of a big office building a few yards down.

It was only a split second after he was lost in the folds of the revolving door that I heard a quick patter of feet on the pavement, and Larry was swinging the door of the sedan open.

He jumped into the rear and threw himself face down on the floor of the car. "Get rolling. Hurry. I had to smack that guy with the butt of my gun. Take it west to Sixth and head north to Fiftieth."

I was so astonished I just sat there without making a move. Larry snarled, "Step on it, stupid! You want to go to jail?"

That brought me to. I still didn't get it, but his tone and his words stabbed through me like a knife. I was dumb, sure, but I knew what the word jail meant, and I knew Larry wasn't kidding. Not laying face down on the floor of the car, he wasn't. I put my foot on the starter and took off.

He kept on talking. "I'll explain later. Don't stop for nothing, no matter what, but don't jump many lights unless I tell you. I don't wanta be picked up by a traffic cop now. There's a parking lot on Fiftieth, right by Radio City. Drop the heap in there."

The lights were with me, and I was on Fiftieth in a few minutes. That was when I heard the faraway wail of the sirens needle the air and I felt my heart lurch. Even then I wasn't sure it was Larry they were after, only I had a funny feeling.

I said without turning around, "What goes on, Larry? What's the idea of the

Dillinger act and the line about the jail?"

"Clam up and do like I said!" he snapped. We stopped for a light, and I heard the quick snapping of doors. A moment later he was sitting beside me, very close. He had his hat resting over his leg and something under it . . .

I felt the cold hard thing in my side and I knew right away what it was. A gun. I don't know whether I was more frightened or surprised. I turned my head to look at him.

His eyes were big and dark in his pale face and his nostrils flared excitedly. Like a cornered rat, I thought, dumbly, staring at him.

The traffic signal turned green and he gave me a slight shove with the gun. "Just keep on driving, like I told you," he said in a low, soft voice. "I'll tell you about it later. Meanwhile look natural and smile and talk like we was just parkin' the car to take in a show. He paused and added slowly. "And don't try to pull anything fast. I don't want to have to hurt you—but I sure as hell ain't gonna let you hurt me."

I drove into the parking lot, nervously weaving the car from away other autos. As I turned the key in the ignition, he muttered, "Don't make any wrong moves, baby. And your hand is shaking."

I STEPPED out of the car. Larry was standing right beside me, one hand in his pocket, the other gripping my arm like an iron corset. His hat was pulled way down, and we were standing in a shadow when the attendant came up and handed me a ticket.

I stuck it in my purse and we sauntered casually out of the lot and toward Broadway. Larry kept his hand on my arm, and every time we passed a policeman his grip tightened. I don't know how I was able to keep walking. My

legs were stiff and moved jerkily, like a puppet on strings.

Larry stopped at the box office of the Roxy and bought a couple of tickets. I said, automatically, as though I cared, as though anything made any difference anymore, "We saw this show the other night."

He answered out of the corner of his mouth. "Yeah. That's why I figured this was a good place to come back to," and we kept on walking through the lobby and up the carpeted steps.

He found a couple of seats on the aisle and we slipped into them quietly. I didn't dare look at him and I kept my eyes glued to the screen, but I was scared to death and all mixed up. I didn't know what was going on, and what was worse, I was afraid to find out.

We sat there maybe twenty minutes, then left the theatre. I wasn't asking any more questions. I was too busy trying to figure the angle. Only one thing I knew. Whatever had happened, whatever Larry had done, I was right in the middle; otherwise he'd have dropped me a long time ago.

We took the subway uptown and got off at the 87th Street exit, half a block from my house. But Larry didn't say a word till we were safely inside my room, and he was sitting on the bed, smoking a cigarette.

He said, "I'm sorry I got tough with you, sugar, but I was afraid you wouldn't get the idea otherwise."

I struck a match. "I still don't. All I know is that you did something—something the cops are going to be looking for you for."

Larry looked me straight in the eye. "Yeah. A stickup. And you were in on it, my lookout. Don't try to convince anybody otherwise, they wouldn't believe you." He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out a diamond ring that flashed blue and white under the

electric light. "This is for your trouble."

"Larry—" I didn't know how to say it, I couldn't believe it. Alright, so I'd met him in a barroom. But in New York lots of girls meet guys that way, and God, they aren't thieves. They work in banks and cafeterias and factories. What's the matter with me that I have to fall for a crook? "Larry, are you telling me you robbed a jewelry store while I was sitting in the car and waiting for you? You mean, you weren't visiting a friend of yours, like you said?"

"For chrissakes, I just told you, didn't I?" Larry doesn't like people who don't get the idea right away. "Listen, sweet pea, I understand you ain't been around very much and so forth, but there must be some limit to your dumbness. Do I have to draw a picture for you?"

I still couldn't get it through my head. Only yesterday we'd been sitting in a night club, dancing, and he'd told me he loved me—"But you said you were a wrestler, you had a bout lined up for next week."

"Alright, so I said it. You don't expect me to come out and tell every girl I fall for I'm a burglar, do you?" He got to his feet and came over to the table where I was standing, and put his arms around me.

"Look, last night you told me you were crazy about me. Because I'm a wrestler? Is that why? What difference does it make what I do for money I ain't hurtin' anybody, outside of in their pockets. And the insurance companies fix that. I don't kill anybody, I don't swindle widows and orphans—all I do is pick off a few hunks of ice where they ain't gonna be missed anyway."

I DIDN'T want to cry, but I couldn't stop. The tears streamed down my face and Larry used his handkerchief

and dried my cheeks. "That doesn't make any difference, whether the insurance companies make up for it or not. It's still stealing, it's against the law. Supposing you got caught. Somebody's going to be interested in finding you, whether its the jeweler or the police department or the insurance dicks."

"There was a cop stopped by the car about three minutes before you came back. He was just walking his beat, but suppose he'd been three minutes later. We might have both been picked up—you and me!"

Larry said, "I keep a gun with me for such emergencies. You don't think I have the police department lined up on my side, do you? I got to be able to handle a tough break if it comes my way."

"What about me? Suppose I got picked up and have to go to jail—and my folks found out about it?"

"Listen, kid, if you get arrested and your folks find out, that's going to be the least of your troubles. If you don't get picked up, they certainly won't know." He stopped smiling and his mouth became a thin, mean line. "Get one thing straight. You're taking a chance. Alright. So am I. What do you think I'm giving you this diamond ring for? It's your split."

"I don't want it. And I don't want you either. Tonight winds us up," I said. But deep down I wasn't sure I meant it, because I was nuts about the guy.

Larry said, "No it don't sugar. Tonight just made us partners, is all. I need you for my lookout, I need you to drive the car. A man might look suspicious, but a girl can get away with anything. And don't think that cop isn't kicking himself all over the place by now for falling for the line you handed him. He's got you figured as being in on the job." He let that sink in. "You're in because I say you are. The

minute you open your mouth to a cop, you'll be put away. Accessory before and after the fact, they call it.

"Anyway, what's eatin' you? Last night you were full of baby talk about love and so forth. All of a sudden I smell bad. You don't want any part of me." He put his arms around me. "What the hell, baby, it's a racket just like anything else. As long as you stay healthy and out of jail, what more can you ask?"

Sure, what the hell—like Larry said. But I felt all torn up inside.

I suppose I should've been a strong character, a good citizen, a heroine. I should have gone straight to the police station and said, "This is the way it was," and taken a chance on their believing me. But I didn't.

I knew from the way Larry spoke I was in for keeps—or until he changed his mind or dropped dead or was arrested. And, like I say, I was a little stupid about the guy. I don't know why, he wasn't any different than a million others, I guess, when you come right down to it. Only that's the way it was, and I couldn't do anything about it.

I found out a lot about Larry after that. I discovered he'd been in the racket for years, that he once served a term in Florida, and that he'd worked with such notorious jewel thieves as Joseph Schaefer, Bill Dietiker, Harry Reszka, Jimmy Cummings and John Alvin Sharpe.

They're all experts—all top men—and oddly enough, at this writing, they're all in jail.

SCHAEFER is serving five to ten years in Sing Sing for the Waldorf Astoria jewelry shop stickup. Reszka is paying off for three different robberies that netted him \$250,000 in hot ice.

Bill Dietiker is in Raiford, Florida, sitting for the next ten years of his

life for the \$125,000 Jefferson Loan Society stickup, along with his pals, Joseph Yates and Robert Edwards.

And Jimmy Cummings and John Alvin Sharpe are two of the gang that pulled the famous "ice cream rock" heist in Philadelphia. This was the job in which Mrs. Henry W. Breyer, widow of the ice cream manufacturer and her daughter in law, Mrs. Henry W. Breyer, Jr., were pushed out of their car as they were leaving the Academy of Music and taken for \$200,000 worth of geegaws stuck around various parts of their anatomies.

Incidentally, those beautiful and rare stones were eventually disposed off to a fence who paid only \$20,000 for them. Police soon discovered that the same gang had robbed Mrs. T. G. Dixon Wainright, beautiful Philadelphia social registerite, of \$5,000 in gems.

Because of the prominence of the victims and the daring and perfect planning these crimes, some of the best dicks in the country tried to crack the case. Detectives John Gara, Charles Steinberg, Inspector George F. Richardson, Captain Joseph T. Kearns, Mary Shanley, the famous New York woman detective—these were only some of the people that worked on the case before it was finally marked closed.

The boys had spent a lifetime learning how to dodge law, and for a while they did alright. But when it came, it came fast. Barely had Jimmy Cummings and Dominick Accabacco been put away when a smart cop spotted John Sharpe standing behind a bar and made the pinch.

These had been Larry's partners and pals. All smart guys—and they were all on the inside. And now I was Larry's partner. It was coming, I knew it. I'd get mine, just like those boys got theirs. It was simply a matter of time.

There was nothing I could do about it, even if I'd wanted. For some rea-

son Larry had chosen me, and that settled it. He kept a close watch and knew every move I made. I had to account for every waking minute, where I went and who I spoke to. And I didn't dare lie, because you don't lie to Larry more than once.

He was protecting himself, naturally, and I can't altogether blame him. And besides we were having a sort of a romance. That is, I was crazy about him and I guess he liked me alright. He made love to me and he didn't bother with any other women, and with a guy like Larry that's going all the way.

Larry wanted me to quit my job in the beauty parlor, but I wouldn't go for it. It was a perfect cover-up, just in case, and I never knew when I'd need one. But I did go to live with him.

We took an apartment in an East Side hotel where Larry had a deal on with the management. They'd have alibied for us if we'd been caught sticking a knife in the Mayor's back, that's how good we rated—and how much we paid off.

I held on to every cent I got my hands on, and stuck it in the bank where I could get hold of it right away in case anything went sour.

And I was expecting that something would break, especially after I got the lowdown on that first job Larry'd pulled with me. It turned out that the diamonds he'd stuck in his pocket that night were worth better than fifty grand. And even splitting that down the middle with the fence, it still came to twenty-five thousand.

But that was only part of it. The "little trouble" he'd mentioned—I believe the newspapers, and the papers said the guy had concussion and it looked like one of his eyes was closed for good. And to make things really tough, it turned out this watchman was some cop's old man. So that meant that

the whole force would be waiting for us as soon as we were picked up. You know how cops are about their own.

I'd had an idea that anything Larry clipped was gravy, and all his. But I found different. His method meant splitting several different ways, but outside of the initial risk of being caught in the act, it made jewel robbery almost a cinch game.

FIRST there was Blackie, probably the best caser in the racket. Blackie could go into an exclusive shop, buy a fifty dollar item and come out with a complete layout of the setup. We depended on Blackie to tell us exactly where and when to pull a job, where the cop on the beat would be at exactly what time. His cut came to ten per cent, which may not sound like much, but hardly ever hit below the two grand line, and that's not bad money when you consider that all the risk he took was walking into the joint just like any other legitimate purchaser.

Then there was Jake's split. Jake was our fence, and what he took from us was strictly a graft. The way it added up, Jake got fifty per cent and Larry took a chance on a rap.

But we had no out. Larry worked only in grand larceny stuff, and wouldn't risk his neck for anything under thirty-five thousand. Of course he took what he could, in a pinch, but he wouldn't plan a job unless he figured the take was worth while. In other words, the jewels were expensive, and therefore easily recognizable. For that reason, before any cash could be realized on them, settings had to be melted down and altered, the stones themselves often had to be cut.

No thief is clever enough to change around a piece of jewelry himself; and even if he were, there'd still be too much danger attached to getting rid of it. The fence is the answer to the prob-

lem of what to do with after you get it. And Jake was our fence.

He had a wonderful front, a hockshop on Ninth Avenue and the most legitimate looking setup I ever saw. There was a constant stream of two dollar customers. Women whose husbands kicked off maybe twenty-five, thirty, a week came in on Tuesdays with the old man's other suit. They wanted just enough to get by till pay day. Seventeen dollar two-pairs-of-trousers suits, ten dollar radios, five dollar wrist watches all found their way into Jake's where they stayed for a three per cent interest charge till the next pay day.

Most of it was stuff Jake couldn't have given away to the Salvation Army, but they always came back for the junk. There was no dough in it—just pennies—but it was a marvelous front for what went on in the back, and gave Jake the reputation of being the neighborhood saint. Which was also good for his back room business.

The back room, behind a heavy steel door, was where Dutchy worked and what Dutchy worked on was mostly diamonds. We never did find out his last name or very much about him, but Larry told me he was one of the best cutters in America.

He had come over from Amsterdam, a refugee, and once he told me there had been diamond cutters in his family for six generations. The only subjects I ever heard Dutchy discuss were diamonds, his family in Holland and his bitter hatred for Hitler and the nazi regime.

Dutchy spent hours on end, peering through the end of a loupe, figuring exactly how and where to cut a stone so he could change it with the least amount of damage. His work room was a mess. There were Bunsen burners for melting down settings, saws and turntables impregnated with olive oil and diamond dust, since only a diamond

will cut a diamond, and about two dozen other tools used in cutting.

Dutchy was the boy who made it safe for Jake to buy our hot ice for one third of its retail value and resell it for as much as the traffic would bear.

Jake had another side line—guns. None of the boys who went out on jobs ever used their own guns. It was smarter to rent one from Jake. It was there when you needed it, you didn't have it around in case the cops got nosy afterward, and as long as the gun couldn't be found, no bullets could be traced back to it.

AFTER the first two or three jobs, I stopped being nervous. I was in it, it was too late to get out, and the smart thing was to protect myself as much as possible.

I picked up a few tricks, like changing my appearance. From that first day when I'd read in the papers that the thief had a young blonde accomplice who could be identified by the officer on the beat, I realized that I had to do something about my face. So I went to a theatrical firm and had a couple of wigs made up for me.

Then I started fooling around with make-up, and the difference was startling.

I have a pretty face—nothing outstanding. I look like a million other blondes, and that made me a natural. Because with a wig and a slightly different makeup, I looked as changed from my real self as black and white. In fact, the New York police gave out five descriptions of me, at various times, each one of them true and each one completely different from the others.

The getaway cars we used were hot, and had generally been picked off the street only a short time previous. Larry would notify a clouter that he wanted a certain make car at a certain time, and it was always there. We paid forty

dollars, and almost always chose a black Ford sedan, which is an ordinary enough looking job and has a good fast pickup.

Larry once showed me how the clouters work, and told me he could get a locked car open and started inside of a minute. He used a jiggle, which is a hack-saw blade cut down to the size of a nail file, and began fooling around with the lock. As soon as the door opened, he moved in behind the wheel and tampered with the wires behind the ignition lock. In a moment he had the car rolling.

"But where's the sense in taking a risk for that kind of dough when you're working on a fifty grand heist?" he asked. He was right, of course.

We'd drop the car as soon afterward as we safely could, generally on a dark street.

From a financial viewpoint, we did swell. Larry didn't stick entirely to jewelry establishments, and I didn't always work with him. Occasionally he stuck up couples leaving night clubs and once he picked off a messenger boy with fifty grand in rocks right on Maiden Lane, the heart of the downtown New York jewelry center.

All through 1940, even after the Stirrat gang — Dorothy Stirrat and Joe Weiss and Mike Lomars—were picked up for the Gold Coast robberies, which included Gypsy Rose Lee, Mrs. Josephine Forrestal, wife of the under-secretary of the Navy, and Mrs. Sally Milgrim, all through this Larry and I kept working and stayed lucky.

Even the war turned out to be a break for us. Thousands of refugees fled Europe with the only imperishable form of property they could carry. Much of it is buried in back yards and vaults where it will never be recovered, and much of it came to America. With the invasion of Holland and the Low Countries, the United States and par-

ticularly New York has become the biggest wholesale market for cut diamonds in the world.

The diamond is the only form of property which never loses its value and remains more or less stable. Money may fall through inflation, real estate may be destroyed, but the diamond has always survived wars and disaster as a means of raising money. With the draft and the spreading of war hysteria and war psychology in America, more and more people in this country began investing in stones, and this brought the price way up. Consequently we were getting more out of it, too.

But oddly enough, the war, which brought us such prosperity was also to bring us ruin. Only I didn't know that, and never even suspected that a war over on the other side of the world could be instrumental in splitting up Larry and me and finally land Larry in jail.

I WAS sitting in the apartment one day in the spring of 1941, just after one of the worst London bombings in which thousands had been slaughtered, when Larry came in, all excited.

He had a scheme—a good one—and it would get us plenty of dough. "One big hunk," Larry said, "and sugar, after we pull this one off, we're through. No more jobs for us. We'll take a trip, maybe to Cuba, and hang out with the ex-kings. Just sit on our backsides and drink rum and let the other grifters worry about cops."

I sat up. "Honest?"

"Sure. I wouldn't pull a line on you."

It was the one thing I wanted more than anything else. As time went on, instead of becoming reconciled to the fact that Larry was a crook, that he'd never be anything else, I'd become more and more unhappy about the setup. I never once went out on a job anymore

without thinking, "Maybe it'll happen this time. Maybe our luck's run out."

And it wasn't as though we didn't have plenty cached away. We did. I'd put better than a hundred thousand aside, in the time we'd been together. But as many times as I asked him, Larry would never quit. The truth is, I guess, he had larceny in his soul and would have been a crook if he'd been born to a thousand dollars a day.

"Only we got to make this heist first, and it ain't gonna be any breeze."

He told me about it. "There's a guy up in Yorkville propositioned me on a deal today. Personally I figure he's a wack, but I should worry. With his kind of dough he can afford to be nuts.

"He's a nazi—but from the word go. Every other word is Heil Hitler and when he ain't saying that, he's saying Deutschland Über Alles. I'm surprised somebody hasn't pushed his face in before this, that kind of a loud mouth blow-off.

"This is the deal. He's got some kind of a connection with Germany and he wants me to lift ice to send over there. It seems that Hitler is running very short of diamonds. They get some from Brazil, but not many. And they need 'em bad."

It sounded screwy to me. "What's Hitler going to do, hand out a diamond studded decoration to every aviator who drops a bomb over England?"

Larry said, "You don't get the drift. These rocks ain't for jewelry or for dames to plaster over their throats and arms. These are for war materials.

"They need these diamonds for working on precision tools, which are used to grind gun bores, pistons, valves, and so forth, necessary in the manufacture of war materials. They need diamonds for producing certain wires for airplane control cables, mine cables, radio valve filaments. Diamond dust for making the lenses of bombsights, cam-

eras, binoculars and range finders.

"When Hitler took over Holland and the Low Countries, he got plenty of rocks, and for a while he was doing all right. But that's almost gone now, and with England in the war, he's in a bad way for more materials.

"What this bird wants me to do is stick up a joint on West Forty-Seventh Street. He found out this firm just made a big deal with the Government and he knows when they're going to have a big shipment of ice in.

"All I got to do is get it—and he's even got one of the boys inside lined up. Once I hand over the stuff to him, he'll take care of the rest. He'll pay better than half of what it's worth—cash on the line—and no splits for no fence and no caser. Strictly a one man payoff, except for you, of course."

I WAS stunned. I said slowly, "But Larry, that's double crossing your own country. Don't you know we're practically in the war, that we're sending materials to England, that there's boys in this country learning how to handle themselves on a battlefield?"

"Yeah, I know," he answered. "I wouldn't do it, only all that dough. Anyway, we ain't in yet. And if I don't do it, somebody else will."

Sure, it was perfect reasoning. If I don't, somebody else will. Only that wasn't the way I felt about it.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a flag waver, or anything like that. Only my old man was in the first World War and I remember when he got his bonus money and bought a new car for the family. And my kid brother Sam, he's only twenty, and he didn't even wait to be drafted. He was one of the first kids in our town to enlist.

I said, "You've made up your mind on this deal?"

"Yeah. I gave the guy my okay an hour ago."

"This is where I came in, Larry. I don't care anymore whether you stay in the racket or not. I'm taking out, like I been wanting to for a long time.

"We've plenty of dough right now. Money we can't spend. We couldn't go to the World's Fair last year because the fair grounds were studded with cops. We can't spread ourselves too much on clothes and a decent apartment because the dicks might get curious about what's Larry doing that he's living so good. In fact, we live like criminals. Count me out—from now on."

"Not from now on!" Larry corrected in a cold voice. "After this heist, okay. But not before."

I tried again. "A long time ago, when I first met you, you tried to sell me on the idea. You said, 'After all, I'm only hurting people in their pocket-books. And nine times out of ten it isn't people, it's insurance companies.' I didn't fall for that, but I let it pass.

"But this isn't hurting pocketbooks. This is stuff that's going to be used in war—killing English boys and women and children. And maybe by next month it'll be American boys and women and children. It's blood money—money to pay for bombings and slaughters. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

It didn't. Not a damned thing. I could tell from the deadpan way he looked at me. War was something for the other suckers to worry about—unless you could make dough out of it.

HE CHUCKED me under the chin. "What do you want to play tough for? You know you can't win with me. The day after tomorrow. I'll get there early, around six. I want to be inside the building before it closes. You pick me up at exactly 7:30. Drive up to the place and a few doors down." He went on to explain the route we would take for the getaway.

I don't know why I should have been

surprised that a heel was after all a heel. But it came with a terrific shock to realize again that Larry was my boss. All the love talk and sugars and babys didn't mean a thing. What it ended up was, Larry said do, and I either did or else.

It didn't make sense when I tried to rationalize it, but I knew all the time I was going to louse up the works.

Dutchy. The diamond cutter that worked for Jake the fence. He was the answer. I remembered that Dutchy was from Amsterdam, that his family was interned in Holland, that he'd sent them thousands of dollars since his arrival in America and never knew whether a cent of it reached them. Didn't even know they were still alive.

Dutchy hated Hitler and nazism more than anything on earth, and I knew Dutchy would help me.

I stopped down to see him that afternoon and in a low voice I told him about the deal Larry'd made.

"There's only one way to stop him, Dutchy. It's up to you. I love Larry, or maybe I don't. I don't even know that anymore. But I know I'm tired of the lousy way I'm living, tired of being hunted, tired of being afraid all the time. Tip off the cops."

Dutchy said in his thick accent, "But it means jail for Larry."

I knew that of course. "Well, he's got it coming to him sooner or later. If not this job, then the next. He isn't going to be able to go on forever without being picked up. And maybe we'll be doing a little good in the world if he gets it now, in the middle of this dirty job. He won't be put away for long. The cops'll figure it's just another stickup, and they'll give him five years at the outside."

"You've got a lot of guts, kid," Dutchy said. "But I'm telling you right now, don't change your mind. Because I'm going to tell the police any-

way, now that I know the diamonds are for importation to Germany."

IT WAS five-forty when Larry left the apartment. He had arranged so that he would be hidden until everybody in the factory had gone home. I kissed him goodbye just like I always did, and it occurred to me that the next time I saw him he'd probably be behind bars.

I said, "Good luck, honey. I'll be there at seven-thirty."

I was, too. Right across the street, huddled in a doorway. But the building was already surrounded by them. I'd watched them drive up in twos and threes. Big men with grim faces and no mercy in their hearts for an ice heister.

I saw Larry stand inside the door for a moment, looking hesitantly into the street. Then he pulled the heavy door open and stepped onto the pavement, a few feet in the direction I was supposed to be waiting for him.

He must have caught the angle as soon as he realized I wasn't there. For the next instant his hand went to his pocket, pulled free a gun.

I heard somebody yell, "Stop!" and then there was the sharp report of a revolver. A minute later the air was split with another crackle and I saw Larry suddenly drop his right arm and spin dizzily backward. His body hit the pavement a moment after the noisy clatter of the gun.

I didn't dare move, I was too terrified. This wasn't the way I'd planned it. I hadn't meant for Larry to be shot, maybe killed. All I'd wanted was to stop him—to put him in jail, if necessary. But nothing worse than that.

In a sudden panic, I ran out of the doorway and into the street. At that same moment a crowd of people, attracted by the sound of gunfire, milled down Forty-Seventh Street, and that brought me to.

As I stepped back, I saw some half dozen cops surround him, and wave the crowd back. In a few moments an ambulance appeared and they rolled Larry onto a stretcher and rode off with him.

How I got home that night I'll never know. I remember stopping in a bar for a whiskey because I felt so sick and cold, and I remember meeting Dutchy and telling him what had happened.

But when I woke the next morning, the first thing I thought of was Larry, and I wondered if they'd killed him. If I'd killed him, because that's what it amounted to.

Somehow I managed to get my clothes on, and I ran downstairs to the newsstand. All the papers carried it, and the headlines varied little. "THUG INJURED IN GUNFIGHT."

Larry had been wounded in the shoulder, just a flesh wound, and was expected to recover within a few weeks. "He will stand trial for armed robbery," the paper went on to say, "and police intend to question him about a series of unsolved jewel robberies within the past two years."

He was tried a month later. I didn't visit him in the hospital and I didn't see him in jail. The lawyer I hired for him tells me my life won't be worth two cents from the minute Larry gets out. But that won't be for ten years.

Meanwhile, I'm alright. The cops figure somebody was working in with him, but they don't know who. Larry didn't confess to but one other stickup, and he never said a word about me.

I've got plenty of money, sure. But that's all I have got. My boy friend's in the pen, and maybe his friends are looking for me. Maybe the next time I get into a crowd the guy standing next to me will have a gun in his pocket with a bullet for a stoolie.

What am I, a sap or a heroine? I still can't figure it out . . .

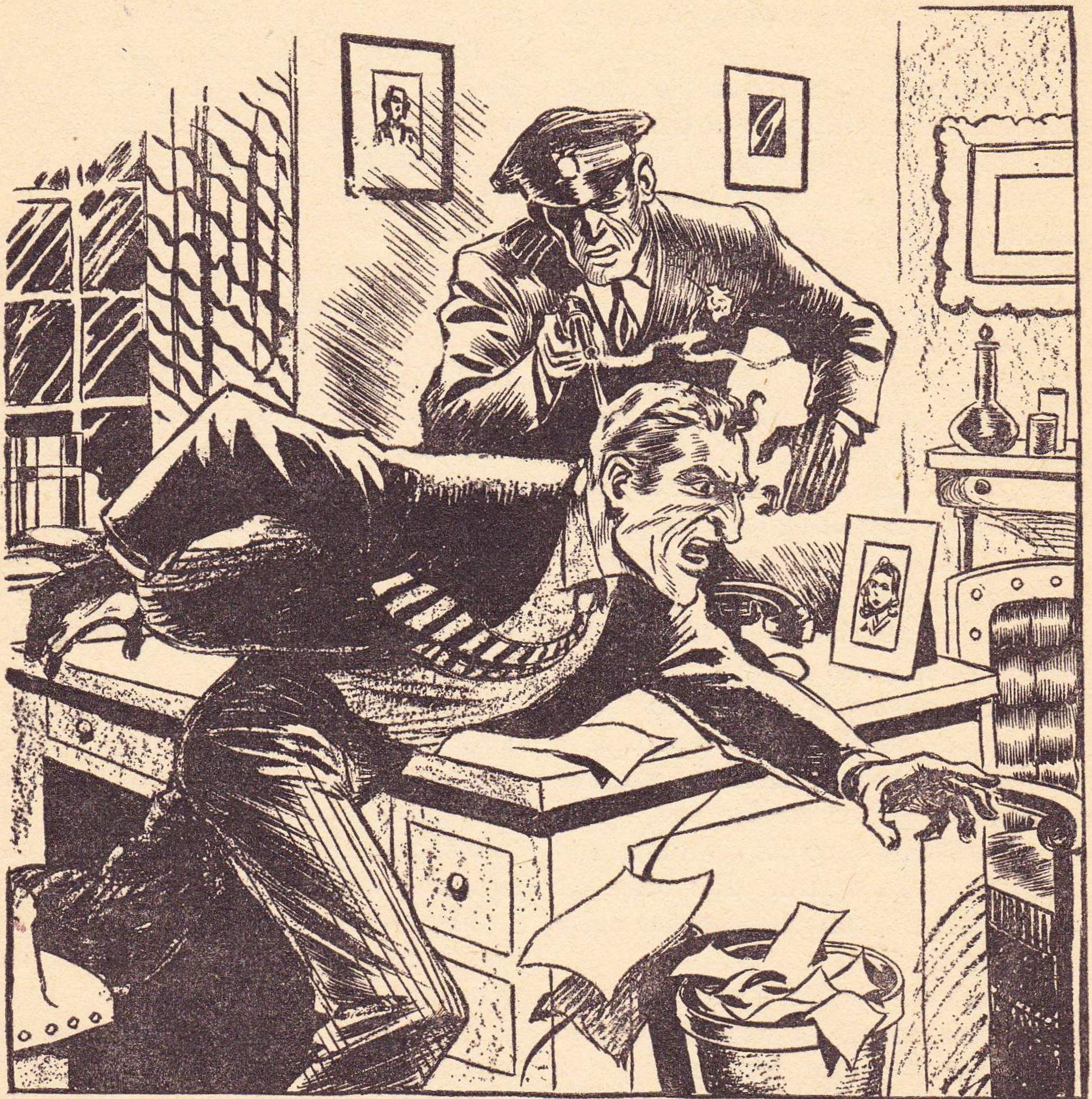
BAD BLOOD

By

H. Q. MASUR

Author of "Soft-Boiled Cop," etc.

The killer made several mistakes—one of them was forgetting that Sergeant Frobel was the best marksman on the Miami police force!



Carter spun and made a sudden dash for the back door—but Frobel was the best marksman on the force!

SERGEANT FROBEL was standing directly under the traffic box when the canary yellow Buick came rolling along. He was thinking how quiet Miami was, how nice and peaceful, and how with the season start-

ing it wouldn't be that way much longer now.

The traffic signal blinked red when the yellow car was still half a block away, but it kept coming along at a nice clip, ignoring the light and careening

around two cars that had obediently stopped. It rolled blithely on, past the traffic stanchion, past Frobels, as unheeding as a pigeon.

Frobels mouth sagged. He jammed his whistle between his teeth and let out a shrill blast. The car didn't even slow down. Instead, with a deep-throated roar it leaped ahead, gathering speed.

Frobels didn't like that, he didn't like it one bit. His chunky face, bronzed to the color of a new penny set hard and he unflipped his service revolver from his sidearm holster. Frobels was the ace marksman of Dade County, and he didn't waste much time sighting along the barrel.

The two shots sounded like one and the blowouts of both rear tires came back to him like echoes. The car wobbled, then careened into a lamppost. The lamppost doubled like a boxer who's caught a pile-driver in the midriff, and the hood of the car folded like an accordion.

When Frobels reached the car, he found the driver jammed up behind the wheel with probably a couple of ribs cracked, out colder than a dead mackerel. He shooed the pedestrians away, put through a call for an ambulance, then explored the guys pockets for some identification.

A cop gets to expect most anything in a city like Miami, but when Frobels started pulling wads of money from the guys pockets, he couldn't help gulping audibly. There were tens, twenties, hundreds. Between twenty and thirty thousand dollars, at a rough guess.

FROBEL made a neat package and stuffed it into his own pocket. Then he found a wallet and learned that the guys name was Leonard Bowden and that he was a native Floridan, living in Ft. Lauderdale.

An ambulance clamped to a stop beside them, Bowden was transferred and

they went clanging away. Frobels put a call through to headquarters, then started browsing around the car. He stopped short at the rear bumper, stooped slightly, his forehead creased.

A thin red line, like from a single stroke of paint brush, made a vertical stain down the gleaming chromium finish. Frobels ran a finger across it, lifted it to his nose, sniffed suspiciously, then stiffened as if a ramrod had been jabbed through his spine.

He went to the dashboard, got the keys from the ignition lock, came back and opened the baggage compartment. The guy in there was dead. There had been two shots, either one of which would have been sufficient. One bullet had ploughed through the bridge of the nose, the other had gone through his teeth. It was very messy and Sergeant Frobels just stood there, cursing.

The dead man was Joe Lamoine, co-operator with one, Lou Carter, of the Everglades Clubs, a gambling joint out on Biscayne Boulevard. The club had a single roulette wheel, several dice tables, and couple of games of blackjack or twenty-one were usually in progress.

Frobels hung around, talking to the headquarters boys, until the morgue wagon carted Lamoines body away and a service truck had hauled the yellow wreck to the police garage. Then he ambled over to the hospital and had a talk with the doctor who was treating Leonard Bowden.

"The boy is badly hurt," the doctor told him. "Four ribs cracked and a skull fracture. He'll pull through all right, but it may be several days before he returns to consciousness. You can't possibly question him."

Frobels got into a police car and drove out along the palm-lined boulevard until he reached the small white frame house with orange neon light that read: EVERGLADES CLUB. He walked in-

side, straight through to the rear and opened the door to the office.

Lou Carter was as lender man with the hard impassive face and unreadable eyes of a gambler. He nodded shortly to Frobelt and said: "Did you pick up Bowden?"

Frobelt stared at him. The report of the accident had not yet been made public. He pursed his lips. "What happened?"

"Plenty," Carter bit out. "This Bowden marched in here and took us at the point of a gun. Cleaned us for twenty grand. Wanted more too. We didn't have it on hand, so he took Lamoine with him. Abduction. Isn't that a Federal offense?"

"You notify headquarters about this?" Frobelt asked.

"Certainly, but not right away. I was afraid of what he might do to Lamoine."

The phone rang. Carter answered it, wordlessly extended the instrument to Frobelt. The sergeant had left word at headquarters to call him at the Everglades soon as they had a line on young Bowden. He listened carefully for several minutes, then replaced the receiver and let his eyes contact Carter's.

"This Bowden lost a wad of money here, didn't he?"

Carter nodded. "What about it?"

FROBEL glanced up at the ceiling. "His grandmother died recently, left him about thirty thousand dollars. Dropped it all here, didn't he?"

Carter's eyes narrowed. "That was his tough luck."

"Maybe. He must have learned that you'd rung in a pair of phony dice on him and he came back for his money. I can't say I blame him."

Carter's voice pulled thin. "I don't like that, Frobelt."

"And you're not gonna like this much better. It's just as much your fault

that Lamoine was killed. He—"

"Lamoine killed!" Carter was on his feet.

"That's right. And if you hadn't provoked that kid by lushing him out of his money, Lamoine would be alive. Can't say I feel bad about Lamoine. He should've known better than to act up in that car beside a scared kid with a nervous gun."

Carter stood still, his legs planted in a belligerent attitude. "Fine talk for a cop."

Frobelt pushed up out of his chair. "I always suspected you were running a crooked wheel, Carter. Think I'll have a look around."

Carter showed his teeth. "The hell you say! Not without a warrant."

Frobelt shrugged, turned suddenly and sauntered out of the room. He walked to the porch and looked around. In a corner of the parking lot, near the exit, he saw a dark blue Buick. The license plate showed it to be a Ft. Lauderdale car. It was the same model as the one Bowden had been driving.

Frobelt noted the number, went back inside, past the bar to the phone booth. He got the State license bureau on the wire and gave them the number. A moment later the clerk's voice came back to him.

"That car is registered under the name of Leonard Bowden."

Frobelt was frowning as he emerged from the booth. Why had Bowden taken somebody else's car? Suddenly he snapped his fingers and crossed back to the small office at the rear of the club. He opened the door without knocking. Carter glanced up, his eyes bright and hard.

Frobelt said lazily: "I think we'll take a trip down to the city. The chief wants to question you, Carter. Get your car and let's travel."

Carter shook his head. "Not my car. That's the one Bowden swiped

when he abducted Lamoine."

"Bright yellow Buick?"

"That's right."

Frobel nodded. "I thought so."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. There was a lot of bad blood between you and Lamoine, wasn't there? You were splitting up your partnership. If I remember rightly, he was suing you for an accounting."

"Lamoine was a fool," Carter snapped.

"A dangerous one?" Frobel inquired softly.

Carter got up slowly. He leaned forward, all ten fingertips pressed against the surface of his desk. His eyes drilled into Frobel's like glittering diamond points. He spaced his words when he spoke.

"Just what you driving at?"

"Blood," Frobel said. "Bad blood, between you and Lamoine. Enough to give you a motive for killing him."

A VEIN throbbed in Carter's forehead. He was silent a moment, his mouth as thin as the edge of a dime.

"Careful, Frobel. Don't say anything you can't prove. That kid came in here and robbed us of twenty grand. My bartender was a witness. Maybe he meant to bump Lamoine, I don't know. Maybe that's why he took my car, so he could ditch it with the dead body in it. Those are facts."

"Did your bartender see him take Lamoine out?"

"No, because they went out the back way through my office here."

Frobel smiled, but there was no humor in it. "Maybe your bartender will sing another tune when he knows that what he says may involve him in a murder rap. Because, Carter, I'm taking you in and charging you with the first

degree murder of your partner."

Frobel's service gun had come out during the speech and he held it lined steadily on Carter's stomach. He moved warily forward, ran his hands over Carter's side, slipped the automatic from a shoulder-rigged holster.

"You'll never be able to prove it," Carter said between clenched teeth.

"Maybe," shrugged Frobel, but I can try. First we'll test your gun. Then we'll take fingerprints from Lamoine's clothes, to see whether you or Bowden dumped him into the baggage compartment. They can do that now with silver nitrate. My guess is he was in that baggage compartment all the time, waiting for you to dump him into the marshes. Because Bowden never meant to take your car. He made a mistake. His own was right out front."

Carter laughed harshly. "Don't make me laugh. Mistake a bright yellow car for a dull blue one?"

"Certainly. He couldn't tell the difference. That's why he passed a red light with me in full uniform right in front of him. He was color-blind, Carter, color-blind. It could only happen in a state like Florida where you don't need an operator's license. He made a dash for it because he thought we were after him on account of the holdup. And when you found out he'd taken the wrong car you didn't know whether to call headquarters or not. That's why you delayed. Then you thought he was playing right into your hands. Well, you were wrong, brother, all wrong. Because his gun will never check with the bullets in Lamoine's skull.

Carter spun and made a sudden dash for the back door. He didn't remember that Frobel was the best marksman on the Miami force and couldn't possibly miss at that distance.

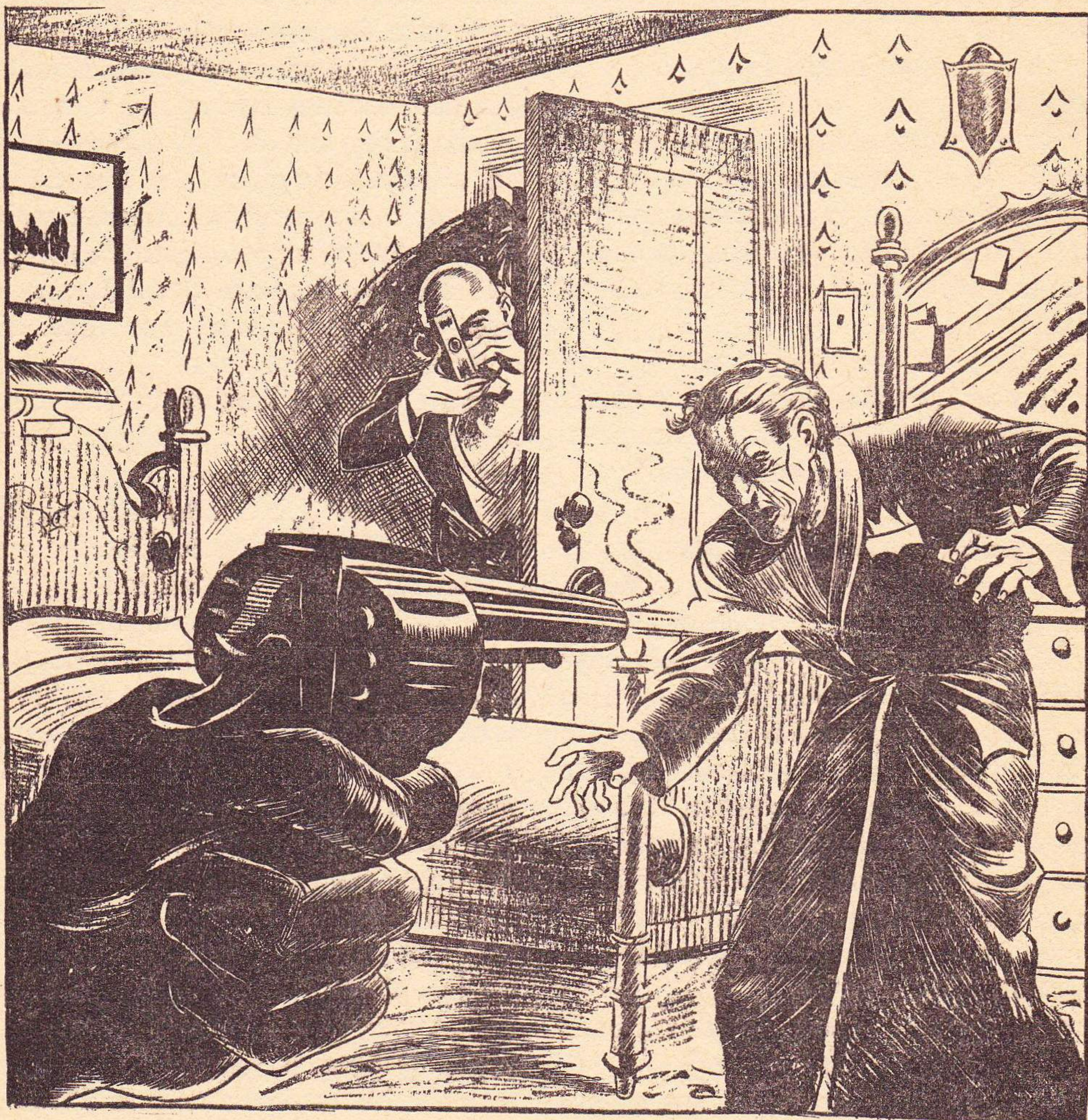


YOU BUILT A FRAME FOR ME

By
LEONARD B. ROSBOROUGH

Author of "Twice Dead, Twice Guilty," etc.

Hard, beautiful, brilliant, the columnists called her, choice bait for the chair, but I remembered only the frightened, soft-eyed little kid I'd seen turn gun-girl. . . .



Finley's camera had recorded the evidence—it showed the killer!

HER real name doesn't matter. Flint Hill, who was in the cell talking to her, called her Kohinoor. Let it go at that.

I was on duty that night in Death Row. Two prisoners were slated for

the last walk. The first grim procession was already disappearing through the little green door.

I looked into the cell. The girl was slumped in the only chair. Her veneer of sophistication was wearing thin. I

was glad of that. It had seemed out of place on a face so young and lovely.

Flint Hill sat on the cot, offering her a sort of cool, impersonal consolation. He had as dead a pan as you'll ever find on a live man.

"A big night, Kohinoor, my jewel," he was saying. "Double feature. There goes the first picture. Soon comes the second. Then this cell will be ready for a new tenant."

HER reply was barely audible, "Maybe I'm softening. I'm thinking of what's beyond the green door — and what will be there again—soon."

Hill smiled in his chilly way. "You amaze me, Kohinoor. Buck up. The chair works fast. Any little message before . . . the end?"

I wanted to strangle the guy. "Hill," I said, "why don't you lay off? Hasn't she got trouble enough?"

She threw me a grateful look and said, "Don't worry. I can take it."

"You see?" Flint Hill said to me. "See why I call her Kohinoor? That's one of the world's great diamonds. Hard, beautiful, brilliant."

I grunted in disgust and walked away.

With the emptying of that cell, society would exact its penalty for the killing of old Prentice Lawson.

Lawson, though wealthy, had lived modestly in a lonely suburban house, with a timid, elderly companion named Finley. The two men were more like old friends than master and servant. They shared a common hobby—the taking of amateur motion pictures.

Flint Hill and Kohinoor were distantly related to each other and to Lawson. They called him Uncle Prentice. His will provided for an equal division of his pile among the three—Finley, Kohinoor and Hill. Then he decided to change it and leave nearly everything to Finley. Told the youngsters they were getting too cynical—it would be

good for them to scratch for themselves.

But he didn't act fast enough.

The police got a call one evening from Flint Hill that he'd found the old man murdered. Lawson was in the parlor with a bullet in his brain.

The girl, Kohinoor, was in a rear room, knocked unconscious, her own .38 caliber revolver in her coat pocket, with a smear of blood on the barrel. It had been fired twice. She didn't explain its presence—merely insisted it had been stolen from her a couple of days before.

Finley was found in a closet of the same room with a blackjack in his hand, a gash in his bald scalp and a bullet in his chest. He lived long enough to mumble something about his camera.

I said at once that Flint Hill did the job. He was coldblooded as a snake, and he'd profit as much as anyone. The girl was a cool one, hard in a way, but a killer?—no. Homicide didn't agree. They searched for the camera, but when Ballistics matched the slugs with Kohinoor's gun, the case was airtight. They built it up like this:

Kohinoor quarreled with Lawson. Finley got his camera going, expecting a good action picture that he and Lawson could laugh over later. When the enraged girl shot Lawson, Finley had the evidence. The panicky servant hid in the closet; she found him, slugged him with her gun, he hit back and she shot him before she lost consciousness.

That satisfied Homicide, but I wondered: How was he able to dispose of the camera? Why didn't she shoot Finley the instant she found him, if she wanted to kill him?

I WALKED back and looked into the cell. Flint Hill, still cool and poker-faced, was talking:

"Time's getting short, Kohinoor. Don't go soft now. I've always liked you because you were hard—"

"*Liked* me," she flared in quick anger, "just as you liked beer and beefsteak!" The flash of anger passed; she lowered her voice. "It's more than *like* with me, Flint—it's *love*. I can't escape it. You built a frame for me—but I can forgive . . . even that." She pulled herself together and went on, "Does that sound soft?"

"It doesn't sound like you, Kohinoor, my jewel," Flint replied. "The hard gal who conked Finley—"

Her anger flickered again, faintly and briefly, like heat lightning on a far-away cloud. But there was no trace of it in her voice when she spoke; "I found Uncle Prentice—dead. My gun was beside his body. I picked it up, started out, and saw Finley dodge into the closet with his camera. When I opened the closet door, he saw the gun and went crazy with fear. He lunged, and I hit him with the barrel—in self-defense."

Kohinoor drew in a long breath. "I threw the camera from the window, into the lily pond."

That gave me a mild jolt of surprise. I had accepted Homicide's theory that Finley got rid of the camera somehow before she caught him, and she hadn't disputed that theory.

She went on, "I was slugged."

I saw the little procession coming back then—all except the condemned man. Time for the second act.

I let them into the cell. Flint Hill stood up, but the girl didn't. Flint took her hand and said, "This is the end of a beautiful friendship, Kohinoor. I'm really sorry. As long as I live"—his tight little grin came out for an instant—"I'll remember the camera."

Kohinoor tried to get up, but her knees wouldn't bear her weight. Two officers helped her to her feet.

She looked at Hill. "That's easy to say, Flint, when I'm the one to suffer. You killed Uncle Prentice with my gun.

You saw me coming and waited. After I struck Finley, you slugged me and shot Finley—and phoned the police. But you didn't know then what had happened to the camera." Her voice rose. "You built a frame for me—"

"For God's sake," one of the officers shouted, "get her out!"

THE officers supported her as they started along the passage. She turned and looked back. Flint Hill was walking away with a group in the opposite direction.

"Flint," she called, but he didn't turn. The officers urged her on.

Near the end of the corridor, she stopped again. There was no cool sophistication, no diamond hardness about her now. I couldn't picture her slugging Finley, although I knew she'd done it. She was just a frightened little girl on the verge of collapse. "That horrible picture—" she whispered.

The picture in the camera? Maybe, but I think she meant something else—the room beyond the green door, the group of silent witnesses, the body in the chair straining at the straps—

I looked around. Flint Hill was at the other end of the passage, and now a couple of guys were supporting *him*. I thought, "Sister, you're not the only sufferer, after all."

Kohinoor spoke again: "I tried—so hard. If they only hadn't found the camera—"

"Too late to think of that," one of the guards said. "They did, finally, and it cinched the case. Come along now—or do we have to carry you?"

"I can . . . walk."

The green door opened . . . closed.

"Flint," the girl moaned.

I was feeling a little sick—glad of any excuse to get away. I turned and ran the length of the corridor, through the green door—and helped carry Flint Hill to the chair.

DEAD END

By

WILLIAM BEGGARATE

Author of "Murder Taken Seriously," etc.

A hundred-to-one chance said this was another Dead End holdup, with ex-dick Duke Lafferty ready to settle for anything short of homicide!



Steve squeezed the trigger and one bandit clutched his chest!

DUKE LAFFERTY was standing at the bar of Frankie McMichaels' nightclub, working on his fourth double Scotch. He hoped the liquor would drown the raucous voice of the newsboy outside, shouting a

headline: "LAFFERTY SUSPENDED!" Duke looked around and saw the people who had just come in the door.

Royce Herndon nodded briefly. Young Phil and languorous Angela Herndon didn't look in Duke's direc-

tion. But Lee Sargent did—studied him a moment and then smiled a peculiar smile.

"I don't think I can eat a thing tonight, R. H., Sargent told the senior Herndon loudly. "I didn't take my powder today."

Involuntarily Duke started for the man but Frankie McMichaels' arm shot across the bar and he grabbed Duke warningly. Frankie said nothing, neither did Duke. After a minute he relaxed. What was the use?

This was how it was going to be. A dumb commissioner suspended you because he couldn't tell the difference between running away from and running after the rats that had drilled your partner. Then guys like Sargent could laugh at you in public and you had to take it.

Duke gulped down his drink. The hell with them—all of them. He'd get out of New York. He'd . . . He was signalling for another drink when a hand fell on his shoulder.

"What are you having, Duke," said a pompous voice. "Whatever it is, don't have too many. I want you to do a job for me tomorrow."

DUKE wheeled suspiciously. Royce Herndon stood next to him, saying "A Scotch and a Manhattan" to Frankie McMichaels. And Frankie, who'd known Duke when, and appreciated what a friendly word meant to the suspended detective right now, grinned happily.

Duke stared at Herndon, the owner of New York's swankiest jewelry shop. A job! God, a job was what he wanted and needed more than anything else in the world.

A job! A chance for a suspended copper who'd been branded yellow to show them at headquarters that he still had what it takes, still had his nerve and brains and . . .

"Never mind that Scotch," Duke said crisply. "I don't drink when I'm working. And right now I'm working on whatever job you've got, Mr. Herndon. But——"

"Good." The puffy-faced gem merchant drained his cocktail and said "Another, McMichaels." Then he turned to Duke.

"No 'but's'," he said. "I've known you since you were first assigned to the Broadway squad, and I don't believe what the newspapers are saying about you tonight. Besides, I need a real cop tomorrow. See?"

He gulped down the cherry in his cocktail, then continued.

"Tomorrow afternoon the jewels that were contributed by European refugee royalty to the Allies Aid Association go on private sale at my store. They're my responsibility. If anything should happen to them—" He rolled pouchy eyes. "They're worth half a million. I'm asking for a special police detail—at the last minute, to prevent leaks. But if I knew a man of your experience was around, I'd feel a lot safer. It would be worth two hundred dollars to me, Duke."

It was an effort for Duke to keep his face expressionless.

"I'm free tomorrow," he said quietly, "and the terms are satisfactory." Satisfactory! Inwardly he laughed. He'd have taken the job for nothing, just in the hope that it would produce a chance for him to show that he wasn't yellow, that he wasn't a run-out guy, that he—but never mind that now! He asked:

"You don't really expect trouble, Mr. Herndon?"

Herndon laughed uneasily.

"Maybe I'm letting this get on my nerves," he said. "But with things disappearing from my very desk, and a gang operating that no one seems able to see—you know, that 'little gang that

isn't there'?"

"I saw yesterday's report at headquarters," Duke replied, "but I was busy at the time—"

"Tonight's paper has a comprehensive account—they pulled another one today." Herndon handed him a sport final and pointed to a column.

Duke's crime-wise brain drank in the details. The gang, apparently kids 16 to 18 years old, had pulled half a dozen jobs in the last two weeks, netting over two thousand dollars. Usually two of them went into a store or restaurant at a busy corner, put a gun in the cashier's ribs, took what they could get quickly, ran out—and disappeared.

That's what made it a good newspaper story. No one could be found who saw them escape. There was no get-away car, no wild dash through the crowds. Nothing. They just disappeared. "The Little Gang that Wasn't There," the paper called them.

DUKE'S brows knit. This didn't make sense. He carefully visualized the location of every one of the places robbed. He was beginning to see light when Herndon coughed ostentatiously.

"Sorry," said Duke. "I was thinking . . . what did you say about something vanishing from your desk?"

"The store will be closed to the general public during the sale," Herndon said. "Admission will be strictly by invitation tomorrow afternoon. Naturally, it is extremely important that only the proper persons get the invitations. For that reason, my son Philip and I superintended sending them. Fourteen were left over and I put them in my desk. Today I discovered two have disappeared. Frankly, it makes me uneasy."

"I'd like to take a look around your store tomorrow morning before it

opens," said Duke thoughtfully.

"I'll telephone the watchman," said Herndon. "Well, I had better get back to my table."

Duke studied the others at Herndon's table. Years patrolling the Bright Light sector had taught him more about the nightclub crowd than its members would ever suspect. There was handsome young Phil Herndon, formerly a star halfback, who was now learning his father's business—and not as successfully as he was coaching an East Side settlement football team, it was said.

And Angela Herndon and her perpetual pout, as though she resented the years that had changed her from New York's best-dressed debutante into a mere unmarried belle—and a not-so-well dressed one, either, since the time her father reputedly had dropped a million in the market.

And, finally, Lee Sargent. Duke himself had once arrested Lee Sargent. The man had beaten the seemingly iron-bound embezzlement rap against him only by persuading his mother to pawn her jewels. No wonder Sargent had seemed pleased tonight after learning Duke Lafferty had been "broken!" Sargent's record was one of those things generally known at headquarters which somehow never leaked out in the select circles in which he played the role of debonair playboy. If Royce Herndon really knew the man who was now being so attentive to his daughter—!

Automatically Duke put on the hat and coat held for him by a hat-check girl. After all, Lee Sargent's relations with Angela Herndon were no more business of his than was young Phil Herndon's quiet affair with Kyla Carroll.

There was one for you! Kyla Carroll was a supper club dancer who could get more out of an admirer than if she'd been a common thief. Several

times she had seen the inside of a headquarters "interview" room, although she had never been convicted. And now her current flame, according to the Broadway chatter, was young Herndon—to whom she probably appeared a pure, calm-eyed goddess!

Duke grunted cynically and strode out into the night. After all, he had a job to do.

He was so eager to get to work next morning that his breakfast was only a cup of coffee that he gulped quickly before going to the Herndon store. He found the store ideal for his purpose. It was a small, high-ceilinged, richly-appointed shop with only two entrances, a rear door which a time-lock could make impregnable, and the main customer's entrance at the front. Over the main entrance inside ran a small balcony. A man on that balcony could see in to every nook and cranny in the store. A respectful watchman showed him the entire layout.

"You've seen everything now but the vault," the watchman said. "That's in here."

He led Duke into a small room where one wall was a huge bolt-studded door of glossy steel.

"I'll get back to my lunch," the watchman said. "I've turned off the automatic machine gun and tear gas protection so you can fool around with the big door as much as you like. The inner one's still locked, of course."

DUKE nodded. Alone, he studied the huge door with a connoisseur's eye. That double dial was unusual. Quite a job, this! Idly his hand went out to the big wheel-like handle . . . there was the sharp spat of an electric contact being made and Duke instinctively hurled himself to the floor.

As he did the room filled with the rocketing roar of a tommy gun. Slugs sprayed through the space where his

body had been a second before. Then the roar stopped. In one wall there was a circle of bullet-chopped wood and plaster.

Duke leaped to his feet and raced outside to where the watchman, his face gone white, sat frozen in his chair.

"My God," the man mumbled, "I turned those switches off. I swear I did. Why,——"

"Where are they?" snapped Duke. The watchman gestured weakly to a closet.

Duke wrenched the door open. Besides mops and brooms there were two big knife switches, one marked "Gun" and the other "Gas." He flashed his pocket torch on them. Fingerprints were plainly visible on the gas switch, which was in the 'off' position. But the other, securely notched in the 'on' slot, had obviously been wiped clean.

"Did you take a nap this morning after turning off those switches?" Duke asked the watchman.

"Yes, but only for——"

"Never mind," said Duke. In spite of himself he felt cold inside. "Someone's playing for keeps today," he said, half to himself. "Nice little case."

He walked out of the store. Discounting the watchman, he was fairly certain only four persons could have known of his intended visit to the jewelry shop. They were Phil Herndon, who might well need money to finance his affair with Kyla Carroll. Angela Herndon, who had never got on well with her father and conceivably might lend herself to a scheme that would buy her new clothes. Royce Herndon himself, who, if he had really lost a fortune in the market, might not be above arranging a well-disguised holdup for the insurance. And finally, Lee Sargent.

Duke paused in the doorway to light a cigarette and as he did his gaze took in the usual newsstand and subway kiosk at the corner. Suddenly his eyes

gleamed.

"Now I call that downright interesting," he told himself.

Sipping a cup of coffee, it occurred to him that Kyla Carroll might be able to tell him something. She was on intimate terms with young Herndon and once had been more than friendly with Sargent. And any sort of interview, no matter how unproductive, would be better than sitting around waiting for afternoon to come! A telephone call to a theatrical agent gave him Kyla's address. Fifteen minutes later he was approaching the entrance to the ornate uptown apartment where she lived.

As he did a familiar figure hurried out the entrance, jumped into a waiting cab and sped away. It was Royce Herndon.

Duke stared after him, trying to fit this new piece of the puzzle into place. He didn't go up to see Kyla Carroll.

DUKE lay belly-down on the balcony of the Herndon store. Perspiration beaded under his eyes as he watched the scene below. For the hundredth time he glanced at his wrist-watch and then at the freshly-oiled automatic lying within finger's reach. Four thirty one. In 29 minutes the sale would be over. And nothing had happened.

Duke cursed. Supposing nothing did happen? Or supposing it did, and he wasn't able to handle it? Or supposing—

Damned fool, he told himself fiercely. In spite of case-hardened nerves this was getting him. For this time, he himself had so much at stake! He forced himself to concentrate on the people in the store. But he couldn't refrain from another glance at his watch. Four thirty-three.

Below him, smartly dressed women and their escorts clustered about the showcases that held little shimmering

clusters of jewels that were worth a king's ransom. He could hear the oh's and ah's of wonder, and above them the loud chatter of two young men, foppish in afternoon coats, who had just come in.

There was a noise behind him. Instantly his gun was trained on the head of the stairway. Phil Herndon was ascending the stairs.

"Put down the cannon," Herndon laughed nervously. "I just got away from the settlement and came over to see the fun—if any. What's going on?"

Duke relaxed. Then before he could answer a shrill whistle beep-beeped outside. To anyone who didn't know better it might have been a traffic policeman's. But Duke's eyes snapped back to the scene below him. Then they gleamed coldly. This was it!

Guns in their hands, the two foppish young men were barking orders to the frightened customers around them. Duke saw two plainly-dressed men, obviously detectives assigned to the store, reach for shoulder holsters. Guns cracked. One officer's hand, crimson-stained, fell useless to his side. The other officer was covered now, a gun punching his back. Duke's nerves were icy cold. He raised his gun.

One of the young thugs had smashed a show-case and was coolly filling a bag with glittering gems. The other held a gun on the unwounded detective and fanned another gun at the customers. Duke calmly sighted down the barrel of his automatic and waited for the man's head to come squarely into the sight. Then he squeezed the trigger, felt the kick . . . the bandit with the guns sagged to the floor, looking surprised. That was one!

But the other, instantly sensing what had happened, wheeled and clutching the bulging bag, ran toward the door, snapping shots at Lafferty as he went. Slugs chipped the iron balcony, making

it hum. Contemptuous of them, Duke raised up, sighted again, saw the man's chest in his sight, squeezed . . . felt the kick. . . .

And at the same instant something hot seared his head and it seemed as if the roof had fallen on him. He went out cold.

Later he figured he could have been out for no more than a few seconds. A bullet, creasing his head, had dazed him momentarily. Below him was the wildest confusion, men shouting and women screaming hysterically. Phil Herndon had disappeared. Grabbing his gun, Duke jumped down the stairs. God! Had he muffed it after all?

No doubt about where to go! He raced across the sidewalk into the subway entrance. At the foot of the subway stairs the man from the change booth bent over a dead figure in an afternoon coat.

"Where's the bag he was carrying?" barked Duke.

"I didn't see no bag," said the change-maker. "Say, this guy's been shot."

It was clear enough now—now that he'd fumbled the chance he had been hoping for and had let his man get away. Or had he? There was still just a hundred-to-one chance. . . .

DUKE vaulted over the turnstile and ran out on the platform where an uptown local was just leaving. At Grand Central station he changed to an express and in a few moments was in front of Kyla Carroll's apartment. He raced into the foyer and straight into the elevator.

"Miss Carroll's apartment—fast!" He snapped to the startled elevator boy.

When they reached the floor, the boy pointed to a door.

Running full speed down the hall, Duke hurled himself at it. The door held. He put his pistol to the lock and jerked the trigger repeatedly. He should-

dered the door and it sprang open. A gun flashed powder in his face and would have blown his head off if he had not come in hunched over.

Duke launched himself at the other man as the gun jetted flame again. The shot went wild, missing Duke—but not Kyla Carroll, standing at one side of the door. It drilled her between the eyes and she was dead before she slumped to the floor.

But Duke didn't see that happen. With a body scissors on his man, he was methodically slugging the handsome features of Phil Herndon.

Frankie McMichaels slid another Scotch highball across the bar. Duke Lafferty took a pull at it.

"Well," he said, "to begin with, I first thought Herndon was crazy to be afraid that a mob of mere kids would take a crack at his place. But that kid mob interested me because of that disappearing angle. That's new—although it wasn't so hard to figure, once I considered the location of each place robbed.

"They were all on main intersections, business corners where there is a subway entrance and kiosk. Get it?

"Look. One kid stays downstairs in the subway station. Another is stationed on the sidewalk just outside the entrance. Two more go in the store they're going to rob.

"When the guy down in the station hears an express coming in, he signals the one on the sidewalk. That one in turn signals those in the store. A subway takes a minute or less—just time enough for a fast holdup. The kids in the store take what they can get in a hurry—run out—and right into the subway entrance! Who notices anyone else hurrying for a subway?

"They just make the express, and in 30 seconds it has sped them blocks away. They're absolutely unpursuable in a crowded city. And the two who

gave the signals can stay behind, interfere with any possible pursuit and perhaps even swear they didn't see anyone go into the subway. Simple—and fool-proof!”

Duke took another pull at the highball.

“I wondered why they pulled so many jobs in the short space of two weeks. Kids usually spend the proceeds of one robbery before staging another. It occurred to me it might be because someone was coaching these kids, using these lesser jobs as rehearsals for a really big one. Moreover, two invitations, absolutely necessary for anyone to get into the Herndon store, had disappeared. But there wasn't yet any definite connection.

“However, when I spotted that subway kiosk not 20 feet from the store entrance, I realized there was a chance of the ‘little gang’ taking a hand in this after all.

“Now, someone who obviously had a key to the store went there and re-set the machine gun switch, almost putting me out of the play. Only a few people—Herndon, his two children and Sargent—would be likely to know I was going there. And only the Herndons or someone close to them could have a key to the store.

“Moreover, I saw old man Herndon leaving Kyla Carroll's apartment this morning, and it seemed to me the only reason he would be visiting her would be to persuade her to leave young Phil alone. Which meant, knowing Kyla, that she had been trying to get some money—important money—out of Phil. And Phil couldn't have much money. His father's lost plenty, as you know. The thing began to add up.

“**T**HEN there was this clue. Working at a settlement, young Herndon had plenty of contact with the kind of tough kids who'd go for a racket like

this.

Moreover, he was a football man, well able to coach the kids in the teamwork and coordination such a form of robbery demands. But it was all largely suspicion. What proof had I?

“So I just played along. Since the little trick with the machine gun switch failed, he came up on the balcony in the store this afternoon to make sure I didn't gum up the works. A phoney police whistle was the signal to those in the store that the get-away express was coming in. I managed to plug both the robbers before Herndon could do anything about it. But he shot at me and the bullet skinned my head, dazing me for a few seconds.

“Meanwhile, he raced downstairs, grabbed the jewels from his pal—who was dying on his feet with that slug I put in his heart—and got away on the express.

“You see, he could always come back in a few minutes and ‘explain’ that he shot me while aiming at one of the thieves and that he had chased what he thought was a suspect onto the subway train.

“Actually, what he had to do was stack that bag of jewels some place fast. I figured—correctly—that he'd go right to his girl friend's apartment. So I went there too.”

Duke drained his glass.

“Incidentally, the two guys who gave the signals on this job got away,” he said.

“But I expect some guy at headquarters can make young Herndon tell who they are.”

Frankie McMichaels chuckled.

“‘Some guy at headquarters’ will probably be you,” he chuckled. “Listen!”

From outside the bar came the shrill yell of a newsboy.

“Wextry! Read about it! Duke Laferty reinstated! Hey, wextry!”

GRAPEVINE VENGEANCE

By ERIC HOWARD

THE word had come in a round-about fashion, by way of the stool-pigeon grapevine. Duke La Porte was hiding out in the biggest hotel in town, in the suite of Sid Marino, gambling man. Duke La Porte had the Grantby ice; he had lifted it and he still had it, because the fence he usually did business with was afraid to handle it. Duke was lying low, under Sid's protection, waiting for things to blow over.

There probably was no safer spot around than Sid's suite, which occupied half a floor in the big hotel. As long as Sid wanted to hide somebody there, and protect him, he was safe. Sid had a few of his boys always on duty.

I walked into the hotel, went to a room phone and called Sid's suite. I hadn't been around long, but I knew him. He knew me. I told the man who answered the phone that I wanted to talk to him. I gave him my name, Pat O'Neill.

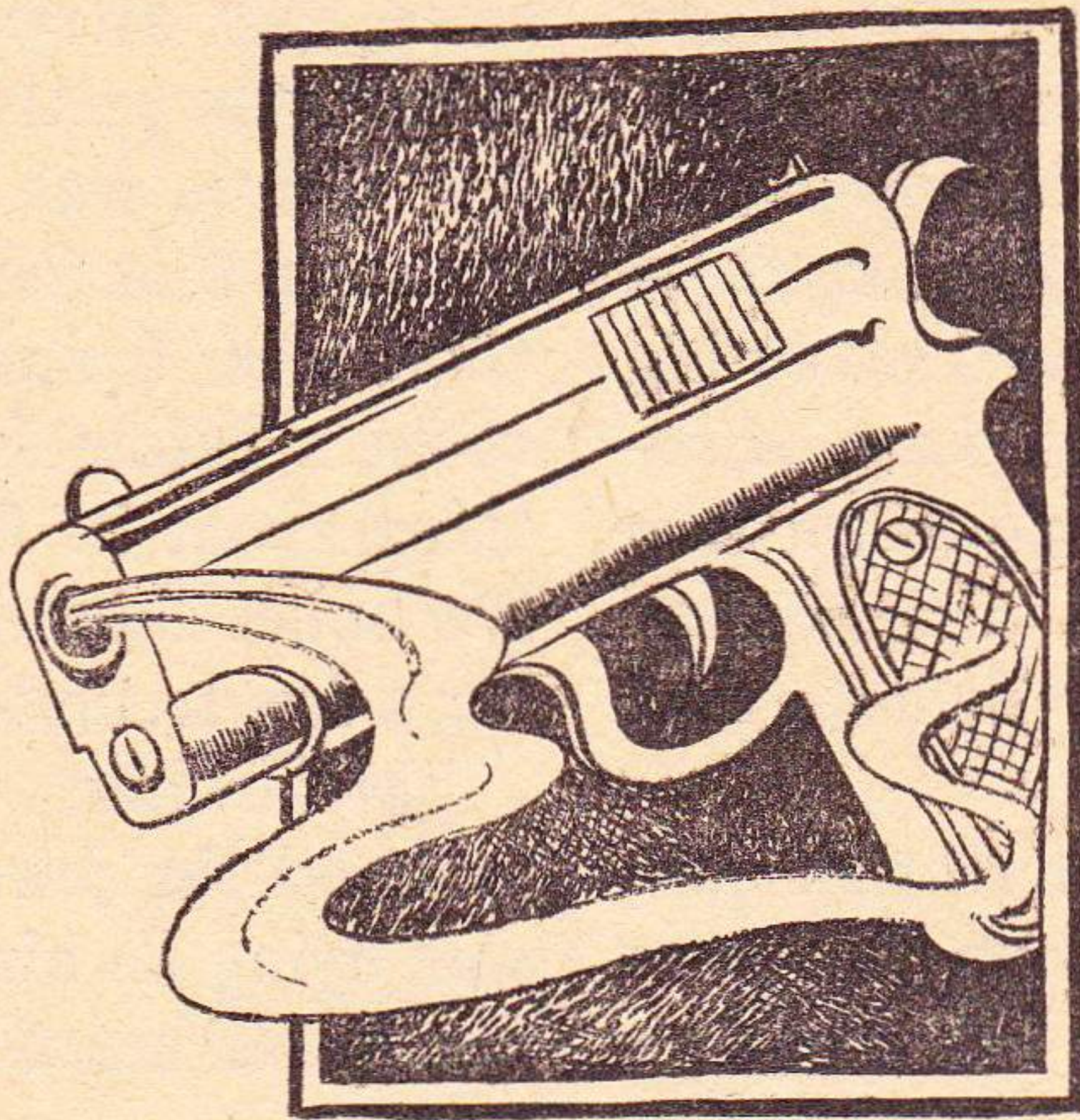
"Sid don't want to talk to you," the guy said. "Or anybody."

"Ask him," I said. "He'll talk to me. If you don't ask him, I'll come up there and ask him myself."

Sid's boy growled something that

sounded threatening, then muttered, "Wait a minute."

I waited more than a minute. I waited about five. But I had time and patience. I just stood there and whistled a little tune through my teeth, meanwhile looking over the people in the lobby.



There was one number there that interested me—a girl in a blue tailored suit, with a cute little blue hat on her smooth blonde hair, sitting in a big deep chair, almost lost in it. From where I stood I had a swell view of her profile, and it was very nice. Only she looked sort of sad

and thoughtful, perhaps lonely.

Then I heard Sid's voice. It was low-pitched, soft, deceptively soft. Just hearing him talk, you'd never think he was a hard guy. Sid was little, dried-up, with a wrinkled face and tired eyes; he was always smoking a long cigar, and acting as though he didn't like the taste of it.

"I'd like to see you for a few minutes, Sid," I said. "Can I come up?"

"Sure, O'Neill, sure."

I walked past the girl in the big chair. She had been crying. She had a little handkerchief in her hand. She had dabbed her eyes with it. I heard

*The gatmen wanted to collect for the ice,
and I had twenty grand I was ready to shove,
but the fools wanted corpses, not cash!*

a half-stifled sob. I paused and looked at her.

She was a beauty, all right. But there was more than beauty about her. I don't know—some appealing, winning quality that got me. She looked so young, maybe, and so forlorn, like she was too little to buck the big, bad world.

I smiled at her, and she looked frightened.

I said, "It isn't as bad as all that. No matter what it is, the sun's still shining and it's a pretty fair world. Keep your chin up." I thought I saw an involuntary smile around her lips, so I added: "It's a nice chin, too. Look, if there's anything to cry about, just stay here and have a good weep. I'll be back soon. I'm a great fixer."

There was a little smile on her lips now.

"Will you wait?" I asked.

"I'll think it over," she said.

I nodded confidently and went on to the elevator. From the cage I smiled at her. Then I shot up to Sid's floor. My boss, Bill Marker, local manager of the Paramount Agency, was always riding me about concentrating on my work. He was a woman-hater, anyway. My work, right now, was to get the Grantby ice away from Duke La Porte, even if we had to make a deal with him.

I knocked on Sid's door. It opened up and a man with a bad eye, and his right hand in his pocket, looked me over. I stepped in. Sid, in a silk dressing gown, stepped out of another room, his usual cigar in his mouth.

"Hello, O'Neill," he said. "Come in here."

I followed him into a little office. He sat down behind a polished desk and waved me to a leather arm chair.

No use trying to surprise Sid, but I tried anyway. I plunged right in.

"We're willing to make a deal on the

Grantby ice," I said. "Twenty grand's the limit, though. In case you're interested."

SID didn't make a move. After a moment, he took his cigar out of his mouth and studied the ash on it.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he told me.

I shrugged. "Okay, if that's how you feel. Maybe I'm wrong. A guy hears all kinds of rumors in this town. I'm a stranger here myself."

"What have you heard?"

"Well, I didn't know whether to believe it or not, Sid. The story as we patched it together went like this. It seems that young Grantby lost some dough in a gambling game. He couldn't pay and his old man wouldn't. Got real tough about it. So nothing happens for a while. Then the famous Grantby ice was lifted. Probably no connection, but some guys think there is. They think it's a way of collecting a gambling debt. They even suggest that one of the best boys in the business, Duke La Porte, has been around—that he lifted the ice for the gambling men. You know how it is, Sid. One rumor is added to another, and pretty soon you have a whole story."

He nodded, puffed at his cigar. There was no expression on his face, but his tired eyes were very thoughtful.

"It's an idea, at that," he said at last. "I mean, suppose some boy refused to pay up. It would be convenient to have somebody around to collect, wouldn't it?"

I agreed. "If I were in your business, and somebody welshed, I'd certainly try to collect."

He shrugged. "Oh, I only figure on collecting a certain percentage. I've got a safe full of I. O. U's. I'll never cash in."

I didn't say anything. I heard a peculiar sound, a sort of groan, in spite

of the fact that these rooms were supposed to be sound-proofed. Sid heard it, too; but he didn't say anything.

After quite a pause, I suggested: "If you're interested—"

"Twenty grand is a piece of change," he admitted. "I could use it. If I could put my hand on the Grantby stuff, I might talk business. But I have no idea where it is."

I laughed. "Funny what stories get around!" I said. "You know what? We heard that you had Duke La Porte right here in these rooms, covering him up. Isn't that funny?"

"Very funny," he said. "You want to look for him?"

"Oh, no, Sid. I never thought you'd be such a sap as to keep him here. The cops want him, and if they got the idea he was here, they might come up with a warrant."

"They might," he agreed.

"Well, it was just one of those ideas that didn't pan out, eh, Sid? I'll be running along."

"Okay, O'Neill. And if I do get next to anything, I'll call you up."

"Fine!" I said heartily.

As I went out, with Sid's guard looking me over again, I thought I heard that sound—a muffled groan from another room. But I knew better than to investigate. If I found out anything I wouldn't have a chance to pass on the information.

The girl was waiting there. I pulled a chair close to hers and sat down.

"The name," I said, "is Patrick Terence O'Neill. I'm from San Francisco and I haven't been here long, but I know I'm going to like it—now. I'm a fairly respectable guy, with a good job, an expense account, lots of leisure time. It's almost noon. Suppose we go into the grill and have a bite, and you can tell me why you've been crying."

That smile tugged at her lips. "My name is Sheila Mason," she told me.

"I'm a sort of stranger here, too." She gave me a long look, then shrugged and said, "All right, Mr. O'Neill."

We went into the grill. We found a very nice corner booth, where I could look over the whole room. She didn't want a drink, but she said, "You have one."

I did, and we ordered. For a while we just sat there and smiled at each other, the way you will on short acquaintance. I pulled a few gags out of the radio programs I'd been listening to; I got her to smile.

AFTER a time, I said, "Why don't you tell me about it? Maybe I could help."

"There's nothing much to tell," she said, "I'm from New Orleans. I came here— Well, I lost my mother three months ago, after a long illness. I had always thought that we were well-to-do. But after her death, the family lawyer told me there was nothing left, that her income had come altogether from my stepfather. They were separated years ago—I scarcely remember him. That income had stopped some time before. Well, I found work in a circulating library. I was getting along all right. Then, two weeks ago, our lawyer came to me and said he had had a message from my stepfather, asking me to meet him here. It seems that he intended to pass through, on his way to South America or somewhere, and wanted very much to see me. He said he wished to settle something on me and he sent a check to the lawyer to cover my expenses."

"I felt I had no claim on him. He was a stranger, you see. But the lawyer urged me to come, said it was my duty. Because he—my stepfather, Mr. La Porte—had always been very generous."

When she mentioned that name, I made a noise with my soup.

"So I came. And he isn't here. He hasn't been here. My money is almost gone and— Well, it sounds silly, perhaps, but I don't know what to do or where to turn. I've looked for work here, but I haven't been able to get any. And my position back home has been filled. I wrote my lawyer, air mail, but he hasn't answered. And so—well, really, I don't know why I'm telling you. I guess it's just that I haven't had any one to talk to."

"It's a good idea to get things off your chest," I said. "Your stepfather—you said his name is La Porte?"

"Yes, Richard La Porte. I think he's wealthy. He travels a great deal, mother always said."

"What's his business?" I inquired.

"Something to do with exports and imports, I think. Mother never wished to talk about him. I—I think she loved him deeply, but something caused them to separate. I just don't know. It seemed to be a painful subject to mother, so we avoided it."

"I see," I said. "He was supposed to meet you here? When?"

"Three days ago. I don't know what to do or what to think. If something had happened to him, perhaps I should ask the police—"

"Oh, I wouldn't do that just yet. He may have been delayed. He may be ill. You'll probably hear from him soon. And then," I said, "I may be able to help just as much as the police. You see, I'm connected with a bureau of investigation, an international detective agency."

"You're a detective?"

"Well, a lot of people don't think so," I admitted. "But, technically, I am. So suppose you become my client and I try to find your stepfather."

"But—but I couldn't pay your fee."

"Let's let Mr. La Porte worry about that, since he seems to be wealthy. After all, a rich man ought to be willing to

pay for being found, hadn't he?"

"I suppose so."

"I make it a rule to see a lot of my clients," I went on. "It seems essential to the work."

As I spoke, I saw that Sid and two of his men, his regular bodyguard, were coming into the grill. Sid saw me and gave me a nod. The three of them walked past the booth, deliberately, and took a table on the other side. When Sid saw my companion, there was no expression on his face; but I thought I detected a flash in his eye—perhaps an angry flash.

So he knew who she was, I thought, and why she was here.

This was a very peculiar set-up. I tried to figure it out.

If Sid had the Duke up there, and there wasn't much reason to doubt the tip from the stool-pigeons, was he just protecting and hiding him? Or was the Duke giving him a little trouble?

It could be, I thought, that the Duke had lifted the Grantby trinkets and had hidden them or cashed in on them. In that case, if Sid had any claim on the stuff, because of young Grantby's I. O. U's, Sid would be mad—mad enough to put the screws on the Duke and make him groan. I had heard somebody groaning, all right.

My job, of course, was to get the ice back, even if we had to pay off. But here I was, all interested in Sheila Mason, who was a nice girl—and she was Duke La Porte's step-daughter!

I watched Sid. His face was as expressionless as always, but all of a sudden his eyes narrowed, his lips tightened and he muttered something. The two men with him turned. I followed their gaze and saw Ace Hudson, one of the smoothest dicks in town, bearing down on their table.

Hudson has been a cop nearly all his life. He's a big guy, built like a football player who has over-eaten; he's white-

haired and his face is deeply tanned, because he gets out and plays golf every free day.

Hudson waved a big hand and pulled a chair up to Sid's table. His heavy shoulders hunched over a little and he said something to Sid. The gambler replied and Hudson laughed. I tried to hear what was going on, but they were too far away.

HUDSON looked around and saw me. He stared at me for a minute, then waved his hand, and looked at Sheila.

We were ready to leave. As we walked out, I steered Sheila past the other table. I paused a second and said to Sid, "Call me up some time. Let's get together."

"Sure," Sid agreed.

Hudson looked at both of us, then said to me, "Haven't seen young Grantby around, have you, O'Neill? He's missing."

"No, I haven't," I said.

"If you do, we expect a little co-operation," Hudson warned me.

"You can count on that," I told him.

We went out into the lobby. I was sort of absent-minded, for a moment. If young Grantby was missing, I thought, that might mean—

"Oh, there he is! I'm sure that—" Sheila said, and broke away from me, running towards the revolving door.

I saw the well-tailored back of a slight man, carrying a brief-case, disappearing through the door. I went that way, too.

But Sheila was stopped by the fact that two fat ladies had got entangled in the revolving door. She got outside, after a moment, and I was only a little behind her. But it was too late.

"I'm positive that was Mr. La Porte!" she exclaimed. "He got into a car and was driven away."

"Did you get the license number?"

"I couldn't even see it! It was there, where that parking space is, hidden by

that limousine. Why did he leave like that? Oh, I'm sure of it! I caught a glimpse of his profile—it's just like a picture mother had of him. Why didn't he ask for me? Why didn't he come to see me?"

She was quite distressed about it. I put my hand on her arm and took her inside.

"You wait here," I said. "I have an idea—maybe it's an idea."

I deposited her in the same chair I had found her in. I slipped over to the grill entrance and looked in. Sid was there, and Ace was still sitting at his table. Sid's bodyguard was on the job, of course.

I went up in the elevator to Sid's floor. I prowled along the corridor. I knew that Sid had a few more boys in that suite, and I didn't want to mix with them. I thought I might hear something. There were four doors opening on the hall out of rooms Sid paid for. I paused near each of them and listened. Not a sound inside, not even the sound of anybody breathing, not even the clink of glasses.

I didn't know what to make of that. I stuck around, moving from door to door, for about ten minutes. Then, when the elevator stopped, I ducked around a corner.

Sid and his two boys got out; Ace was right after them. Ace must have got the same tip we had. He was looking for Duke La Porte. Or maybe he was looking for the missing scion, young Grantby. Sid didn't look too happy, but Ace was chuckling and saying something he thought was funny. Ace had evidently demanded a little co-operation from Sid, and the gambler couldn't refuse to let him look around his rooms.

But Sid was foxy. He probably had ways of signalling his boys inside to make everything look right. If the Duke had left the hotel, he wasn't there. If young Grantby was inside, then Sid's

boys would make a good try at concealing him from Ace.

Sid opened the door, started in. Then he stepped back. One of his boys said, "Holy goldfish! Lookit—"

Ace thrust himself forward, stood there looking in.

"Looks like you've had visitors, Sid," he said, and laughed.

They all went in, but left the door open. I slipped down the hall. I got to the door and looked in. Two of Sid's boys were on the floor, out cold. The two who had been with him downstairs were picking them up.

Sid snapped something at them, and they started for another room.

"I'll go along," Ace said genially, "just to see what other damage has been done. Anybody else here?"

"No," Sid said, but I thought he was lying.

A minute later, I heard Ace boom, "This is murder, Sid!"

And Sid's reply, "I don't know anything. I didn't know this guy was here."

WHILE Ace was giving him the razzberry, I walked in. I looked into a bedroom. They were standing around a bed. On the bed was young Grantby, and from the cold pallor of his face and the bruises on his head you didn't need a medical examiner to tell you he was gone.

Ace heard me and looked around.

"Murder, O'Neill," he said. "What do you know?"

"Nothing," I told him. "I was up here talking to Sid a while ago. I thought I heard somebody groaning. It could have been this boy, taking some punishment. I don't know."

"He wasn't here an hour ago," one of Sid's boy said.

"No, he wasn't," the other chimed in.

The two mugs who had been knocked cold were coming out of it. We went back into Sid's sitting room. The

mugs rubbed their thick skulls and looked at Sid, waiting for a word.

"Where'd Grantby come from?" he asked. "How'd he get in here? Who brought him? And what happened?"

"We was sittin' in here, Sid. A guy comes in another door as quiet as a mouse. Yeah, he's got a key. He comes in there an' he brings that Grantby with him an' throws him on the bed. We don't even hear anything for a while, do we, Pete? No, not a thing, the guy's so quiet. Then he knocks over that little table in there by the bed—an' we hear a glass bust. First, we think you're back. We go in. The guy—I don't even get a look at him, Sid—conks me."

"Yea," Pete took it up. "I see Joe fall, see? I see this guy—I just get a flash of him. He ain't big. He's wearin' swell togs. I don't know him, but I seen his pitcher somewheres. I think he's the Duke. I go for him. I get my rod out. I take a jump. Damn if I know what hit me—the water bottle, mebbe. Anyway, I go down, too. I fall over Joe."

Sid chewed his cigar. "Duke La Porte," he said with a nod. "That's the guy you want, Ace. I been hearing things about him. O'Neill says he lifted the Grantby ice. The way it looks to me, he had young Grantby somewhere in the hotel. He grabbed the kid and the ice. Yeah. Must be the kid put up a fight. Then I guess the Duke hit him too hard and laid him out on a slab."

Ace said, "Why would he drop him on one of your beds, Sid?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I trimmed him once. I won fifteen grand off him. He was a lousy loser. I figure he was trying to get back at me, trying to make you guys think I had something to do with the Grantby kid getting it."

"You didn't, huh?" Ace asked.

"You heard what the boys said," Sid replied. "How could I? The Duke

brings a dead man in here, plants him on me. The Duke is the guy you want."

"How about the man O'Neill heard groaning?"

"That was me," Peter volunteered. "It was something I ate."

"How much did Grantby owe you, Sid?" Ace inquired.

"Oh, not so much. Around ten grand. Not enough to worry about. I knew he'd pay off in time. Now, though, I'm out, I guess. But that's how it goes in this business."

Ace picked up the phone and called headquarters. I started for the door.

"Stick around, O'Neill, stick around," the big dick said.

"I'll be downstairs," I told him.

"Oh, yeah. Who was that lady I saw you with—and no gag?"

"A client of mine," I said. "Miss Sheila Mason of New Orleans."

"And how does she figure in this?"

"Does she? I don't see how. She retained me to locate a missing relative. That's all I know."

"Okay," Ace said. "But you be downstairs."

"Sure."

I glanced at Sid. I had guessed that he knew Sheila was the Duke's stepdaughter. But his face was blank again, except for the glow in his eyes. He didn't pay any attention to me. He was trying to figure something out.

Sheila wasn't downstairs. I stood there, staring a minute at the chair where I'd left her. I got all hot and then cold. I was sure she hadn't just walked out on me. I was afraid something else had happened.

I beat it over to the desk. I asked questions.

"Miss Mason? She went out a few minutes ago with a gentleman."

"Who was he? What did he look like?"

I was sure he was going to describe Duke La Porte, but he didn't. He de-

scribed a man I had never seen—a swarthy, young man who might have been a foreigner.

THE doorman couldn't help me. He hadn't seen them leave. None of the taxi drivers had seen them get in a car. I went back to the desk and pestered the clerk.

Had it appeared that the swarthy man was compelling her to go with him? Oh, no; on the contrary, she seemed eager to go.

"As if," the clerk said, "as if she was in a hurry to get somewhere, to see someone."

I sat down and lit a cigar. Ace Hudson came down right after three homicide men had gone up. He spotted me and walked over.

"Where's your client?" he asked.

"Oh, you mean Miss Mason? She stepped out. She'll be back later."

Ace dropped into the chair beside me. "Every cop in town is after La Porte. We'll pick him up. But ten to one he has an alibi. Ten to one he can prove he was nowhere near this hotel. He's smooth. He beat two raps that I know of and we still want him for a job he pulled three years back—if we could prove it on him. I don't think he killed Grantby, anyway. That's Sid's job, I'll bet. But we can't prove that, either—not yet."

"Why Sid's?" I asked.

"Well," Ace said, "the Duke is a slick crook. He makes a brag that he never carries a rod, that he can pull off a job without violence. And a couple of other men who owed Sid money have wound up this way. One of them got it from a hit-and-run driver, right after he told Sid he wouldn't pay. Another was found in a weedy lot, beaten up. Sid's boys get rough, too rough. Young Grantby wasn't built to take punishment. I'll bet he's the one you heard groaning. His old man is going to burn up the town."

But I can't arrest Sid on what I guess."

A boy came by, paging me. I was wanted on the phone. I hustled over and took the call. Bill Marker, my boss, was on the line and he had one of his regular mads on.

"I was just going to call you, Bill," I soothed him. "I've been busy. Ace Hudson has been dogging me, too. How'd you get word about Grantby?"

"Never mind how I got it! I've got ways of learning things!"

"Now, look, Bill," I said, "it seems that the Duke rubbed him and planted him in Sid's suite. The Duke is not around. They're trying to pick him up. But Ace thinks Sid—or one of his muggs—hit Grantby too hard. He don't figure the Duke is a killer. As for the ice—"

"That's what I'm interested in!" Bill yelled. "Where is it? Did the kid have it on him? Did he glom it to pay off Sid? Did the Duke get it? Has Sid got it? I want to know!"

"I'm working on it, Bill. I've got an angle. There's a girl here—"

"Stay away from women!" he growled. "Every time you look at a skirt you forget your work."

"No, Bill," I said, "she's in it, in a way. She's the Duke's step-daughter and she—"

"Bring her down here then! Let me talk to her!"

"But she left, Bill. She went out."

Bill muttered some very bad words, wound up by calling me a lot of names and firing me. Then he hung up.

The hotel manager was talking to Ace. As I walked over that way, a homicide man came down and joined them. I heard him tell Ace that Sid wanted to leave.

"Let him go," Ace said wearily. "We can't hold him." Then he added, in a lower tone, "Put a tail on him."

Sid and his four boys got out of an elevator. Sid saw me and came over.

"Maybe I can help you out, O'Neill," he said. "Maybe I can find the Duke and see if he has the Grantby stuff. If I can, I'll be glad to help you boys."

"Thanks, Sid," I said.

He gave me a long look. The way I read it, it meant that I was to mind my own business, keep my mouth shut. I got that very clearly, from Sid's cold gaze, also from the look on his boys' faces.

They marched out of the hotel like a young army.

I just sat there, with my hand up to my face. How long, I don't know.

Until someone sat down beside me and I heard a very nice voice.

"I—I had to go out," Sheila said. "But I hoped you'd wait."

I turned and looked at her. She wasn't smiling. She looked sort of sad. Then I saw that she had a flat briefcase in her hands.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I—I met my step-father," she said. "He gave it to me. There's something valuable in it."

"I know," I said. "Better get it out of sight."

I took it and put it back of me, leaning against it. Sheila leaned towards me.

"Tell me about Mr. La Porte."

"You want to know? Did he tell you what was in here?"

"Jewels, he said, belonging to some rich family. I was to keep them until I was approached regarding them. When I told him I'd met you, he said you would make me an offer. He said to trust you, that you'd protect me from his enemies. But he was in a dreadful hurry, and his story didn't—well, I didn't understand it."

"Duke La Porte," I said slowly, "is one of the biggest jewel thieves in the business. The police want him. He's clever, and although he's been arrested many times he's never been sent up.

He stole this batch of stuff—the Grantby jewels—somehow. And that somehow got him mixed up with Sid Marino, a gambler. I don't know much about it, but, anyway, Grantby is lying upstairs in Marino's suite—and the police don't know who killed him."

Sheila's face went pale. "You mean maybe Mr. La Porte—?"

"Maybe," I said, "although he's never killed before. Maybe some of Marino's men. Where did he go?"

"To the airport. He said he was flying to Mexico City—on business. But he told me he wanted to see me taken care of. That's why he gave me that brief case. He said you'd make me an offer for the jewels it contained and that I was to accept it."

"Yes. Twenty thousand dollars—and no questions asked."

Her mouth formed an O.

"But if he stole them," she said, "then I must return them to their owners."

"My outfit represents the insurance company," I said. "I'm authorized to pay up to twenty thousand for the return of this stuff. Think it over. You—we—could use that much."

She shook her head. "I couldn't take it. Would you want me to?"

That was a hard one. I couldn't admit, looking into her eyes, that I wanted twenty grand no matter how I got it. And I didn't have time because my irate boss, Bill Marker, came crashing in.

"Big fight at the airport!" he yelled at me. "The Duke! Sid and his mob got him as he went to a plane! But the Duke got Sid and one of the others! Now where's the Grantby stuff? It wasn't on either of them. It must be—"

"Stop talking in headlines, Bill," I said. "I'm fired, remember? I don't work for you any more."

BILL started to swear, then looked at Sheila and didn't.

"If I got my job back," I said, "and

a raise, and a month's vacation, and a little decent treatment, I might save you a lot of dough. How about it?"

"Give!" he said. "What do you know? I'll give you all you deserve—and then some!"

I handed him the briefcase. "In there," I said. "The Duke turned it over to this young lady. She gave it to me, refusing payment when she heard the jewelry was stolen."

Bill jerked the zipper open, looked in. "It's all here! All of it. Thanks, young lady. That was a very honest thing to do. Hey, what's this?"

He pulled out a sheet of paper. He read it, frowning.

"This is a letter Duke wrote," he said. "He claims Sid forced young Grantby to lift this ice, then beat him up when Grantby tried to fight. Grantby died as a result of the battle. He says Sid had tipped the cops that he, the Duke, had lifted this stuff. They were after him. He knew Sid had it in his desk, so he crashed the suite and got it. Say, if Sid wasn't dead already, this would convict him!"

Sheila was sobbing. I put my arm around her.

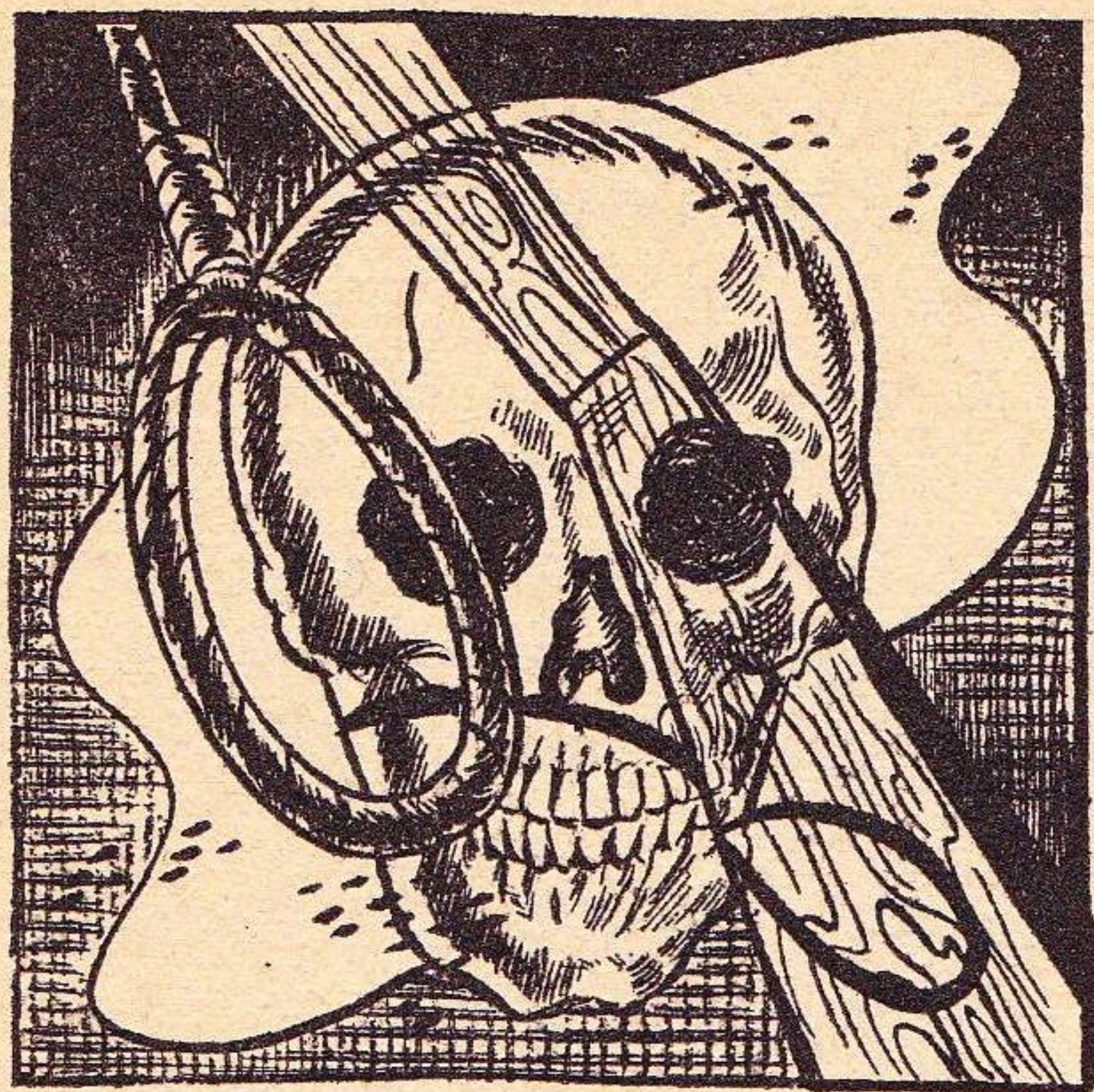
"Never mind," I said. "The Duke was all right, in his way. He meant well. I guess he just couldn't help being a crook. He wanted to give you a stake, he wanted you to be happy. He must have thought a lot of your mother. And this finish—he probably knew he'd end like this. Don't cry, honey, don't cry."

Ace Hudson came out of the managers office and Bill hurried over to tell him things, waving the Duke's letter.

"Don't cry," I pleaded. "Look, I've got my job back, I'm going to get a raise, I'll have a month's vacation. How—how—well, look, Sheila, maybe when you know me better we could make it a honeymoon?"

And that's how it turned out.

MURDER BY INSTALMENT



By ERIC PRESTON

"The M.E. and the wagon," would be Homicide's verdict on this very dead housekeeper's daughter, but not after this clue-crazy newshawk Martin Dering scooped the case!

THE sardonic gleam in Lieutenant Horne's blue eyes told me the worst. Between him and Detective Sergeant Duffy, I was due for the cleaners on this hand. It wanted three minutes before eleven and I'd two sawbucks in the pot. The phone on Horne's desk rang while I considered throwing in my hand.

Laying his cards face down on the desk, Horne scooped up the receiver. "Police Headquarters, Lieutenant Horne speaking," he growled under his beaked nose. "Be right over!" he promised gloomily seconds later and hung up.

He looked like a vulture balked of a feast when he unfolded his lean form. "Get moving!" he ordered Duffy. "Attempted murder at Ingleside, Cecil Winram's place on Mount Durham!"

Duffy was a huge man with the face of a gargoyle. He sighed, stacked his cards on top of Horne's pile and swore softly when I flipped my twenty bucks from the kitty.

I was still grinning when I parked on the back seat of Horne's coupe downstairs. I ignored his scowl. They'd been willing to take my dough so I rated the story. I'm Martin Dering. You read my scoops in the *Globe-Herald*.

Horne twisted on the front seat and pushed a finger under my nose like it was a gun.

"Listen, louse," he snorted. "The last two times you rode with us you stuck your long beak in an' grabbed all the credit. This time, you're a passenger, an' a dumb one!"

I generously refrained from reminding him that on each occasion I had prevented him from arresting innocent parties. I've a big heart—and I wanted the story. Any kind of a story. A dearth of local news these last few days had brought dark hints from the chief's desk.

"S'help'me!" I promised solemnly, "I'll be good!"

Mount Durham is in the old residential district, peopled by wealthy folk who haven't quite gone modern. Ingle-side proved to be a rambling old mansion ablaze with lights at the far end of a long driveway. Duffy braked at the foot of stone steps and we spilled out of the jalopy.

The gloomy-eyed, horse-faced man who admitted us wore a faded dressing gown wrapped around his bony figure. He reminded me of a totem pole in a blanket. The hallway was big, so big I glanced around for the bell-hop line and elevator bank.

Gloomy-pan conducted us through the rotunda and up two flights of stairs to the third floor. We brushed past two girls wearing cheap kimonos and crying softly in a huddle near three

men and followed our guide into a comfortably furnished room.

"The police, sir," Gloomy-pan announced—quite unnecessary if you've seen Horne and Duffy as a team.

The girl at the foot of the bed wore dark blue slacks and a shirt to match. The statuesque type; black hair, dark eyes and features the color of old ivory. She studied us coldly without moving. Young, probably twenty-one or two, the lad who stepped out of Horne's path looked like a stuffed owl behind his thick glasses. Tall, but not heavy. I noticed his hands, big, and covered with inkstains. He was fully dressed in a dark suit.

Horne rapped, "What's this?" and a little fat guy bent over the bed bounced around. He had a balloon stomach and wore a vividly-striped pyjama coat tucked inside light gray pants. A white muffler enveloped what little neck he had. He appeared in his late fifties.

He screwed up his moon face and gaped at Horne. "I'm Cecil Winram," he whispered hoarsely. His little eyes, almost lost between bushy brows and plump cheeks, held a bewildered light.

"My housekeeper — Miss Hagen — I'm afraid she has committed suicide!"

Over Horne's shoulder, I peered at the still figure on the bed. Middle-aged, the dead woman had been pretty once. Her features large and regular, she might have been asleep only her brown eyes were open wide and staring vacantly at the ceiling. One hand lay stretched along the coverlet.

"M.E. and the wagon," Horne growled without looking around. Duffy legged out of the room to hunt a telephone.

AN alarm clock ticked loudly on the night table beside the bed. There was an empty water glass, too, and a bottle of sleeping tablets a quarter filled. Horne frowned at them, shrugged and

wheeled to glare at Winram.

"You didn't mention the suicide," he accused, making it sound like a personal affront.

"But I didn't know of it when I phoned," Winram mumbled huskily. I figured he had a cold. "One of the maids discovered her like this while the household was being assembled for your arrival."

"Know why she did it?" Horne inquired glumly.

"Of course not." Winram frowned. "She was quite happy."

The dark-eyed girl sniffed audibly.

Horne's moody eyes swung to her. "Well, wasn't she?" he snapped. "Who are you?"

"Olivia Rance," she replied and ignored the first question.

"My niece," Winram added. "This —" a fat finger indicated the youth hiding behind the glasses, "—is Barry Cort, my secretary."

Horne's eyes questioned Gloomy-pan.

"I'm Tompkins, the butler," the man explained hastily.

While they were getting acquainted, I'd gone on a prowl for a picture of the late Miss Hagen. Unsuccessful, I paused at the dressing table. My fingers casually flipped open a large Bible lying there.

The smiling youth on the postcard-size photo tucked away in the middle of Psalms looked around seventeen. A neat inscription at the bottom read: *To Mother, with all my love. July 1936.*

I breathed easy when the picture reposed in my inside pocket.

Olivia Rance shivered abruptly. "Must we stay here?" she inquired.

Horne shook his head. "We'll go into the other business below," he informed Winram.

The group in the corridor trailed us downstairs. Duffy was already in the library.

Winram rolled onto a deep leather chair. He looked like Tweedledum—or maybe it was Tweedledee.

"Go ahead!" Horne grunted.

"Look!" Winram loosened the muffler covering his throat. "Someone tried to strangle me!"

Moodily, Horne studied the ugly purple patches blotching the flabby neck, then:

"Start at the beginning," he said. He nodded when the little fat man touched his throat and winced, added, "The medical examiner can check you over when he arrives."

"I retired to bed shortly before ten," Winram began, "and fell asleep almost immediately. Hands gripping my throat awoke me. I struggled for perhaps a minute then had the presence of mind to go limp. The pressure relaxed just before I lost consciousness. When I could move again, I summoned Barry, then phoned you."

"You didn't get a glimpse of your assailant?"

"The room was utterly dark," Winram explained. "I fought the hands at my throat, felt rubber gloves. It must have been around ten-thirty when I was awakened."

Horne's lips pursed thoughtfully. "Anything of value missing?"

"I made a close check, sir," Tompkins volunteered, "and found everything correct. The doors and windows were all as I had left them."

"I keep a small amount of cash in the safe in my bedroom," Winram said. "But the safe had not been tampered with."

"Who has the combination to the safe?" Horne wanted to know.

"Only Barry and myself."

The lieutenant nodded, his lean face somber. He shot a keen glance at the other occupants of the room. "An inside job," he grunted. "You—" he stabbed

a long finger at Barry Cort "—is the whole household present?"

CORT'S eyelids fluttered. He nodded hastily. "Matt Adams, the gardener." He pointed to a small wiry man with a weather-beaten face. "Beside him, the chauffeur, Roebuck. Ollie, behind Tompkins, acts as handyman. The two girls, Rose and Alice, are maids."

I sensed a slight tension in the room when Horne shot the obvious question, "Where were you all at ten-thirty? We'll start with you, Miss Rance."

She hesitated perceptibly, then demanded sharply, "Why pick on me?"

Horne frowned. "Someone has to be first," he snapped. "Answer, please!"

"In my room," she replied sullenly. "I was reading when Rose knocked on the door."

"But that was after eleven o'clock!" Barry Cort muttered, surprise on his face. He mopped a damp brow with a handkerchief. "I'm sorry, Miss Olivia," he went on nervously, "but you'd been out before that. I saw you and Harvey Pitton beneath the trees near the garden a minute or so before Mr. Winram rang for me!"

I noticed ink smudges on the handkerchief from his plump fingers when he stuffed it back into his pocket.

"That settles it!" Winram's hoarse voice broke the short silence that followed Cort's statement. He glared at the girl, his moon face a brick red.

"So you defied me! Barry, make a note for my lawyer to draft a new will in the morning!"

The disgusted expression that flowed over Horne's lean face tickled me. "You can have a lawyers' convention in the morning," he said sourly, "but right now I'm investigating an attempted murder and a suicide."

"Wait!" Quick suspicion flamed Winram's angry eyes. He bounced out

of the chair like a rubber ball, grabbed Horne's arm. "I've warned her about meeting Pitton. He's a fortune hunter. This afternoon I threatened to cut her out of my will if she saw him again. She knew I meant it. She—she could have admitted him into the house and waited outside until he rejoined her."

Two spots of color stained Olivia's pale cheeks but her voice was cool when she addressed herself to Horne.

"All right, I'd promised to meet Harvey in the garden at ten. I slipped out through the side door after Uncle went to his room. You can guess now why I didn't admit it. We sat talking a while in the arbor, discussing plans for getting married." She threw Winram a scornful glance. "I'm tired of hearing Uncle's threats. We don't need his money. Harvey has a steady job, earns enough to keep us."

Horne looked at her hard. "Then the side door was open for nearly an hour from ten," he commented softly. "You saw no one?"

The girl shook her head. "Not even Barry spying."

"You're wrong, Miss Olivia!" Cort appeared greatly distressed. "I had just awakened from a light doze in my room and walked to the window. I—I had no alternative, but to tell that I saw you."

Horne gave me a complacent glance. I read his thoughts. Maybe he was right, and Olivia Rance and her sweetheart the guilty parties, but I kept an open mind—yet.

"You could have included the disposal of your uncle, before he changed his will, in your plans!" Horne's voice held a steely edge now. "His threat to disinherit you provides a strong motive. Where does Pitton live?"

Olivia's composure deserted her. Her dark eyes widened in swift fear. Her lips moved soundlessly. But it was all over in an instant and she had re-

gained control. She eyed Horne defiantly and muttered an address across town.

Horne thumbed Duffy. "Have him picked up for questioning."

THE girl's eyes followed Duffy to the phone. She smiled mirthlessly. "If you're looking for motives," she said softly, "you'll find plenty, won't he, Adams?"

The little gardener jiggled his Adam's apple a couple of times. "Don't know what you mean," he murmured nervously.

"They all hate Uncle Cecil," Olivia informed Horne in a brittle voice. "An autocrat with an inferiority complex, he bolsters his ego by bullying people who daren't talk back. Today was a field day. Only Barry and the two maids escaped."

I thought Winram was going to throw a fit. "My method of disciplining the servants isn't under discussion," he croaked.

Horne wagged a reproving finger. "We gotta figure every angle, Mr. Winram." His blue eyes bored the girl again. "What happened today?"

She lit a cigarette with aggravating slowness, then:

"He started with Tomkins after breakfast," she said. "Oh, it's an everyday occurrence. He abuses them vilely and they take it because jobs are hard to find. Adams and Ollie came next before lunch. This afternoon I received an ultimatum. Roebuck's on a week's probation from today. And poor Miss Hagen—quite happy, he said. He forgot to mention he drove her upstairs early this evening in tears over some trivial matter. I guess she couldn't take it any longer." She pointed her cigarette at Adams. "Tell the police what I overheard you say to Roebuck tonight. 'I'd like to choke the old devil!' wasn't it?"

The gardener wriggled uncomfortably. "Don't always mean things we say when we're mad," he defended weakly.

Olivia's answering laugh didn't sound nice.

The medical examiner's arrival brought an interlude. Sending Duffy upstairs with the doctor, Horne went to work again. The two frightened maids were quickly disposed of and dismissed. They slept in the same room, had played Chinese checkers before going to bed at ten.

Adams and the chauffeur, both fully dressed, claimed to have been in Roebuck's room all evening discussing the war until Tompkins routed them out to come downstairs. According to his story, the butler had locked up and retired immediately after his master went upstairs. Barry Cort, engaged in checking accounts in his room, had fallen into a light sleep during the process.

I didn't give a tinker's damn who was responsible for the attempt upon Winram's life by the time Ollie got through explaining he had visited a show downtown—it being his night off—returning only a few minutes before our arrival and admitting himself through the servants' entrance with a key.

I wanted to know more about *Miss Hagen*. A burning curiosity why she had treasured in her Bible the photo of a youth inscribed *To Mother* consumed me!

In an aside to Tompkins, I suggested that coffee would be welcome. The butler agreed, obtained Horne's permission to adjourn to the kitchen. I trailed him casually.

"Quite a happy little family," I said, watching him prepare the coffee.

"The master is a little—difficult at times, sir," he admitted, his wrinkled face sad. "But it isn't so bad as Miss

Olivia makes out. You see, we understand that he doesn't mean all the things he says."

"Apparently Miss Hagen didn't feel that way," I threw out.

Tompkins looked at me, a puzzled light in his faded eyes. "It wasn't that, I'm certain," he said earnestly. "I am at a loss to understand why she did it. She usually cried a little after one of his outbursts, but on the whole, she really seemed contented."

I munched at a biscuit and inquired, "Had she been with Winram long?"

Tompkins' scant brows lifted in concentration. "More than twenty-five years," he replied after a few moments. "She was here when I came in 'sixteen."

I nodded approvingly. If the inscription on the photo was addressed to her, Tompkins would know something of the youth.

"Was there ever any—shall we say—scandal connected with her during that time?" I murmured.

HIS eyes reproved me. "She's dead," he said quietly. "We all respected her."

"But wasn't there a son, about twenty-one years ago?" I persisted.

"Good gracious, no, sir!" Shock lengthened the butler's gaunt features. "Never anything like that—" His voice died abruptly. He stood staring at me, his mouth agape. "Good gracious!" he said again, thinly.

I whipped out a notebook and pencil. "Withholding evidence," I stated sternly before he could gather his wits, "in an attempted murder and a suicide, Tompkins—*umm-m*, pretty serious. Now, let's have it." I prayed Horne wouldn't tramp in and ruin things.

It came reluctantly. "There—there was some talk during my first few months that she was—well—friendly with the master. He, Mr. Winram, never married. She was away a whole year,

the armistice year, visiting friends down south, we understood. What might have happened during that year, I can't say."

"Ever see this lad?" I showed him the picture.

He studied it for a few moments and the lines in his old face softened. "No," he said gently, "I never saw him."

I nodded and helped myself to another biscuit. I was thinking that Miss Hagen's death would be an awful shock to the kid. If he was her kid!

Howe and Duffy were waiting for the morgue wagon when we returned to the library. His job upstairs finished, the M. E. was giving Winram some advice regarding his throat before he departed. Olivia Rance was aimlessly reading a magazine and chain-smoking cigarettes. Evidently lost in thought, Barry Cort sat near the long table, his fingers beating a monotonous *tap-tap* on its polished surface. The other servants were absent, dismissed, I judged correctly.

Winram claimed the butler, kept him busy applying compresses to his throat and growling incessantly throughout the process.

I turned in the story without any mention of the kid's picture, or my suspicions. I wanted to be sure first, and that meant persuading Winram to talk.

The morgue wagon came and took away Miss Hagen's body. Before he left, Horne phoned headquarters for word of Pitton. He hadn't enough to take Olivia Rance in for further questioning. I could see it disagreed with him. I grinned. It wasn't my headache. I had a better story in view—I hoped.

The lieutenant was scowling darkly when he hung up.

"Pitton hasn't returned home yet," he informed Olivia in a surly tone. "We'll have him by morning and check up on your story. You're staying here, Duffy, and—" he glared at the girl

"—see that no one phones Pitton before we pick him up."

Olivia shrugged and sauntered out.

"Why not take every precaution, Mr. Winram," I suggested softly while Horne gave the sergeant his final instructions, "and have someone stay in your room for the rest of the night?"

The man's round face brightened. "An excellent idea." He glanced at Cort. That worthy favored me with an angry look.

It disappeared when I said, "Cort needs his sleep. I'm used to night work. I'll stay."

Winram hesitated then nodded assent.

Horne eyed me suspiciously when I told him I intended remaining, but he made no objection. "Once we grab Pitton," he informed me confidentially, "he'll sing."

Tompkins followed him out, paused in the doorway to announce, "You will find coffee in the kitchen, sergeant."

TEN minutes later, quietness had claimed the house. Duffy was parked on a chair in the big hall downstairs within easy distance of the kitchen—and the coffee. Young Cort had helped me fix a spare bed in Winram's room and left with a brief "goodnight!"

Maybe, I thought, watching Winram wriggle out of the gray pants, the old guy will bounce me when he learns what I'm after. But I had to take that chance if I wanted the story. And want it I did. Most of the Park Avenue dames would rather eat scandal than grapefruit for breakfast. I was wishing I could get a picture of Winram. Little fat men like him shouldn't wear tight py-jamas.

Well, here goes, I decided, and cleared my throat. "Of course, you will be notifying Miss Hagen's son?" I sprang on him.

He sat on the edge of the bed and

just looked at me for a few seconds. His plump face seemed to shrink. "What do you know about Anne's son?" he whispered after the slight pause.

Something in his eyes gave me a bad touch of the conscience no good news-hawk can afford to own. I didn't want to, but I thought of what the publicity could do to Anne Hagen's kid. I swore silently. To hell with the story!

"Forget it!" I snapped brusquely. "It's none of my damn business, anyhow." I bent to unlace my shoes.

He didn't seem to be listening. "I don't know how you learned about—him," he muttered, "but that doesn't matter. Olivia was right. I drove Anne too hard. But I never dreamed she would—" He shivered and sat staring down at the floor.

I left my shoes on and lit a cigarette, regretting the impulse that had prompted me to open the dead woman's Bible.

"She was never the same after I told her he was dead." Winram's low monotone broke a painful pause. He got up and padded across the floor. He sat on the bed beside me and smiled wistfully. "You don't mind—it's a relief to talk about it—now she's dead."

I nodded without looking at him directly. If I'd been pressing him to talk he'd have shut up like a clam. "Sure, talking does you good, sometimes," I told him.

He shook a cigarette from my pack and I lit it from my own. "I arranged for the baby's adoption by a middle-class family," he went on. "Anne never knew who they were, that was part of our bargain, she must never see the boy or attempt to learn the name he was going under."

I smiled grimly, thinking of the picture in my pocket. Anne Hagen had proved smarter than he figured, had been in contact with her son for several years, unknown to Winram.

"Until he was seven, I visited him once a year," the little fat man was saying. "Then, for no particular reason, I stopped going, didn't see him again for nearly fourteen years right after the accident."

"His foster parents died in a car smash over a year ago. Their own boy, Brant, around my son's age, was killed with them."

"How did your son escape?" I inquired curiously.

"He hadn't accompanied them on the trip," Winram explained. "I flew down when I heard the news, introduced myself as an old friend of the boy's supposed parents. I brought him back to the city with me, found him a good job and he is, I'm quite sure, contented. Naturally, he believes that his real mother, father and brother all died in the accident. Anne had been worrying me to openly acknowledge the boy on his twenty-first birthday. To quiet her on the subject, I told her of the accident everything; only I said the boy who died was—our son. I didn't tell her I had brought the other boy to the city."

My face must have reflected my thoughts because Winram suddenly looked ashamed.

"Oh, I've realized since it was a wicked thing to do," he muttered. "But I wasn't throwing the boy over completely. I've taken care of him adequately in my will." He touched my knee.

"This—you won't publish what I've told you?"

I shook my head. He looked so pathetically unhappy I sat there and let him ramble on for nearly half an hour, mostly about Anne Hagen and himself, before I suggested he roll into bed. I walked over and flung open the window to clear the room of smoke. Between us, we had emptied my pack of cigarettes.

WINRAM waddled across the room, stopped by the big fireplace. I watched him press a spot on the left-hand side. A two-foot section of the ornate tiling swung out, revealed a small modern safe. He fumbled with the dial for a few seconds and presently came back holding a long unsealed envelope.

He withdrew two stiff sheets of paper, gave them to me. "A copy of my will," he explained. "I want you to know I'm telling the truth."

Rapidly digesting the contents of the will, I whistled softly. Winram hadn't lied. A substantial sum bequeathed to Olivia Rance and the servants' legacies left the bulk of Winram's fortune—almost a million dollars—to Anne Hagen's kid.

But the paragraph stating the youth's present name and whereabouts didn't make sense. Puzzled, I reread it, started to speak, then stiffened abruptly. A faint rustling outside the door caught my ear. The noise came again and the doorknob shook slightly.

Winram had heard it, too. His fat jowls quivered.

"He's back again!" he whispered.

Handing him the will, I made a swift motion for silence and moved noiselessly to the door. A sharp twist turned the key. But the corridor was empty when I stepped outside. A faint grayness came up from where Duffy sat.

Someone was moving stealthily down there. I grinned suddenly. The sergeant, of course. I pushed Winram back into the room.

"Relax. Duffy on a check-up prowl," I explained softly. "Merely tried the door in passing. Go to bed. I'll have a word with him before I hit the hay." I closed the door.

Duffy wasn't in sight when I descended the stairs but the library door was open. I strode inside. The room was empty like the big hallway and cold air streamed through an open window.

I approached the window and stared outside. A pale quarter moon painted a weak glow over the grounds and something stirred in a patch of tree shadows beyond the lawn while I watched. A second later, Olivia Rance moved onto the lawn. I stepped outside. She came toward me, her face darkening.

"Another snooper!" she snapped.

I grinned and inquired bluntly, "What are you doing out?"

"It's none of your business," she informed me coldly, "I—I couldn't sleep.

"Wouldn't be Pitton again?" I murmured. "You'll probably finish the night at headquarters if Duffy finds you out here."

She shrugged. "It's no crime to be—" She broke off short, her eyes lifting over my shoulder to the house. "Did you hear that?"

I nodded and whirled. The noise could have been a table crashing, splintering glassware. Olivia Rance was staring up at Winram's open window. "Sounded like Uncle's room," she said.

SHE was close behind me when I raced back into the house. On the second floor a quick thrust opened Winram's door and I stopped inside. The little fat man sprawled on the floor like a floating porpoise. A small table lay overturned in a pool of water from the broken carafe.

I knelt beside Winram and Olivia Rance said, "Oh!" I felt her weight on my shoulder and thought she had fainted. But she straightened. Winram's face wasn't nice to look at. The killer's hands had finished the job this time. I stood up, pushed the girl before me into the corridor and closed the door.

I spotted Tompkins on the rear stairs leading from the third floor, his thin lips working nervously. Behind him, Adams gripped a belt in his right hand, its heavy buckle-end swinging.

"Something wrong, sir?" the butler quavered. "I—I heard a noise."

"Your master's dead!" I said briefly. "Get the other servants. You, Adams, find the sergeant." I turned to the girl. "Which is Cort's room?"

She pointed out a door at the end of the corridor. Barry Cort opened it after I had rapped loudly, twice. "What is it?" He stared at me, fixing his big glasses with fumbling fingers.

"The killer returned, strangled Winram this time!" I snapped, worried at Duffy's absence.

Stunned amazement widened Cort's eyes. He pumped in air like a dying fish. "But—I—I thought you were with him," he spluttered.

I didn't answer because Adams came up the rear stairs. He looked scared.

"The sergeant!" he blurted. "Slumped on a chair in the kitchen! Looks like he's doped!"

I swore softly. The killer or an accomplice—I scowled at Olivia Rance—had cleverly decoyed me from the room while the deed was done. It had to be someone Winram had known otherwise he would have cried out.

Tompkins and the other servants were gathered in the hall now. I sent the butler to work on Duffy and herded the rest downstairs into the library. I phoned Headquarters. Horne was cursing fluently when I hung up. I missed Barry Cort and Adams.

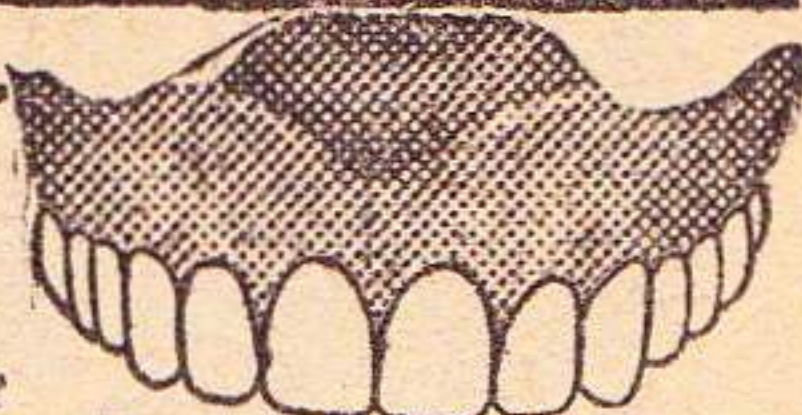
They came in through the open window before I could ask questions. The medium-sized chap in their grip had a young face and worried eyes.

"Saw him skulking among the trees," Cort explained. "Adams and I went after him. He is Pitton."

Pitton shook himself free. He looked uneasy but not frightened. "Olivia just left me when you came

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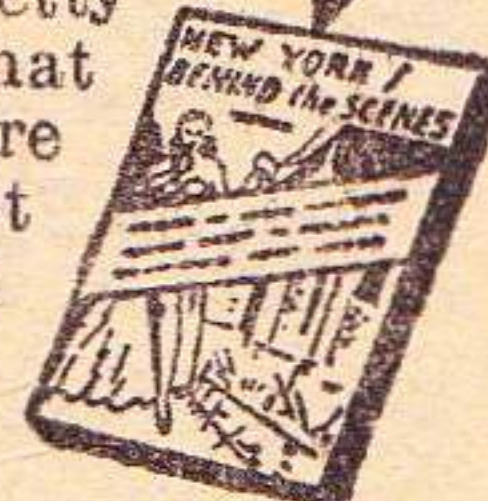
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out," he told me. "I saw you run into the house and waited, in case—"

"Better keep it for the cops," I growled. I'd suddenly remembered the question I had been going to ask Winram when the interruption came and it wasn't going to be easy figuring the answer by myself.

"They worked it slick!" Horne summed up half an hour later. Augmented by some of the Homicide Squad we were all crowded in Winram's bedroom. "She—" he nodded to Olivia Rance—"doped the coffee, waited until Duffy went to the kitchen for a drink and passed out, then admitted Pitton. She tricked you into going below, leaving a clear field for him to finish the job and beat it out the back way."

The little wheels churning inside my skull began to click. The result was something fantastic, but it supplied the answer to the puzzle.

Horne laughed harshly. "I'm arresting you both—"

"Better go slow," I warned Horne.

"Keep outa this!" The lieutenant's blue eyes sprayed fire. "I got the case cinched. We found the rubber gloves—her garden gloves—in Pitton's pocket. We've got the motive. Winram's threat to cut her out of his will. On that evidence, I'd arrest my own grandmother!"

"It's a frame-up!" Pitton shouted.

"Sure, it always it," Horne snarled.

"Take 'em away!"

"Wait!" I stabbed Horne with a lean finger. "Give me five minutes and I'll produce the real murderer!" My whisper only caught Horne's ear.

HE glared at me, chewed his underlip furiously for a couple of seconds, then nodded reluctantly.

I crossed to the fireplace and found the hidden spring. The safe disclosed, I turned to Cort. "You know the combination," I said, "open it!"

He glared at me. "This is irregular!" he protested. He made no move to comply until Horne repeated the order.

I shouldered him aside once the door swung open, reached in and removed the envelope containing the copy of Winram's will. As briefly as possible, I recounted what Winram had told me before he died.

"Do you," I asked Cort, "know the contents of this will?"

"Of course not!" he replied uneasily.

"What's this to do with the murder?"

Horne barked.

"Everything," I told him. "Cort's lying. He killed Winram!"

"You're mad!" Cort shouted.

I ignored him. "He's named in the will as Winram's illegitimate son, Barry Cort," I went on. "But his real name is Brant Cort, the son of the people who had charge of Barry. Winram, without knowing it, told Anne Hagen the truth. Their son was actually killed in the accident, not the Corts' boy. Brant Cort knew the story of Barry's parentage from some source, knew Winram hadn't seen the boy since he was seven and decided to impersonate the dead youth. The smash-up occurred several hundred miles from their home so there was no one to dispute Brant when he identified the bodies and made the switch. Winram brought him right back here as his son."

The stubborn line of Horne's jaw hardened. He started to speak but I hurried on:

"Later, finding this copy of Winram's will, he realized that he would be heir to nearly a million dollars upon the old man's death. But he couldn't wait for that to happen naturally and planned murder. His opportunity came today, following Olivia's quarrel with her uncle. Cort knew she was meeting Pitton in the garden at night after Winram retired. He stole the gloves, wore them when he made the first at-

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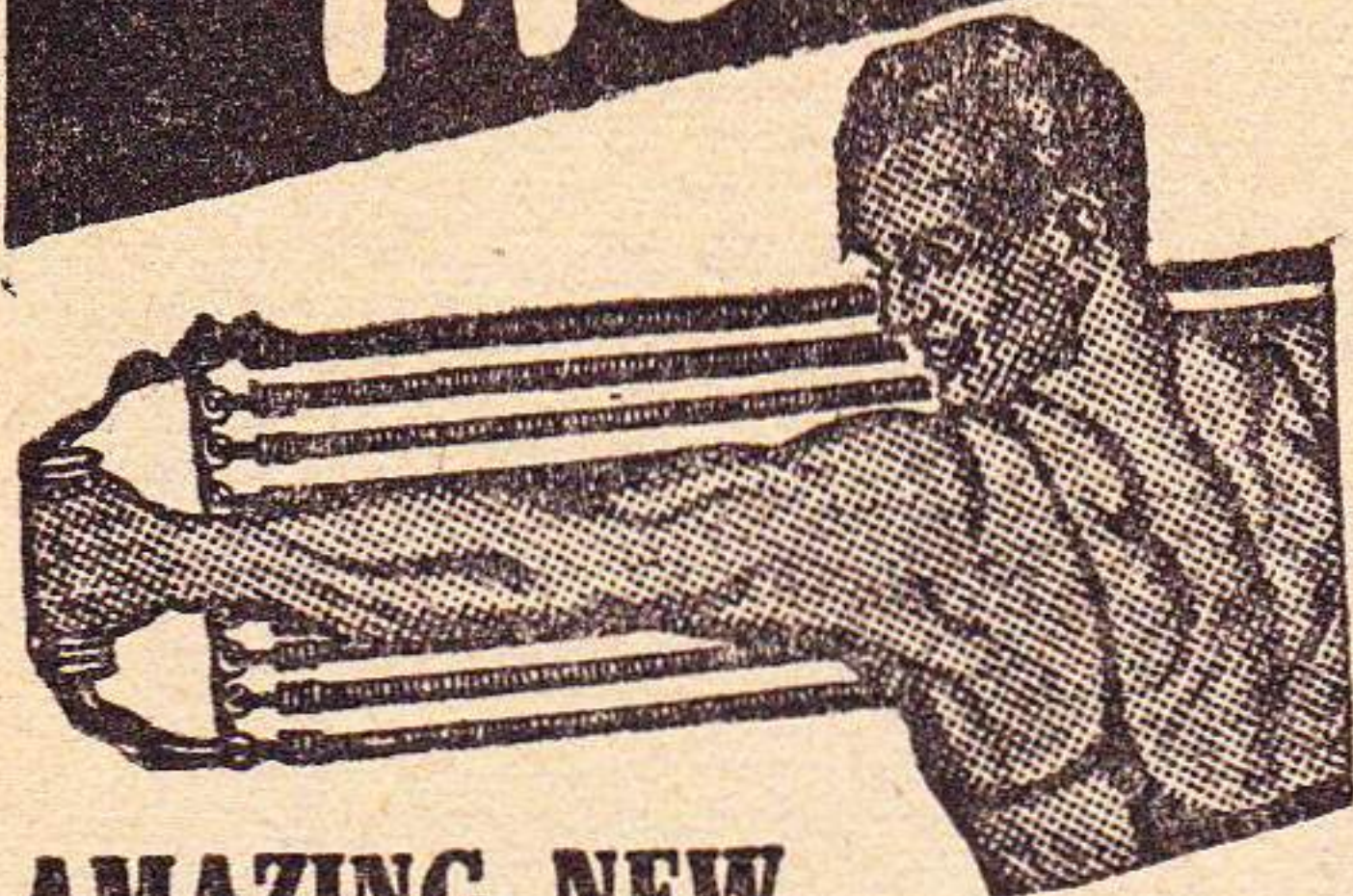
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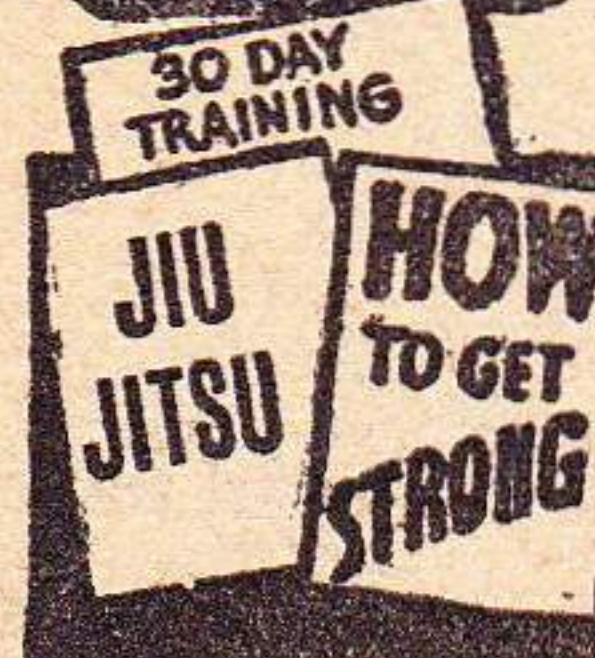
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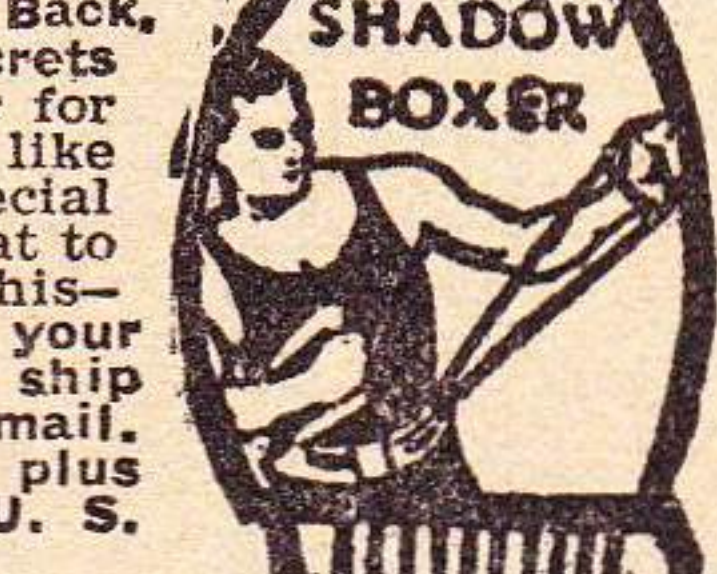
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tempt on Winram's life. He had no intention of killing the old man then, however. It was part of his plot to leave him alive and furnish the evidence against these two—the gloves! He, not Olivia, doped the coffee, brought me downstairs, then hid until I went out through the library window. Winram dead, he slipped back into his own room. It was an easy matter to drop the gloves into Pitton's pocket while they were bringing him in."

"Here's the real Barry," I said and handed Horne the picture I had taken from Anne Hagen's Bible. "Photographed four years ago. Cort knew Miss Hagen was in touch with Barry, but he didn't know she had a picture of her son. He slipped her an overdose of the sleeping tablets because she would have denounced him once the will was read."

"All theory." Cort smiled confidently. "None of it is proof I killed Winram!"

I grabbed his hands, held them exposed, showing the ink staining his fingers. "Some of this ink came off when he used his handkerchief tonight," I told Horne, "drawn by the dampness. An analysis will show more of it inside the gloves he wore when he strangled Winram!"

A wave of fury distorted Cort's owl-like features. A desperate wrench freed his hands from my grasp. He made a dive for the door. But Horne's foot reached out and he finished the dive on his face. He was handcuffed when they dragged him to his feet cursing me.

I smiled at Horne. I could see he was holding back a lot of words behind his teeth and I guessed they weren't all nice ones. I smiled again when I saw two sweating plainclothesmen hauling the still unconscious Duffy out like a common drunk after I'd phoned in the story. And I smiled a big, contented smile when I thought of those two sawbucks still reposing in my wallet.

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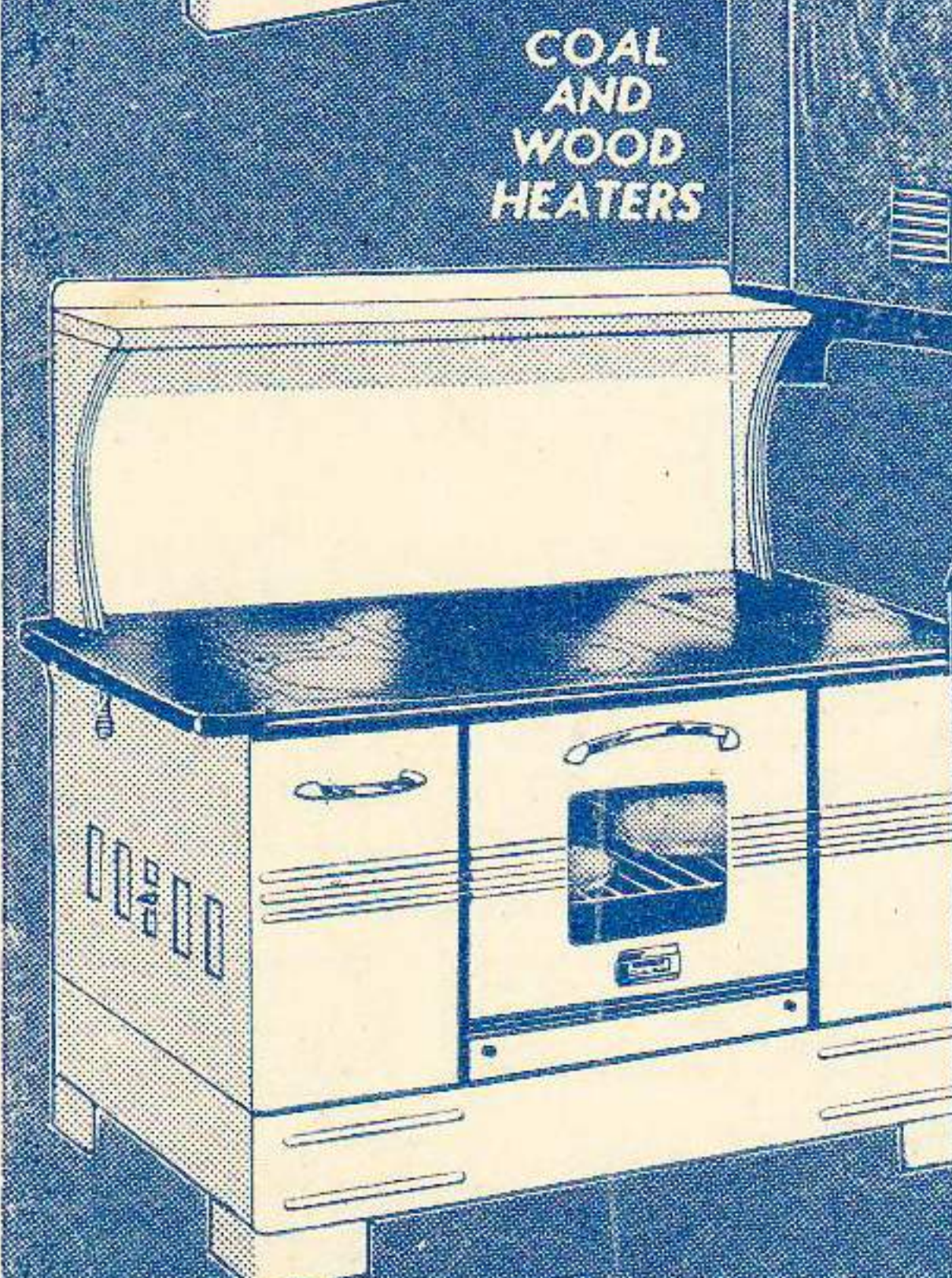
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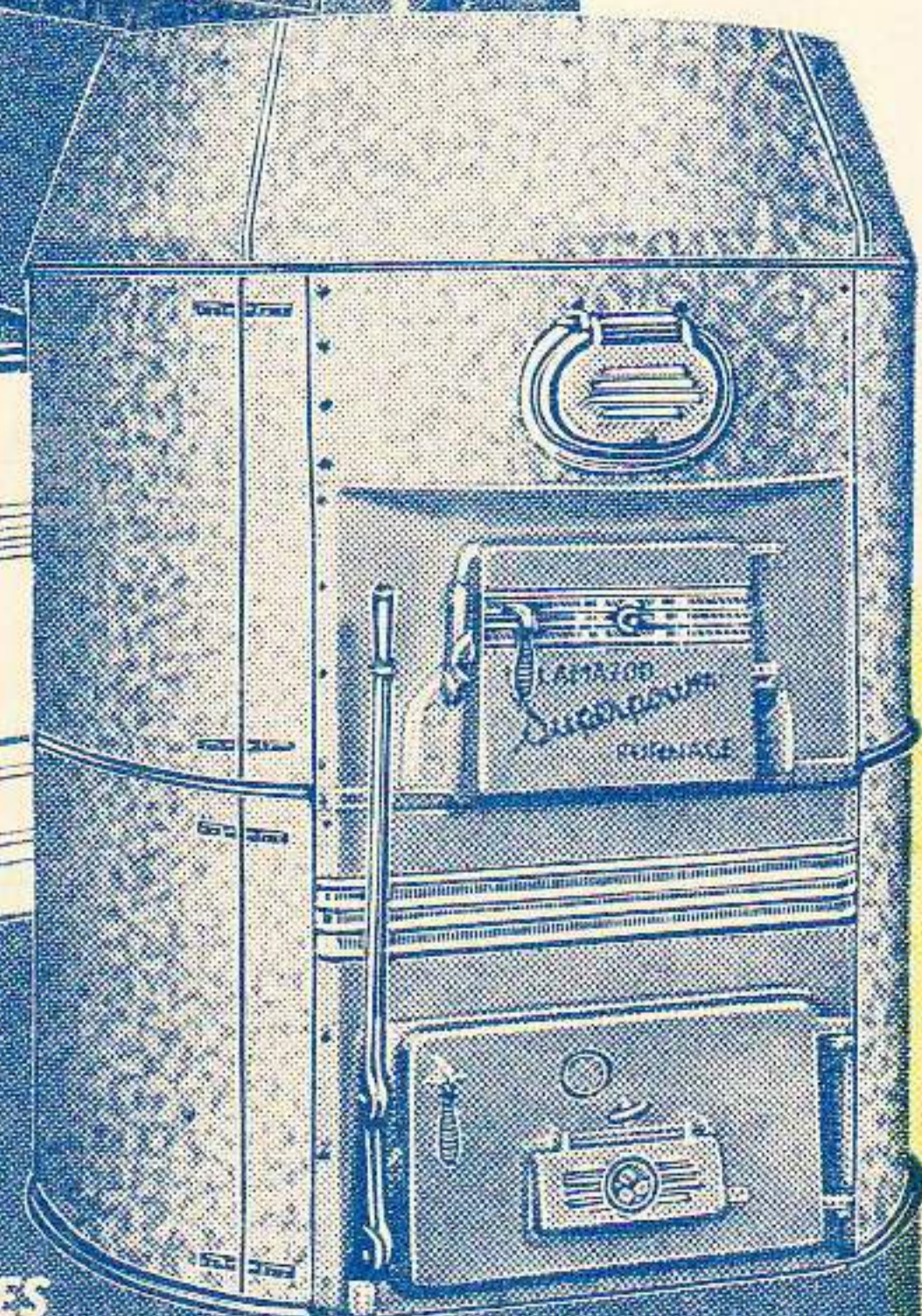


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