

*Street & Smith's*

# DETECTIVE

*Story Magazine*

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NOVEMBER

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STREET & SMITH'S

# DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

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Vol. V, No. 3 (British Edition)

November 1945

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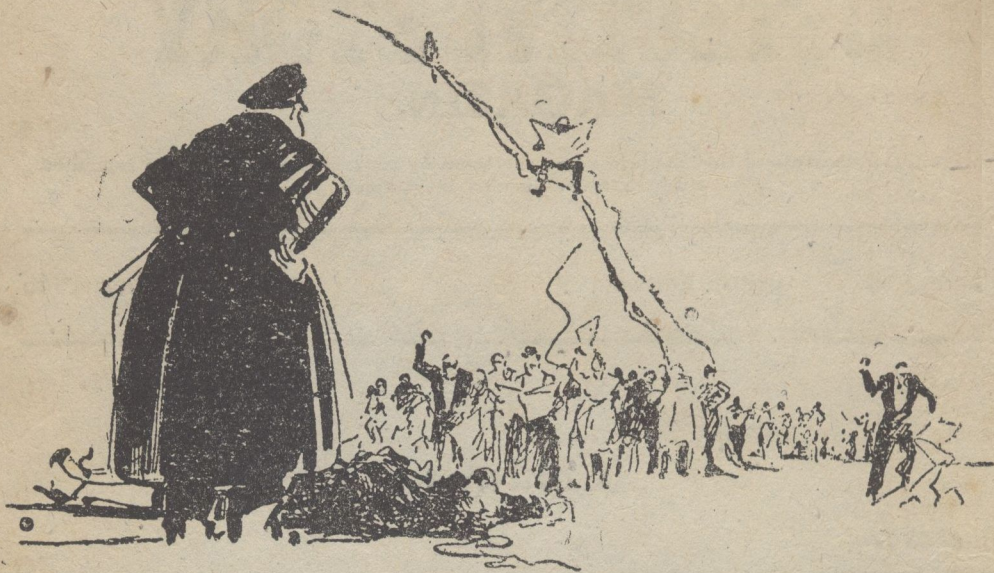
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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.





# AN ITEM OF MURDER

*A Novelette*

By A. BOYD CORRELL

*Too many people could cheerfully have killed Claudia Knight not to have one, at least, take advantage of the opportunity.*

## I.

It was quite a coincidence. Feet on the desk, I had the evening paper folded to the theatrical page and was reading Claudia Knight's gossip column, "Knight in Hollywood," when the phone rang.

I picked it up and said, "Jimmy Adams, private investigator."

A clipped, businesslike feminine voice answered. "This is Claudia Knight. How long will you be in your office?"

I looked at my wrist watch and saw it was five thirty. "Until six thirty at least, Miss Knight."

"I'll be over before then." She hung up.

I glanced around the office to see if it was in order, parked my feet back on the

desk, and continued reading "Knight in Hollywood."

Claudia was quite a celebrity. I knew more people would delight in cutting her throat than that of any other individual in the cinema capital. Her syndicated column was published in over five hundred newspapers throughout the country, and it carried weight. She didn't pull her punches. She could make or break a movie star by continuous plugging or nagging, and had done it a number of times.

Her ways of getting intimate gossip were not according to any book of etiquette, but she scooped her contemporaries consistently. She had a leg man named Tony Carlo who chased stories for her and ghosted her radio show. I'd known Tony before he went to



jail. He started out as a good newspaper reporter with a hobby for locks. He developed a knack for opening doors and other locked things that were not supposed to be opened except by their owners, and went into it professionally.

When they let him out of the pen, Claudia gave him a job. She had been on the same paper he had worked on, and she remembered his ability to write and hustle news. When they had worked together, she was just a sob-sister, but during the five years Tony was learning all about a jute mill, she was climbing to the top as a gossip columnist. So she was powerful enough to hire him and thumb her nose at anyone who criticized her for employing a jailbird as her ghost writer. I suspected that Tony's deft fingers accounted for a lot of juicy items which could not have been secured in the conventional way, but that's Hollywood. Anything you're not caught at is O.K., and only a sucker gets caught.

I noticed in the column that Claudia was still riding Janie Crews. Janie had come up from the extras to supporting rôles, and had recently finished the first picture in which she shared the billing with a star. She was going places, if left alone, but apparently Claudia was not going to leave her alone. For the past week she had been making subtle cracks about her, and now it was out and out vicious. Nothing you could pin down as applying to Janie, but nobody who followed the movies would doubt who was meant. The item read:

A lot of young men who are gaga about a certain "young" actress who has just reached stardom are probably in for a rude awakening when they realize her true age. She was seen yesterday at the Union Station meeting a boy of about fifteen and whisking him into her car before many could see her. We wonder if she's a divorcee and a mother?

Stuff like that can smack a coming actress into a row of B pictures and oblivion quicker than anything else. I tossed the paper aside and brought my feet to the floor as there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," I said.

Claudia Knight was a medium-sized person, somewhere in the late thirties. She was straight-backed and trim in a tailored suit of green, and her hair was as blond as a beauty shop could bleach it. Her head had a forward thrust as though she were straining to hear everything that was said, and

her eyes, too small even for her narrow, pointed face, had a hard glitter in their grayness. Her upper lip was too short to cover her teeth, which protruded slightly. She reminded me of a Walt Disney mouse with a yellow wig.

I said, "Good afternoon, Miss Knight. Have a chair," and pushed one forward.

She ignored it as her gaze swept the room. She spotted my license on the wall and went over to read it. She had a stride like a man's, with no sway to the hips. Standing with arms akimbo and feet spread apart, she looked as hard as some of the things she wrote in her column.

At last she turned her inspection on me and, apparently satisfied, asked, "Are you any good at following people without being seen?"

I said, "I haven't received any complaints."

"Good!" She stuck a cigarette between her teeth and raked a match across her thumbnail. As she closed her lips to draw on it, I noticed the effort pulled the tip of her nose down. "You know Tony Carlo?"

"Your Man Friday? Sure, I know him."

She squinted her eye against the smoke. "We'll skip the Man Friday stuff. I want him shadowed. I've a suspicion that rat is selling me down the river. Do you also know Jerry Tuttle?"

I shook my head. "Not personally. I know he's got a gossip column in the *Morning Journal* called 'Tuttle Tattles,' or something like that."

She nodded and her little gray eyes looked mean. "That's him, the louse! And if you've been following his dirt, you'll know he's been taking a few cracks at me." She snuffed out her freshly lighted cigarette on the underside of the desk and tossed it into a wastepaper basket. "Jerry Tuttle has been scooping me on some of my own stories. I send Tony out to get an exclusive piece of news and he comes back and says he can't get it. Yet the next day Jerry has it in his column." She got up and paced back and forth a few times. "If that crooked jailbird I pulled out of the gutter is selling my stories to Jerry Tuttle, so help me, I'll kill him!"

"So," I said, "you want me to follow him and find out if he is. And if so"—I grinned at her—"you'll kill him."

The little gray eyes squinted. "Don't be funny. You're not very good at it. What I want is a report on every place Tony goes. If he visits the *Journal* office or meets Tuttle



anywhere, I want to know about it. But"—here she waved a hand and dropped her voice to a casualness that was a little bit too casual—"if he visits anyone else, I want to know about that, too."

"Oh! Oh!" I thought. "Something smells." The gossip I'd heard about Tony and Claudia was just opposite to the way she talked about him. I'd heard that, back in his newspaper days before he tried to unlock his way to a fortune, she had made passes at him. It was also rumored that she carried the torch for five years and that was the reason she put him on her pay roll.

I told her, "O.K. When do we start?"

Claudia looked at her watch. "It's six fifteen now. Be in front of my office at seven. I'm sending Tony out for a story then. You can pick up his car—it's a black coupé—and he's supposed to go straight to Panamint Studios. Max Smiley, a producer out there, promised me an item." She glanced at her watch again. "Damn!" she said, heading for the door. "George is broadcasting at six thirty and I want to hear him."

I automatically asked, "George?"

"Yes, George Sanders, my nephew. He's a substitute announcer this week at KZO. Don't forget, pick up Tony at seven. He should be through by nine and you can report to me at my office then. I'll be working late."

She left, and I went out for a quick bite to eat. The *Morning Journal* was on the streets and I bought one to read while I ate. At a serve-yourself restaurant a block from my office, I picked up a Swiss steak with mashed potatoes, found a table, and turned to Tuttle's column, "Tuttle Tattles."

Halfway down was an interesting item. It read:

What lady journalist is going to buy a run-down radio station and probably lose her shirt within six months just so her favorite nephew will have a permanent job? This philanthropy is overshadowed by her viciousness in such things as trying to wreck the career of a coming young actress merely because the latter is friendly with the L. J.'s boy friend.

I stopped chewing a hunk of steak and read the item again. It was evidently aimed at my client. Tuttle was really going out of his way to make it nasty. I recalled what she had said about wanting to hear George, which tied in with the radio station angle, and the "coming young actress" fitted Janie Crews like a glove.

A clock on the wall showed five minutes to seven. I walked out, got into my coupé, and drove east on Hollywood Boulevard. At Vine I turned right and parked halfway down the block. Across the street, a few doors down, was the building in which Claudia had her office on the third floor. In front was a black coupé. I lighted a cigarette and waited.

At five after seven Tony came out. He headed south, with me tailing him. Instead of going straight up Sunset toward Santa Monica, he went two miles out of his way to Wilshire Boulevard where he turned west.

A few blocks out, he pulled up in front of a large apartment house which sat back from the street. I passed him, turned into a side street and parked. By the time I had walked to Wilshire, he was entering the front door. I gave him a couple of minutes, then went in. The long hall was deserted. Doors ranged on each side and I started checking the names on those on the left.

The first was the manager's and I skipped it. The second brass name plate holder had an engraved card in it: The name was Janie Crews. I heard footsteps on the stairs at the end of the hall and started walking for the front door. Outside, I ducked to the right and into a narrow alley which separated the apartment house from another just like it. A window of the second apartment was half open and I hunched beneath it. I could hear Tony talking.

"It was George Sanders who saw you," he was saying. "Claudia was merely making a wild guess."

A feminine voice came in, that of Janie Crews, I felt sure. She seemed bordering on hysterics and her voice was shrill. "But the records are there! She'll get them, and it'll be in her next broadcast. Tony, you've got to kill—"

A loud yell above me broke into Janie's words. "Police!" it screamed in a cackling falsetto. "Burglars! Police!"

I glanced up and saw a woman's white figure leaning halfway out of a window on the third floor of the building next door. She was pointing at me and yelling bloody murder. Her hair, in curl papers, stood out from her head like a fright wig.

I said several four-letter words, cut and ran toward the rear. It was the only thing to do. I ducked past two buildings and came out on the street where I had parked the coupé. I slid in and eased away with the



lights off, circled two blocks, came out on Wilshire Boulevard, and headed slowly toward the ocean. My guess was that Tony would leave in a hurry because of the disturbance, and would show up soon.

My guess was right. I had only traveled a short distance when the black coupé swished by me. I stepped up my speed, and this time Tony led me straight to the studios, where I parked in the shadows of a palm a block behind him.

He was hardly in the front building ten minutes. When he came out, he took the short route to Hollywood. At Beverly Hills he cut over to Sunset, and straight to Claudia's office. Except for reporting to her, my job for the night was done. I waited until he drove away, then took the elevator to the third floor.

Claudia got up as I went in. She stepped to the door, peered out into the corridor, then shot a large bolt into place. "Well," she asked, taking a seat at her desk.

I recounted Tony's movements in detail, all except the interrupted conversation under the window. I hadn't heard the last of the girl's words before that old gal stuck her head out the window and started yelling. Anyway, I didn't want to appear silly by being almost caught so easily.

Claudia had got up as I talked, and now she was pacing back and forth like a caged tiger. If ever I saw fury written on a woman's face, it was on hers now. When I finished talking she turned on me and almost spat.

"So that little so-and-so is trying to take him, eh? And this on top of Tuttle's lies!" She thrust out an arm and held her fingers like claws in front of her face. Slowly, she closed them. "So help me, I'll write a column that will blast Janie Crews out of Hollywood and get Tuttle blacklisted with every newspaper in the States!"

She forgot me then and slammed into a chair which faced a typewriter in one corner of the office. I asked, "Remember me? I'm the shamus that brought you the news. If you don't need me any more, I'll take a check and scam."

She didn't turn around. She hit the space bar of her typewriter a couple of times, then answered, "I might want you tomorrow. Come in about ten in the morning."

I said, "Adios," and went home to bed.

Next morning, I knocked on the frosted glass of Claudia's office. There was no

answer. I tried it again, but no luck, so I sat down on a bench in the hall. My watch showed ten o'clock.

I sat there for fifteen minutes, watching the elevator, but no Claudia. At last, I got fed up and went to the door to give it a final rattle before leaving. Then the elevator gate banged again, and I looked around and there was Tony.

He was a handsome man. Tall, slim hips, wide shoulders, dark Latin features, brown eyes and black hair. He wore a sports shirt with its collar tucked outside a light jacket. He looked at me a bit quizzically as he walked up. "Hi, Adams. Looking for Claudia?"

I nodded and thought fast. "Yeah. I thought she might fix me up a pass to one of the studios. I've a friend coming in from the East, and you know how they are—got to see where the movies are made."

"Easy," said Tony. "I can get you one myself." He was fiddling with a bunch of keys, picked one out, and inserted it in the lock. "Come on in."

He turned the key and pushed, but the door remained shut. He glanced at me, then rapped on the glass. "Funny!" he muttered "Maybe she's still asleep. She's got a one room apartment adjoining her office and sometimes spends the night here if she works late." He knelt down on one knee, put his hand through the letter drop to push up the flap, and shouted, "Hey, Claudia!" He peered through the slit. "Dear God!" he breathed, and jerked his hand from the opening. I saw his olive complexion blanch and his hand go to his mouth.

I dropped down beside him and looked through the mail drop. In front of the typewriter table, where I had left the columnist the night before, she lay on the carpet. Her eyes were staring right at me and her mouth hung open. Her whole head was surrounded by a pool of blood.

Tony was up and trying the key again, shaking the door so hard the glass rattled. I laid a hand on his arm.

"Hold it," I said. "This is a job for the cops. Better get them in on it from the beginning." I looked down the hall and saw a pay phone. I dialed the Hollywood station and asked for Detective-Lieutenant Carney, a big oaf of a guy I knew, who had worked Hollywood since it was an orange grove. He said he would be right over.

Tony didn't talk while we waited. He sat on the bench, white-faced and licking his lips, his uneasy gaze fixed on the door.



Carney arrived in record time. He didn't force the door right away. He went over the glass carefully but swiftly, checking the metal strips which held it in, then turned his attention to the letter slot. The slot was only about an inch and a half wide by eight inches long, and it was impossible to get your hand through it. At last he seemed satisfied. He took out his gun, tapped the lower left-hand corner of the glass sharply with the barrel, and a good-sized hunk dropped out. He reached through and shot the bolt which was holding the door.

## II.

CLAUDIA was dead all right. Her bleached hair at her right temple was badly burned from the shot, and beside her right hand was a small pearl-handled .32.

After looking at the body, I watched Tony. He stood as though about to be ill, staring at the dead columnist. Then his gaze shifted to the typewriter table where she had been working. Several sheets of paper lay alongside the machine and he reached for them.

"Hey!" It was Carney. He had looked up from his examination of the body and seen Tony fooling with the notes. He sprang up and knocked his hand away. "You got more sense than that!"

Tony rubbed his hand nervously. "I merely thought it was a suicide note."

Carney squinted at him. "How come you think she killed herself?"

Tony shrugged and swept an arm around the office. "Well, everything's locked. That's her gun—I've seen it scores of times in her desk drawer—and her hair's burned from the gun flash."

Carney said "Humph!" picked up the typewritten notes, and started checking the room. Three windows faced onto Vine Street. They were all securely fastened. A solid wooden door, which I guessed led into Claudia's one-room apartment, was bolted the same as the entrance. The transom above it was also bolted.

The lieutenant sat down in the desk chair and started reading the papers he had picked up. I watched him and heard him grunt a couple of times. Then he looked up sharply at Tony.

"You know a dame named Janie Crews?" he asked.

I saw Tony flush. He hesitated, nodded. "Yes, I do."

"She sure was poison to your boss. How come?"

Tony said, "Claudia didn't like a lot of people."

"Well, if this was Knight's column for tomorrow, it would have knocked this Janie Crews into the bleachers." He read further. "Hell's bells! Here's another one. Listen: 'The early history of a certain male keyhole columnist in this town would be of help to the FBI, if they are still interested in pulling together the few remaining loose strings that will write finish to the marijuana smuggling case that had the Mexican border hot 'way back in 1929.'"

He whistled, closed one eye and squinted at me. "Jimmy, I don't think this dame killed herself." He reached for the phone. "Gimme police headquarters. Homicide."

When he got through telephoning, he turned to us. "They want me to handle the case. They're sending up the M. E., a print man and a photographer." He glanced around the office again. "Until they come, I'm buttoning this place up, so you two can wait in the hall."

Tony said, "Look, lieutenant. The place was locked from the inside, the gun belonged to Claudia—"

Carney looked at him and a grin spread on his face. "An old key-and-lock man like you making such a crack!" He shook his head. "Hell, there are half a dozen ways of locking this room so it looks like suicide. Here—" He reached in a wastepaper basket and pulled out a piece of string. "Watch, professor!"

The lieutenant went to the door, looped the string over the bolt and threaded the two ends through the letter slot. Then, from the outside, he pulled the door shut.

I watched the string tighten, then pull the bolt into place. Carney dropped one end of the string and whipped it through the slit. When he came back in, he was thoughtfully winding it around his finger. "I just happen to remember," he said, "reading a column called 'Tuttle Tattles' in the *Journal*. Some junk about a lady columnist's boy friend and a movie actress." His eyes narrowed as he stared at Tony. "You just said you know Janie Crews. You didn't, by any chance, come up here last night and bump off Miss Knight, did you?"

Tony's face was impassive, though his lips were white. "No," he answered.

"Because if Tuttle was talking about you, you've got a swell motive."



"Listen," said Tony, "if you're hunting motives, I can give you the names of fifty people who would delight in putting a bullet through Claudia's head, if they could get away with it. However, you don't arrest people for having motives. You arrest them on evidence."

"Yeah," Carney answered, still squinting. "But motives lead to suspicion, suspicion causes investigation, and investigation gets evidence. What time did you last see Miss Knight?"

"About nine last night."

"I suppose you can account for your time between then and ten o'clock this morning?"

For a moment I saw panic in Tony's eyes. "I—I—Yes. What the hell! Are you accusing me of murdering Claudia?"

Carney smiled crookedly. "Huh-uh. I'm not that silly. I'm waiting until the medical examiner tells me about what time she died, then you're telling me where you were at that time." He waved us into the hall. "Wait out there. I'm going to look around some more."

In the corridor, Tony pulled me down beside him on the bench. He was nervously wetting his lips with his tongue.

"Adams," he said, "I'm hiring you right now to find out who killed Claudia, if she didn't do it herself. Otherwise, I'm a dead pigeon. Look at the setup for the police! Me, a jailbird with a record for monkey business with locks. Tuttle was talking in his damned column about me and Janie Crews, and it'll be easy to prove as soon as they contact him. On top of that, Claudia was as jealous of me as the devil is of his sinners. That's why she was attacking Janie in her column. And, to make everything perfect, I can't tell 'em where I was last night."

I observed, "A sweet handicap you're saddling the job with. I'll take it on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you answer all my questions without reservation."

Tony nodded. "Of course."

I glanced into the office. Carney was opening the door to the apartment, and out of earshot. "First," I asked, "just what is the *status quo* of you and Janie Crews?"

That rang the bell. Tony's mouth closed and his jaw thrust out. "No," he answered, "I can't."

I said, "O.K., you damn fool," and started to get up. "Can't you get it through your

head that I'm not a columnist, and what you tell me is not for publication?"

Tony pulled me back. "Janie and I are married."

"That's better." I settled back on the bench. "Now, about this fifteen-year-old boy Tuttle spoke of. Is he your son?"

Tony shook his head. "No. We were married about six years ago, shortly before I went to jail. The boy is my kid brother. He was East with an uncle of mine—my parents are dead—but the uncle died and I sent for the kid. I was out on a story for Claudia when he arrived, and Janie met him for me. George Sanders happened to see her at the station and told Claudia about it. He's the one who tipped her off about seeing us together."

"Who's this George Sanders?" I asked.

"A nephew of Claudia's. He does some snooping for her, picks up stories when he can. However, he's got ambitions toward a radio career, and Claudia, who was nuts about him, was planning on buying Station KZO and putting him in charge."

"Think he might have bumped off his aunt?"

Tony shook his head emphatically. "Hell, no! She supported him, and, like I said, was going to buy a radio station for him."

"That's a heck of a big present for a nephew."

"Well," answered Tony, "Claudia would actually own it. She'd always talked about having a radio station of her own, and when she found she could buy KZO, all hell couldn't stop her. George was her only relative, and she was going to make him manager. It would have been a swell setup for the boy."

"All right," I said. "Let's get back to Janie. You married her and kept it quiet. How come?"

"Janie was working in a night club that wouldn't allow married women in their show," he explained. "She made me promise to keep it secret until I was making enough to support us both comfortably."

"So you tried to hurry it along by your little excursion into housebreaking?"

Tony nodded and flushed. "I was a damn fool, but I loved her and wanted to give her everything. After I went to jail, naturally she didn't tell about being married, and after I was out, she had a good start in the movies. If it got around that she was the wife of an ex-convict, it would have ruined her chances, so we've kept it quiet. I've



still got to keep it quiet for that reason." I was with her last night."

"So that knocks you out of an alibi as to where you were," I said.

Tony nodded and got up. He paced back and forth a couple of times. "Think you can do anything?" he asked.

I said, "One more question. Last night, just before a woman started yelling for the police, what was Janie talking about when she said, 'You've got to kill—'?"

Tony swung around on me. "How the devil did you know about that?"

I grinned. "Go on, answer the question."

Just then the elevator door clanged and three men got out. They came straight to the office. I figured them for the medical examiner and a print man. The third was obviously a police photographer, as he carried a camera case and tripod.

Carney met them at the door, and I called him aside. "I've got other business. If you want me, you know where to find me. I'm scrambling. O.K.?"

"Yeah," said the lieutenant, "but I want to keep your playmate here for a while." He nodded toward Tony.

I told him, "All right, but don't stick your neck out by arresting him without plenty of evidence. Remember, Claudia Knight was one of Hollywood's most eligible murder-victims."

I got into the coupé and drove to the *Journal* office in downtown Los Angeles. On the second floor a cute blonde at a switchboard pointed out Tuttle for me. He had a glassed-in cubbyhole. I could see a young man in there talking with him, so I took a seat at an empty desk until the visitor left.

Tuttle was florid-faced. Short, sparse blond hair shot up from his skull like needles in a pin cushion. He seemed to have no neck, just a pivot on which his perfectly round head connected with hunched, fat shoulders. He waved me to a chair.

I said, "My name's Adams. I want to talk to you about Claudia Knight."

He glared at me. "Yeah?"

I nodded and smiled. "Yeah. She seems to think you know something about some Mexican marijuana, vintage 1929."

Tuttle's round face started getting red. The flush climbed into his forehead and scalp, making his blond hairs look almost white. He pushed slowly against his desk and got up. A fat finger whipped under my

nose and stayed there shaking. "If that dirty, blackmailing, filth-peddling parasite of yellow journalism prints that about me, I'll sue her every damn cent she and her lousy papers have got!" His roar rattled the glass partitions of his office. Outside, I could see workers looking up at us from their desks.

I held up a placating hand. "Take it easy and be more respectful. The dame is dead."

Tuttle's wagging finger slowed up, then dropped to his side. "Dead? Claudia Knight dead?" His voice was unbelieving.

I said, "Uh-huh. And you're involved." I told him what Claudia had written about the marijuana.

"Hell!" he ejaculated. "I'm clear on that. I was working on a San Diego paper then and my car was stolen. It was caught on the border, loaded with marijuana. Claudia is just stirring up the old fire to give me some bad publicity. She and I have been feuding for three years. The *Journal* doesn't condone her type of journalism."

"She told me yesterday she suspected you of bribing Tony to slip you some of her exclusive stories," I said.

Tuttle chuckled, then broke into a guffaw. "Did you see the young fellow who was here when you arrived? Well, he's the source of some of her exclusive stories I've published. He's her nephew, George Sanders."

"You mean he's been double-crossing his aunt?"

"I wouldn't call it that," said Tuttle. "He was a free-lance tipster. Of course, I'd agreed not to let Claudia know he sold me items. You probably knew she was going to buy him a radio station. That's what he was in about a short while ago."

"The radio station?" I didn't get it.

"Yeah. You see, part of my payment to him was going to be publicity I would give his station, once he had it. He told me just now that Claudia had completed arrangements for buying it yesterday, and would swing the deal next week. He was really on top of the world today and everything was rosy, although I told him the station cost a fortune to run, hadn't been a paying business, and that his aunt would probably lose her skirt."

"He's in for a dose of smelling salts when he finds she's dead," I said. "Who owns the station?"

"A movie man out at Panamint Studios, named Max Smiley. I know him personally, and he told me it took everything he made to keep the station going."



A trip to see Max Smiley was the last assignment Tony had from Claudia before she was murdered. The radio station deal gave a new angle to the case and I began to see a light.

I leaned toward Tuttle confidentially. "Listen, I've a hunch and you can help me. Incidentally, I can help you, too. This marijuana motive is going to put you over the jumps with the cops as soon as they get around to it. You willing to co-operate?"

"Sure," he said.

"O.K. Lend me your typewriter." I sat down, thought a moment, then typed out a paragraph and handed it to him. "Stick that in today's column. What time does the paper hit the streets tonight?"

Tuttle was studying what I had written. "Six o'clock," he said. "You sure about this? If you're not, I'm really sticking my neck out."

I was ready to leave. "Absolutely. Just make sure it appears."

I drove straight to the Hollywood police station and found Carney in his office, with a foot-high stack of newspapers in front of him.

I asked, "Any suspects?" and tossed my hat on a file cabinet.

Carney squinted at me. "You kiddin'? I was going to slap a murder charge on Tony, but the D. A. said 'no' after reading a few of that dame's columns. Jeeze!" He waved a hand at the pile of papers. "Judging by the mud she's slung, half the population of Hollywood would jump at the chance to kill her."

"Right," I said, "but I think I know who did it and I've just given him an invitation to make a personal appearance tonight." I explained briefly, then added, "Tip off Tony to turn in early. I'll meet you about eight thirty."

By nine o'clock, Carney and I had stowed ourselves in a clothes closet of the bedroom in Tony's apartment. We had left a slight crack in the door for ventilation, and made ourselves as comfortable as possible. It would probably be a long wait.

The *Journal*, which I had bought at six o'clock, had the death of Claudia splashed all over the front page. The press had made a mystery of it. "Murder or suicide?" was mentioned in almost every paragraph. However, I skipped through that in a hurry and turned to "Tuttle Tattles." The end of his column carried my contribution. It read:

It is rumored that a certain ex-convict has in his possession a paper which he is afraid to show to the police until the death of Claudia Knight is cleared up. The paper would make him heir to her estate, yet furnish an excellent motive for his murder of the columnist.

I admired Tuttle's nerve for printing it.

Carney sighed, and I could feel him shifting his gun to a more comfortable position. Then Tony came in. We heard him in the bath, and at last he snapped off the lights and went to bed.

The wait seemed endless and my muscles were cramped. I had squatted down with my knees under my chin, and I was almost asleep when I heard a slight noise at the apartment door. Carney grabbed my arm and squeezed it. I could feel his other arm easing toward his gun.

Through the crack in the door I saw the beam from a flashlight streak across the room, then settle on the sleeping face of Tony. A muffled voice said, "Get up!"

Tony muttered, then the bed springs rustled violently. "What . . . what the hell!"

"Shut up!" the muffled voice spoke again. "This gun in your stomach ain't a water pistol. I want that paper Tuttle mentioned in his column.

The bed rustled again and Tony exclaimed, "O.K.! Don't try to shove that gat through me. I've got to get up to get it. Wait, I'll turn on the light."

There was a sharp report as of something hard connecting with flesh, and Tony cursed.

"Touch that light again," said the muffled voice, "and it won't be a tap on the head. It'll be a slug. Now get up and get that paper."

Carney was easing the closet door open. Silhouetted against the glow of the flashlight, I saw Tony climb from the bed, go toward the dresser and pull open a drawer. Behind him, barely outlined in the darkness, stood a man. In one hand was a flashlight, in the other he held a gun aimed at Tony's back. Carney's arm snaked out, tripped the switch on the wall, and the apartment was flooded with light. The prowler swung around as we charged out. His gun was swinging in an arc to aim at Carney when the lieutenant fired from his hip. The prowler stopped, put a hand to his stomach, and slipped to the floor. Tony reached down and jerked off a handkerchief which masked his attacker's face. "George Sanders!" he yelled.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "But we had to pull him out into the open." I dropped down beside the youth as I heard Carney



jiggle the phone, then call headquarters for an ambulance.

Sanders was alive, but the trickle of blood that came from the corner of his mouth told me that an ambulance wasn't going to do much good. "You want to confess?" I asked him.

Mean little eyes squinted up at me. "You go to hell!" he whispered.

"O.K.," I said. "But you'll probably beat me there. Anyway, I'll confess for you. Correct me if I'm wrong." I lighted a cigarette and put it between his lips.

"First," I began, "you planned your aunt's murder quite some time ago, ever since she decided to buy Station KZO and make you manager. Your agreement with Tuttle, to give you publicity for the station in return for news items you swiped from Claudia, was merely a blind to make him think you really wanted the station. You wanted it to look like you'd be the last one who would wish your aunt's death."

I looked up at Tony, who had got a wet towel and was holding it to his head where Sanders had hit him with the gun. "I'll confess I thought you had done it at first," I told him. "Then my suspicion went to Tuttle. But, after reading Claudia's last unpublished column, I knew neither of you would be foolish enough to leave such a motive for the police to find. Either of you would have destroyed it."

"So," I continued, "I looked for another motive. I found it in the radio station purchase. George Sanders, working there as a substitute announcer, was in a position to know the bad financial condition it was in. Tuttle told him whoever bought it would

probably go broke. Sanders was Claudia's only relative, and naturally her heir. If she bought the station, she would at least lose a great deal of her money—money Sanders expected to inherit. You told me, Tony, that when Claudia set her mind to something, all hell couldn't stop her. So, to keep her from buying, he killed her.

"That item I had Tuttle publish about Tony having another will was a lot of malarky, but you fell for it," I said to Sanders. "You already had committed murder to get your aunt's money, and you were not taking any chances on someone else getting it. Right?"

Sanders had been staring at me all the time I talked, but now his eyes were glazing. "Smart copper, aren't you?" he mumbled. Suddenly, a flow of blood gushed from his mouth.

Carney dropped to his knees beside him. "Is that the story?" he asked.

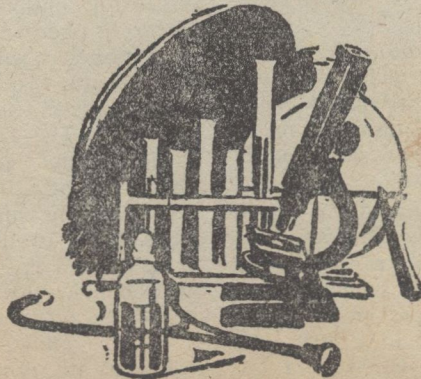
Sanders managed a bitter smile. "Yeah, He's right. And me, working for two columnists and knowing ninety percent of their eyewash is lies, was sucker enough to believe an item like that! Dear God, was I the prize dope!" His eyes closed.

"He's dead," said Carney.

I turned to Tony. "One thing more. What in hell was your wife saying when that woman yelled for the police?"

"She merely said I had to kill any rumor about our being married if it should start up. She'd said that before. She was also afraid Claudia might check and find the record of our marriage."

I sighed. "O.K. That buttons it up. I'll send you my bill in the morning."





# A GOOD PLACE FOR A MURDER

*A Novelette*

By M. V. HEBERDEN

*Strangely, the suggestion of how to dispose of the body came from the corpse itself.*

## I.

A TORRENTIAL downpour had converted the main plaza of Uruapan into a lake through which a car was splashing cautiously. It was the only moving thing in sight. The Mexicans, accustomed to their weather, had taken immediate and patient shelter in various doorways and halls and watched incuriously as the car, sending up geysers of water on either side, drew up in front of the Morales Hotel.

In the entrance to the hotel, half a dozen men were standing, looking damply chilly in shirts and overalls. They were the only people who evinced the slightest interest in the car. Their interest was commercial for they were the proprietors of horses, mules and cars. The arrival of a car meant tourists, tourists came to visit the volcano, and to visit the volcano, a driver was needed who could negotiate the road, and horses and mules were necessary for the last lap.

"Good grief! What a moth-eaten dump! And this is the best hotel in the place! Well, I suppose we'll have to put up with it. I really don't see why they can't build a few decent hotels." The speaker trailed two priceless platina foxes over one chair, a polo coat over another, stood a small dressing case on a table and somehow managed to occupy the whole lobby. Her remarks were presumably addressed to some companions so far invisible.

Having deposited her possessions over as wide an area as possible, she surveyed her surroundings with ever-deepening disgust, automatically smoothing the carefully blond hair which, with the equally careful make-up, did not disguise the fact that she was in her late forties. Her hard blue eyes alighted on the young man behind the desk. "You! D'you speak English? I'm Mrs. Masterson. You should have reservations—"

Two girls were struggling through the door, weighed down with baggage. The first one, whose blond discontent would one day become her mother's hard beauty-parlor mask, was saying, "Doesn't it ever stop raining in this benighted country?"

The second, who was dark, answered, "Judy, it is the rainy season, you know," in a tone in which exasperation struggled with a desire to make the best of things.

"Helen!" Mrs. Masterson spoke peremptorily. "Did you bring the hatbox? I told you not to let that idiot Alberto—"

"It's here, Aunt Margaret." The dark girl held up a hatbox.

"Where's Peter?" demanded Mrs. Masterson. "If he's going to trail around with us like a lovesick pup, he might make himself useful."

"Mother, he's helping Alberto with the bags," Judy defended the missing Peter.

In the meantime, the clerk had given some instructions to a couple of youths who seemed to be acting as bellboys. A pad was thrust in front of Mrs. Masterson for her to register. A fair, curly-headed young man ducked in, carrying two bags, followed by the chauffeur with four more. Finally, the party was conducted upstairs. Mrs. Masterson's voice floated down. "Helen, if you know where you packed the iron, you'll have time to press my blouse before dinner, and did you fix Judy's green slacks this morning before we left?" And Helen's voice replied from the landing, "No, but I'll do it now, Aunt Margaret."

The man who had been sitting in the lounge reading his paper, looked up as they passed his line of vision, moved irritably in the chair, took cigarettes from his pocket and lighted one. Tourists annoyed him. At least, tourists of that kind. It was all a very obvious setup. One wealthy woman and daughter, one poor relation and one hanger-



on. Rick Greer had seen the combination, or variations of it, too often before. He went back to his paper and read, without a great deal of interest, about a plan to pave some streets in Guanajuato and the progress of the campaign against illiteracy.

Greer was a war correspondent on vacation, the first one in more years than he liked to remember, and he had allowed an editor to talk him into coming down and doing an article on the Paracutin volcano and the changes it had brought in the neighborhood. He had protested that it wasn't news any more and that the doctors had ordered him to rest anyway, but the editor had said, "The volcano's acting up again now. And the boys I've got around would make it sound about as exciting as a damp squib. And think of the fun you can have in Mexico."

That morning he had watched the army trucks evacuating more of the Indians whose small farms had been slowly but relentlessly covered by the blighting volcanic ash, whose mud houses were being pushed over by the streams of lava. And the evacuees had reminded him of other refugees he had seen, in Ethiopia, then in Spain, in Greece and in France. With an angry determination to get the memory of suffering out of his mind, Rick turned back to his paper. He had read it from cover to cover. He started on the advertisements and was deriving considerable amusement from the cheerfully uninhibited medical notices wherein sundry doctors positively guaranteed, if you would come to their convenient and clean offices, to cure you with promptitude and secrecy of all the diseases which there was space enough to list. He had just reached a glowing description of how a given doctor had handled a particular case, when he was aware of a commotion going on upstairs. It hurtled downstairs and resolved itself into Mrs. Masterson at the head of her retinue. "It's gone! It isn't in any of our rooms. I put it down myself, here, on the table. Helen, why didn't you watch it? Sorry! It's no good being sorry now! Where's Alberto? Peter, find Alberto. He can talk to these people. Get the manager. Send for the police."

For the next half-hour there was pandemonium. It was amazing that one woman could create such an upheaval. The clerk called the manager. Peter called the chauffeur. Judy Masterson demanded that a long distance call be put in to the agency who had supplied the car and chauffeur.

The manager arrived and called the police. The chauffeur rushed to the garage and rushed back. Out of the bedlam, Rick gathered that the small dressing case that Mrs. Masterson had brought in herself had disappeared.

"Is there a United States consul here? I'll get in touch with the embassy," she declared. Somehow, she managed to convey that the ambassador, Congress, the U.S. army, navy and marines would come down and protest the loss of her dressing case. "There was a dark fellow in overalls standing right by it. I know he took it. I'm positive of it."

"I noticed him, but I didn't see him touch it," Peter defended the anonymous dark fellow vaguely.

"They're all thieves, these people. Is this a policeman? Does he speak English? He doesn't!" The last as if the fact that the Mexicans, not unreasonably, are quite satisfied if their police speak only Spanish, was a deliberate insult to her.

Rick Greer got up and sought the peace and quiet of his room. When he came downstairs sometime later, he asked the clerk what had happened.

"Manuel was arrested," the man told him.

"Manuel!" Rick stared. He had, after several futile attempts, finally arrived at a tentative friendliness with the boy who had seen his farm first covered with ash, then with lava. Manuel's family, which consisted of his widowed mother and five smaller children, had been evacuated to the somewhat haphazard settlement where the army took the refugees. Manuel had promptly taken them away and now they were lodged with a distant cousin, also a widow, who was poorer than themselves. "So you see, señor," he had explained, "it means that I must find support not only for my own, but for my cousin and her two children as well." This he was endeavoring to do by renting horses and mules to tourists.

Remembering the dark face, old for its years, stamped with the curious patience and endurance that seems to stamp the Indian faces, Rick shook his head. Manuel wasn't a thief. His considerable experience of human nature told Rick that with an instinct that was surer than reason. When he could muster up his Spanish, for the clerk always talked to him in Spanish, he asked how it had come about.

The señora had identified Manuel as the man she'd mentioned who'd been standing near the case. He had, in fact, she recalled



later, had it in his hand. The case had subsequently disappeared. It was simple. He had obviously stolen it.

"But that's no proof he took it," protested Rick.

The clerk shrugged his shoulders with the philosophical fortitude with which one faces other people's misfortunes. "What will you, señor?" The chauffeur spoke to the police chief. The chief likes to keep the favor of the travel agencies. The travel agencies like their customers to be satisfied."

The resigned cynicism with which the clerk explained it all, as if the American must be very stupid to need to have it explained, annoyed Rick. He went into the dining room in savage silence which mildly surprised the untidy waitress with whom he usually cracked bad Spanish jokes. The only other people in the dining room were the Wells Fargo party which had arrived earlier in the afternoon. A quiet little minister and his wife from Something Falls, Iowa, and a couple from Kansas with their fourteen-year-old son.

Rick propped a biography of Savonarola against the sugar castor and was annoyed that the castor was not up to the task of supporting the redoubtable Florentine friar. He pressed the bread basket into service and read. He was more than halfway through his meal when the Masterson entourage swept in. Nothing, of course, was right about the dining room. The tablecloth was damp, the chairs were uncomfortable, the decorations terrible, the waitress looked sloppy, the soup wasn't hot enough and, "Don't they ever have anything but steak in this country?" They'd have given up a whole batch of ration stamps at home for the tenderloin about which they complained.

Their complaints exhausted, they began to talk about the missing case, and Mrs. Masterson's broadcast, for it was more than a conversation, intervened between Rick and the struggles of Savonarola and Lorenzo de Medici.

"I thought the boy just wanted to help carrying things upstairs in the hope of a tip," Helen was saying. It was noticeable now that her clothes were much less expensive than mother's and daughter's.

"Probably that was the impression he wanted to create," said Judy wisely, "so that if he'd been caught then and there, he'd have had a good story."

"I've never seen a guiltier-looking loafer," declared Mrs. Masterson firmly. "I know

a guilty man when I see one. These people have got to learn that they can't get away with that kind of thing, not against Americans."

Rick wondered vaguely what was the good of a friendly government policy if people like Mrs. Masterson were allowed to run loose. For the benefit of foreign relations they were a type that never should be granted passports.

"More important than putting that dumb Indian in the local hoosegow," said the curly-headed young man, is getting the case back."

"The jewelry is insured. So's the case itself, for that matter," announced Mrs. Masterson. For a while, the conversation dealt with the speed or lack of speed with which the company could be expected to settle. "You sent the wire, Helen?" she ended.

"Yes, Aunt Margaret."

"Did you forget the paper?"

"They didn't have an American paper, Aunt Margaret, and the Mexico City ones haven't arrived yet."

"What's the matter with this country? I've read every line of that *San Antonio Post* we got yesterday in Mexico City." There was a slight pause and her eyes rested on her dark niece. "I saw in it that there was going to be a special memorial service for that young man you thought you were in love with once." Helen said nothing, but her face set. It didn't exactly harden, but developed a secret look. "You ought to be grateful to me now for stopping it, or you'd be a widow, probably with a baby on the way, and where would your medical studies be then?"

"For stopping it?" The girl looked up. A suspicion was dawning in her brown eyes. "Then he did write," she said quietly.

"Army doctors certainly have time to write a lot of letters." Mrs. Masterson gave a complacent chuckle. "And it worked out just as I thought. You were upset at first when you didn't hear, then annoyed, then very sensibly went back to medical school and forgot him. And his letters stopped coming."

Helen said, "Excuse me," and left the table.

Rick had finished his coffee. He picked up Savonarola and left the room. As he passed their table, Judy was saying viciously, "You do get a kick out of breaking up love affairs, don't you, mother?"



Rick had to pass Helen's room. She was still standing in front of the door, fumbling with the key. The keys were difficult to manipulate, but that didn't account for it. Rick went up to her and, without any comment, took the key from her hand, unlocked and opened the door. She nodded her thanks and disappeared. He went on to his own room, looked for a moment at a bottle of Bourbon, then picked it up and went back. She hadn't closed her door properly and he pushed it open and asked, "May I come in?"

He chose to take her startled look for acquiescence and went over to the table where the water carafe and glass stood. "I brought you some medicine. Best in the world, as any medical student knows." He poured a stiff dose of the Bourbon and handed the glass to her. She started to say, "But—" and he cut her off. "It's excellent stuff. As you see, a third of the bottle is already gone and I'm still alive. So that guarantees that it's non-poisonous. And as for the proprieties, the door is partly open and you can scream any time you think it's necessary. You don't look as if you screamed often, but I'll bet if you did, it would be a rousing, businesslike job. And stop looking so dumpy at that glass. Bourbon is meant to be drunk and enjoyed, not wept into. If I'd thought you wanted to weep, I'd have brought you a bottle of beer."

She gave a slight choke and said. "You are a fool."

"You've guessed my secret," he exclaimed dramatically, and then. "This is the most inhospitable hotel. Only one glass. Do I drink out of the bottle?"

"There's another in the bathroom."

When he returned with it, she was replacing a handkerchief in her pocketbook. He didn't look directly at her until he'd poured his own drink. He said, "Here's to tomorrow. It'll probably be worse than today, but it's a good excuse for a drink."

"Do you need an excuse?"

"Woman! This is too much. One secret you may probe in the first five minutes of our acquaintance, but not all of them."

She put down her glass. "I needed that," she told him, then went on, "I saw you down stairs."

"There's six feet and a hundred and eighty pounds of me, so you probably couldn't help it. Never mind. You're getting over the shock of the sight."

"Why did you do it? I mean, bring the bottle and come in?"

"I thought it a better line of approach than 'Didn't I meet you in Oskosh?'"

She shook her head. "No. That wasn't it. Do you always go around being kind to sniveling women?"

"No. I'm a newspaperman." He poured her another drink and said, "There's nothing more futile in the world than shedding tears over what might have been. Never do it, little Helen." He laughed. "The next most futile thing, in case you're interested, is telling people that. They never believe it until they've learned it from their own experience and lots of them never learn it."

"You heard the conversation?"

"If ever I have an open-air show that needs a barker, I'm going to hire your aunt. I don't eavesdrop normally, except in the line of business. But tonight—" He ended with a shrug.

"My parents were killed in an accident two years ago," the girl said. "There was no money and Aunt Margaret took me to live with them. She's sending me through medical school. Robert had no money. He was just another doctor. She said she wouldn't help us, but we didn't mind. If it hadn't been for the war, we'd have been willing to wait until I had my degree. But with the possibility—" She broke off. "Then Robert was ordered overseas. He expected to get forty-eight hours leave. I would have gone to him whether we had time to be married or not. But I never heard a word. Not a message, a wire or a letter. When a week had gone by, I wrote and I realized later that the letter must have reached the post after he'd left and had to be forwarded. He never received it, though, because I found out later that he'd gone over on a bomber almost direct to Italy to replace a surgeon who was ill. The second day he was there, the hospital was bombed and he was killed. He was operating when the bombs came. He never received my letter," she repeated, and was silent for a moment. "I was very stupid, I suppose. I never thought she would suppress telegrams or mail or do anything like that."

"And the hell of it is that she believes she's done a good deed."

"I could kill her." The intensity of the quiet tone startled Rick.

He said lightly, "She's not worth swinging for."

"And she's doing the same thing with Judy," went on the girl, after a while. "Peter has no money. Judy has none of



her own. Aunt Margaret says if Judy marries him, her allowance will stop. But they aren't like Robert and me. We wouldn't have minded being poor. But Judy just isn't used to it."

"Men have been known to work and support their wives," suggested Rick.

"Peter couldn't support a—" She bit off whatever she was going to say with a self-conscious laugh. "I don't know why I'm telling you all the family history."

"It's my kind, honest face," Rick told her with the half-smile that always lurked on his lean, dark features and seldom touched his eyes. This time it did reach them and gave a certain warmth to their cold grayness. A little while later, he got up. "I'm going to drive up and see if the church wall has been pushed over by the lava yet."

"Church wall pushed over?"

He explained about the village church which was still standing, although the lava was piling up against the back of it, and how the newsreel and newspaper photographers were maintaining a sort of death watch over it. "I'm doing a feature article so I don't have to sit and watch it twenty-four hours a day. I just take a look occasionally. Oh, by the way, my name's Greer—Rick Greer. Is yours Masterson or is she a real aunt?"

"She married my uncle. My name's Helen Darrow."

"Good night, Helen. See you around."

"Good-night, and, thanks."

In the lobby, he encountered Mrs. Masterson who was screaming, "There must be some kind of entertainment even in a one-horse place like this! Where's Alberto?" at the top of her lungs. Rick saw that the day clerk had been replaced by the non-English-speaking night clerk. Mrs. Masterson spotted Rick and directed her next scream at him. "You look like an American. D'you know this town?"

"I've been here three days," he said cautiously.

"You can tell us then." Mrs. Masterson positively purred. "What is there to do at night?"

"Go to bed," answered Rick.

"How dull! Aren't there any cabarets? No? Well, there must be movies?"

"I believe there are."

"Is there one worth seeing?"

"That's something I wouldn't know. I don't ever remember seeing one worth the effort, but I haven't seen them all, thank God," Rick told her, and added, "I've no

idea what is showing locally." In faulty but workmanlike Spanish he inquired of the clerk, then turned back to Mrs. Masterson. "It is a Mexican picture and he doesn't think you'd enjoy it as you wouldn't understand it."

The arrival of Alberto spared him further work as an interpreter. As he went in search of the car that he always used, there floated out behind him Mrs. Masterson's determined screech, "Looks as if all we can do is have a couple of rubbers of bridge. Judy, get Helen."

The wall of the church didn't collapse that night, but everyone felt that before another twenty-four hours had passed, the house of God would collapse before the fury of God or the shrine of superstition could fall before the onslaught of nature, according to his religious beliefs.

It was almost dawn when Rick returned. He spent ten minutes standing in the street, hammering on the door, for Mexican hotels have a way of bolting and barring the place as if for a siege at about ten o'clock, and finally managed to get himself admitted. As he went up the stairs, he caught a glimpse of a couple in the almost dark patio, very close together on a leather settee, and Judy's voice came to his ears, "It's no good, Peter. I've got to have money. You don't know mother. She wouldn't relent. She'd just say if I got a divorce or annulment my allowance would start again and, until I did, no dice." Love evidently wasn't blinding Judy to the ever-present need of the wherewithal to pay bills in this regrettably commercial world.

## II.

RICK slept late and drove out to the village, half smothered in lava, as soon as he'd had a combination breakfast-lunch. The church wall was still standing. He had known one of the cameramen in Spain during the civil war and they spent the afternoon pleasantly, reminiscing. It was then that Rick noticed Manuel. He inquired what had happened and whether the dressing case had been recovered. Manuel shrugged his shoulders. "They do not even try to find it, señor."

"Why are you free, then?"

"The jailer lets me come to look after my horses. When the tourists have brought them all back and I have rubbed them down and fed them, then I go back to the jail so that I am there for the morning checkup. It is often done like that."



Rick knew just enough about Mexico not to be surprised. The maneuver embodied the strange practicality that lurks amid the appalling inefficiency.

Shortly after five, the Wells Fargo party arrived, followed immediately by Mrs. Masterson's group. The car drivers like to come over the road in couples, so that if one car gets into trouble the other can help out and, as the road resembles an obstacle course or a testing ground for tanks more than a highway, it is understandable. As usual, Mrs. Masterson was complaining about everything and even Alberto, accustomed as he was to tourists and their vagaries, looked a bit worn. The Wells Fargo bunch got mounted and started off quite happily. Apparently, they had not expected to be provided with thoroughbred racers to ride and seemed quite content with their assortment of scrawny horses and mules.

Finally, Alberto got his flock aboard some animals. Mrs. Masterson was in a pair of light-blue gabardine slacks with jacket to match, for she had scorned the available overalls which less wealthy tourists gratefully rent to protect their clothes from the black volcanic ash which sifts through everything. She sat her depressed-looking nag well and Rick was sure she exercised frequently on an expensive horse from an expensive stable in an expensive park. Judy also seemed to know what she was doing with a horse, and Peter had a careless ease which bespoke familiarity. Only Helen appeared an amateur who just used common sense and sat tight. Not that any of the underfed and weary animals were equal to causing trouble to the veriest tyro.

As, guided by Alberto who, in turn, was guided by a small barefoot boy who ran alongside of him, they turned into the road that led through what remained of the village to the ash-covered fields beyond, Mrs. Masterson saw Rick and shrieked at him, "Hello, Mr. Greer. Did you ever see such an animal? And they call it a horse! And the saddle!" She made a sweeping gesture toward various pieces of string that held the stirrup together.

A man who represented a travel agency's interests locally, was reminding the proprietors of animals that the following day he expected a party of seventy-five. He was hoping that there would be some more evacuation proceedings as tourists enjoyed seeing evacuations. "I wonder they didn't try to get permission to take some guided parties to watch the war," growled Rick.

"Perhaps they did try," said his friend. "If they could have guaranteed to show them a few soldiers dying slowly and painfully, it would have been a big attraction."

As the cameraman spoke, Rick caught a glimpse of Manuel. He was looking after the pale-blue figure of Mrs. Masterson and the concentrated hatred on his dark face was frightening.

The evening and night passed pleasantly. Rick had a bottle, and his friend had a bottle. They played poker and Mexican rummy, ate the lunches their hotels had put up for them, and looked at intervals at the church wall which was still holding firmly.

By eleven o'clock it started to rain. Rick huddled himself in his big overcoat under the shelter of a tumbledown roof and wondered whether he'd go or stay. It didn't really matter whether he saw the famous wall collapse or not, but his instinct made him want to be there when it happened. The whole scene was like a Doré illustration of the inferno. To his left, he could see the banks of lava pushing through and over the few houses that remained standing. Now, in the dark, it was incandescent under its covering of ashes. A group of Indians were sitting within a foot of the lava wall, grateful for the warmth, indifferent alike to its majesty and potential danger. In the tiny plaza, others had lighted fires around which they sat, the smoky flames throwing curious paths of yellow light into the shadows. The women sat with their griddles over the inevitable charcoal braziers, making the inevitable *tacos* and *tortillas*.

The usual routine for tourists is to go up in the late afternoon, look at the sight by daylight, take a lunch and remain until dark, in order to see the flames and molten rocks that are vomited forth in pyrotechnical beauty. So, by midnight, the Wells Fargo party began to dribble back, the fourteen-year-old boy first. The clergyman was the next to appear. His mule had quite obviously steered him home rather than he the mule. Then, at quite a respectable canter, came the curly-headed Peter. Manuel, who had taken one of his horses and loped out across the dead fields about an hour before, returned now to collect his animals. Rick heard Peter calling to the clergyman, "Extraordinary beast, this. All the way out it wouldn't do anything but walk and, suddenly, on the way back, it took it into its head to canter and I



couldn't hold it." Alberto was the next arrival, plodding stolidly on a mule. The mother and father of the fourteen-year-old boy followed shortly, with Helen only a little distance behind them. Then came Judy, and then the minister's wife.

Helen came over to the fire by which Rick was standing. She said, "It's a terrible sight, but wonderful. I'd never seen a volcano before. It must be awfully bad for these children," she went on looking at the hordes of youngsters who should have been in bed, but who were still playing about. "I mean all this volcanic ash in their lungs. I feel choked and I know my face is black."

"Just a pale shade of gray," Rick assured her.

Picking its leisurely way quite unconcerned between the different groups and the little fires, neatly avoiding an old woman and her trayful of *tortillas*, came a riderless horse.

"Aunt Margaret's horse! What—" Helen looked frightened and turned to Rick. "What can have happened?"

"People do fall off horses, even tame ones," Rick said, but he went with her to join the group of Manuel, Peter, Alberto and Judy.

Manuel was protesting vigorously to Alberto that Hidalgo was a gentle, tame beast who wouldn't throw a five-year-old and that he'd offered the services of one of his baby brothers to run alongside, but that Alberto had said all his charges were competent horsemen who did not need to have their horses led. Judy was already showing signs of hysteria. Peter kept saying, "Nothing serious can have happened." Helen looked at Rick and asked, "What do you think?"

"She might have dropped something, dismounted to pick it up and forgotten to keep hold of the horse," he answered lightly.

Alberto was saying they'd better get some fresh horses and search. The Wells Fargo party had not yet driven away and the father of the fourteen-year-old, sensing something was wrong, came over and asked what the trouble was.

"Did you notice the lady in the blue slacks at any time on your way back?" asked Rick.

The man shook his head. "In the first place it was dark, in the second it was misty, in the third it was raining and in the fourth, when I'm on a horse, brother, I give all my attention to staying there."

The minister came over to know whether he could do anything.

Rick spoke to Peter, "Why don't the girls go back to the hotel? You and I can ride out with the search party and use my car to get back in later. Alberto wasn't driving, was he?"

"No. We've a local car and driver. Alberto didn't want to use his over that road," answered Peter.

Both Judy and Helen protested, but after a bit of argument, gave in. Meanwhile, one of the police, whose business it was to watch the cars coming up to the village, arrived and spent the next fifteen minutes being important and delaying everything. Rick borrowed a poncho to keep himself dry. Alberto was nearly crazy. In the eight years that he had been a guide, he had never lost a tourist, and if anything really disastrous had happened to the older woman, not only would he lose his job, but his reputation would be blasted. Muttering invocations to all the saints who he thought might be useful, he rode forth with a woe-begone expression.

The rain wasn't yet sufficiently heavy to have washed out the tracks the horses had made, but the mist, the volcanic ash and the darkness combined, made the use of lanterns and flashlights necessary. Progress was not very fast and grew increasingly grim. Even Peter, who at first had kept up a rattle of talk, became silent. After about twenty minutes, Rick noticed tracks leading off toward the left.

"Everyone rode down there on the way out," explained Alberto, in answer to his question. "One can get quite close to the lava there without any danger and Miss Masterson wanted to take some pictures."

There was silence for another fifteen minutes, then they reached the first of the gulleys which separated the ash-covered fields. As their horses slid and slipped down the twenty-foot bank, the police officer who was in the lead with Manuel called out that they had better search a little way along the floor of the gulch as the incline was the most likely place for anyone to fall off a horse. Nothing was found and they rode on again.

Going as slowly as they were, it took them nearly two hours to reach the completely covered over village where tourists spread ponchos on the ground, eat their lunches and wait for nightfall.

"She wouldn't have come back here," said Peter.



"I shouldn't think so," agreed Rick.

"Of course, she might have got confused in the dark," the young man suggested dubiously.

The tracks made by the party could still be read quite clearly in the ash which was hard-packed, like black sand. Alberto had taken a lantern and rode around from the roof of the church, which was all of the village that showed above the ash, to the farthest limits the party had reached. He waved the lantern as he circled, calling, "Mrs. Masterson!" in a voice that trailed off into a reproachful wail. The police officer decided they were wasting their time and had better return.

Peter said, "She can't just have disappeared."

"What order were you riding in when you started back?" asked Rick.

"The Wells Fargo people got mounted first. Of our lot, Judy was in the lead. She was bored. Helen was next, then Mrs. Masterson and Alberto. Alberto went ahead of her as soon as they started. I was last. I couldn't tear myself away. The color was so magnificent. The fire!"

Rick asked, "But you caught up with them later?"

"Oh, yes. I spoke to Mrs. Masterson as I passed her. We went in single file nearly all the time, of course. One has to because of all these gulleys. I wanted to ride near Judy. Then some falling lava startled my horse and he high-tailed for home. I couldn't hold him and I passed the whole lot of them."

On the way back, when they reached the tracks where Alberto had said they had ridden down to look at the lava, Rick suggested that it was possible that Mrs. Masterson had mistaken the tracks and followed them.

"But, Señor, the horse knows the way home," protested Manuel.

"We must ride down and look," decided the policeman.

They headed toward the lava wall. At the points to which the tracks led, it was some twenty feet high, like a glowing fire which had no flames. The outer crust, exposed to the rain and air, had cooled a little and was black, but wherever it cracked, the incandescent heat beneath glowed in the darkness. The stream of destruction seemed to have halted a moment where a field sloped down. The little group of searchers stood their horses on the opposite slope and contemplated it silently, each busy with his own

thoughts. Rick's eyes systematically ranged up and down and back and forth, as if the mountain of lava were a map divided into squares.

It was Manuel's shout that notified them that Mrs. Masterson was found. His lantern was swinging in the direction of something that lay in a wide crack of the lava. They dismounted and scrambled down the slope. The heat was uncomfortable as they drew closer.

The police officer looked at Rick and Peter and said, "Be careful. Sometimes it moves rapidly."

In the same way that the Indians seem able to handle pieces of rock that are much too hot for Americans to cope with, so they seemed able to go nearer. A few minutes later, something was carried up the slope and laid down. It wasn't pretty.

"Oh, my God!" cried Peter.

Alberto was mumbling half-hysterical prayers, whether for the soul of the dead woman or for his job, Rick couldn't be sure. Manuel's face, in the flickering light of the lamps, was like something carved in bronze. Rick looked thoughtfully at the almost unrecognizable thing in the light-blue slacks. They were burned now. He knelt down and used his torch.

"She must have taken the wrong trail. The horse got frightened and threw her." That was Alberto.

"No horse, even if it bucked, could have thrown her into that crack," said Rick flatly.

"What are you looking for, señor?" asked the police officer.

"An injury on the back of her head."

"But"—Peter gulped—"d'you mean you think—"

"She was murdered," Rick finished for him.

Everybody talked at once and, above it all, could be heard Alberto's wails. He seemed to think it was all a horrible plot to discredit him. After some time, the police officer obtained silence. "*El señor periodista* is right. No horse could have thrown her there. We must see if she has been robbed."

But she hadn't been. The pocketbook had slipped down to the ash, and though it was scorched, it was easy to see that the contents were intact. Her rings were on her fingers.

"It was not for robbery, then," said the officer slowly, and his eyes turned to Manuel. The others were looking at Manuel, too. He read their thought and looked back at them sullenly. Rick directed his flash at a



bottle which had held mineral water. It was lying near the spot where the pocketbook had been. He picked it up.

Everything took an unbelievable amount of time. Finally, the body was carried back to the village where the church wall had not yet fallen in. The news cameramen were overjoyed. It had been rather tedious waiting for the lava to follow its relentless but slow path, and here was a perfectly good murder dropped into their laps, and cameras and the murder of an American in the bargain. In the meantime, a police officer on a motorcycle had been speeding back to Uruapan and, finally, the police chief arrived in person.

Señor Juan Rojano was *jefe* by virtue of his political position, but now that he had a case which would undoubtedly bring much publicity, he was going to show everyone what efficiency was. He was a stout little man with a face that shone greasily. His belt was too tight around his waist and his uniform collar was too tight around his neck. He had beautifully shaped, small feet of which he was very proud, and his one major extravagance was expensive boots. He fussed around importantly, confused Peter with Rick, and when he got that straightened out, thought Peter was the dead woman's son. Because Peter didn't speak Spanish and seemed on the thin edge of hysterics all the time, and Alberto was so occupied with his wails about his blighted career, Rick acted as interpreter. Finally, as the rain stopped with the dawn, permission was given to take the body down to Uruapan and Peter was allowed to go and break the news to the two girls.

"But I must interview the señoritas at once," announced Señor Rojano. "I will tell them that I already have the murderer under arrest." He pointed dramatically to Manuel, held between two officers.

"Señor"—Manuel's voice stopped Rick as he turned toward his car—"I did not kill the señora. You could make them believe that I did not."

Rick looked hard into the man's face. Again he was aware of the quality of endurance, endurance of physical labor, inadequate food and injustice. Endurance that voiced no complaint because it knew the futility of it. There never had been enough food, there always had been bitterly hard work and there always had been injustice. It was a proud face. Manuel was pure Indian and there was no servility in his makeup? He wasn't pleading for help now.

He made the simple statement of fact. He had not killed the señora and Rick could make them believe it.

"You had reason to kill her," Rick pointed out slowly.

"But I did not."

And the reporter believed him. "I don't know what I can do," he said.

### III.

BACK in Uruapan, he cabled the story off to New York and then telephoned the American embassy in Mexico City. On the way down in the car, he'd tried to question Peter, but the youth was too upset about how he was going to break the news to Judy to answer questions sensibly. When he reached the hotel Rick went up to his room, took a shower and shaved, got into clean clothes and went down to breakfast. And all the time at the back of his brain he knew that something was wrong. There had been something he had missed.

He'd nearly finished when Helen, looking white and tired, came in and tried to order some coffee to be taken up to Judy. Rick interpreted, then asked, "How is she taking it?"

"I've got her quieted down now," said Helen wearily, and pushed her dark hair back from her forehead.

"Better have some breakfast, then."

"I must go back to her and I'm not hungry, anyway."

"Probably not, but you'd better eat. Come on, there's a good girl." He placed a chair for her and she sat down.

"I'll never forgive myself," she said, after a while. "The things I thought about her and now—"

Rick grinned. "Be honest, Helen. If she was a devil yesterday, the fact that someone bashed her head in doesn't make her a saint today."

"But I wished—" She broke off.

"She were dead? Why not? Most of us would like to commit murder sometime or another in our lives. We don't do it, partly because we're conditioned to shrink from the idea and partly because we've got the brains to realize that damn few people are worth swinging for. That's nothing to be upset about. It's normal. I'd have committed lots of murders if I wasn't afraid I'd be caught. I've never been able to figure out what I could do with the body."

Helen gave a little cry. "She said that—"



Aunt Margaret." She saw Rick's questioning glance. "When we were looking at the lava, she said it would be a good place for a murder because you'd be able to dispose of the corpse, or something like that."

The minister and his wife appeared in the dining room. They had heard the sad news and came over to ask if they could be of any help. Helen thanked them politely, said "no," she didn't think there was anything they could do.

"I hear the murderer has been arrested," said the minister, "so that at any rate you can feel justice will be done."

"Justice," murmured Rick, as they went to their own table. "I wonder."

"What do you mean?"

"I wonder if Manuel killed her."

"I never felt very sure that he took that dressing case," said Helen. "Suppose he didn't, he might have killed her because she accused him of being a thief."

"He might have," agreed Rick, without much conviction.

"Why would anyone else?"

He didn't speak at once and, when he did, it was to tell her that he had telephoned the embassy, that someone was coming down from there and that he had also made some tentative arrangements about the body.

"You are very kind," she said. "Peter's gone completely to pieces and Alberto's no good. And I can't make these people understand me."

"The Greer interpreter service is at your disposal whenever you need it," he told her.

After Helen had gone back to Judy, Rick went to his room and had several drinks, then sat staring out over the small balcony and glaring at the plaza, below. He should get some sleep, he told himself, but he knew he couldn't sleep. Whatever it was he had missed, the thing that the deep part of his brain had noticed but that he couldn't bring to the surface, was nagging at him. The life of the plaza went on busily. Absent-mindedly, he watched without keeping track of time. The woman selling the ubiquitous *tortillas*, a boy of about ten pushing his little blind sister up to all the passers-by to beg, a youth bicycling along with a flat basket four feet wide containing rolls balanced on his head, a young lad riding a donkey, his naked feet in stirrups made by the simple process of looping a piece of rope. Suddenly, Rick knew what he'd been trying to remember. He got up and went downstairs.

The police chief had been spending the

morning trying to get a confession out of Manuel. Not that he personally minded whether Manuel confessed or not, or, for that matter, whether he were guilty or not, but he felt that a confession would impress the higher-ups when they arrived as he felt sure they would. He was flattered by this celebrated reporter's interest in his conduct of the case.

Our doctor agreed with me," he said, "that she had been stunned with some heavy object. He is stubborn, this Manuel," he went on. "These Indians are." He was a good three quarters Indian himself, of course, though he claimed to be purely Spanish. "Manuel says that he did not steal the case and that, though he is glad the woman is dead, he did not kill her either. I ask him why, then, he rides out over the fields if not to intercept the party on their way home so that he may kill her. And he tells me that he rides out because that was where his farm was before first the ash covered his fields and then the lava covered his house. He goes, he says, to look at the place that was his own."

"That's plausible," agreed Rick.

"But I have not been idle. I have men questioning his friends to find out where is the case." Already his mother, his cousin and his brothers and sisters have been questioned and the house searched. They profess to know nothing of it." Señor Rojano looked down complacently at his elegant feet which were well displayed in front of him. "They will find that it is not wise to try to deceive me."

Rick didn't voice his doubts about Manuel's guilt. He realized that, at a moment when the *jefe* was bursting with self-congratulation, it would be useless. He walked thoughtfully back to the hotel and discovered that a Lieutenant Gray from the embassy had arrived by specially chartered plane. The lieutenant was reported closeted with Peter and the two girls, so Rick left a message with the clerk that he wanted to speak to him as soon as he was free.

The Wells Fargo people had returned for lunch and were leaving for Patzcuaro in the afternoon. Rick ambled over and asked the minister a few questions. The father of the boy put in a few remarks.

"You know, it was kinda funny watching those four up there playing bridge. Gave their whole minds to it, too. Hardly stopped long enough to look at the volcano. And when it started to get dark, the fussing



to get the lamps in the right place. You'd think their lives depended on it," he said, and repeated, "Somehow, it was kind of funny."

"If they just wanted to play bridge, it would seem it would be less trouble to stay home and play," agreed Rick. "They didn't get started back until after you?"

"Account of Mrs. Masterson wanted to finish the rubber. I passed right close by as I went to climb aboard my horse and I heard her saying, 'Anyway, let's finish the rubber before we go.' They must have finished it pretty quick, though, because as I got started off, I saw them getting up."

Rick thanked him and once more returned to his room. Two drinks later, there was a knock on the door and a somewhat harassed-looking young man appeared and said he was Lieutenant Gray, adding, "I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Greer, from Tom Hennessy, who was stationed here for a while."

"I haven't seen Tom since Vienna during Anschluss week," said Rick.

"I believe he's in Stockholm." The lieutenant accepted the drink Rick poured and studied him with amazingly blue eyes. "What's on your mind about this mess?" he asked.

"They've arrested the wrong man," said Rick, and swallowed his drink.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Who did it, then?"

Rick talked for some time. Lieutenant Gray groaned. "That'll be a worse mess. Besides, you'll never be able to prove it."

"Oh, I don't know. A little trickery may help. You talk to the police chief—he's a smug little bladder of fat. Have him get them together this afternoon. He can say there are some formalities that need straightening out."

Judy burst into Rick's room a little while before the time set for the meeting and said, "I can't find that lieutenant, but can't you stop him having this business this afternoon?"

"I stop him? My dear Miss Masterson, I assure you I have no strange power over the embassy or over local red tape."

"Haven't I answered enough questions? Why can't they hang the man or shoot him or whatever they do down here and leave us alone?"

"Suppose he isn't the right man?"

"It doesn't much matter. He's only an Indian," she answered petulantly.

"Maybe instead of trying to educate the defeated Germans in democracy, we should start with the kids at home," murmured Rick.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," she said.

"I do. But perhaps the lieutenant has more interest in abstract justice than you."

"All I want is to get out of here and forget it." She stopped suddenly and demanded, "Why don't you think this Manuel did it?"

"Manuel knew too much about horses and about the tricks of the lava. The person who killed your mother had a much more deep-seated grudge against her. That person hated her. I doubt whether, if you hadn't come here, it would have happened. But your mother said it looked like a good place for a murder and that put the idea into that person's head. Here was the opportunity the murderer had secretly longed for. While waiting for darkness, the murderer made plans. Manuel's having ridden out to the field was just a bit of good luck."

Judy stared at him. Finally, she swallowed a couple of times and said, "I thought—" and broke off. "Doesn't it make any difference to you whether you like people or not?"

The queer half-smile that was on Rick's face didn't touch his eyes. He answered, "I like the closest approximation of justice that we can get in this world."

An hour later, the group was gathered in Señor Rojano's office. The police chief wasn't happy. He divided his reproachful glances between the lieutenant and Rick. Several of his officers, with huge revolvers strapped round their waists, leaned against the various walls. Judy sat nearest the desk, with Peter on her left and Helen a little distance from him. Manuel was brought into the room by the guards and made to stand at the farthest side. Alberto was in a corner. Manuel looked at Rick, but didn't speak.

The reporter looked round and said, "I'm going to ask the questions. I think we'll get through quicker that way, so please don't resent it. First, Manuel, do you remember which horse Mrs. Masterson was mounted on when they started out?"

"But I told you, señor, the horse was called Hidalgo," answered Manuel.

"Hidalgo was the horse that came in riderless, but are you quite sure it was the horse Mrs. Masterson started out on?"

Manuel thought for a moment. Some-



thing approaching an expression of surprise crossed his usually immobile face. "No, señor, I am not sure. I remember now that she started on Guadalupe."

"But that's nonsense," interrupted Judy. "I remember mother saying that she was going back on the same one. She said she'd got used to the poor bag of bones."

"Ah!" breathed Rick, but he didn't follow up the subject. "You rode down as close to the lava as was safe to take a picture, I understand."

"Yes. I had my camera," said Judy.

"And while you were there, your mother made the remark about its being a good place for a murder?"

"Yes. She'd read a lot of detective stories and said, 'You'd have no trouble getting rid of the corpse. There's your crematory right at hand.'"

"Did anything particular happen while you were waiting for it to get dark?"

"Everybody was very unpleasant," Judy looked at Helen.

Helen explained, "The minister who was with the Wells Fargo people knelt down and prayed—"

"And I laughed," put in Judy. "You've no idea how funny he looked, kneeling there in overalls and praying. It really embarrassed me. And Helen took it upon herself to lecture me."

"I didn't, Judy," protested Helen. "I only said the man had a perfect right to pray if he wanted to and he wasn't bothering anyone."

"And then?" inquired Rick.

"We ate lunch."

"And you had bottled water?"

"Sure."

"Go on."

"Well, I was bored," said Judy. "Mother suggested bridge. But Helen didn't want to play, nor did Peter. And mother said that the only reason she let him trail around with us was because he made a fourth. And then he didn't keep his mind on the game and Peter, my sweet, you aren't a good enough player to do that."

"I know," Peter grinned at her.

"I was all set to leave any time. But mother said we were supposed to stop till dark and we'd got to. She was always like that. She did everything in a place that tourists are supposed to do. Personally, I thought it was silly. It was uncomfortable and we could certainly say we'd seen the volcano, which was all that mattered."

"So you waited till dark?" again Rick prompted.

"And we couldn't fix the lanterns so that we could see the cards, and Helen wasn't playing properly either. Finally, mother said something to her and she said, 'Did we come all this way to play bridge? Look at the magnificent sight! Isn't it better than the damned old cards?' And mother said that as we'd brought her on the trip, the least she could do was to be reasonably polite and Helen said, 'You couldn't ever let me forget I'm the poor relation, could you?' which wasn't very nice."

"I'm sorry I said it," put in Helen.

"You're sorry!" Judy stared at her.

"When you finally started back," interrupted Rick, "did everyone have the same horse as when he started out?"

"I did, I know," answered Alberto, "but it was a mule."

"I wouldn't swear to it," said Peter. "They were all such poor wrecks, I hardly noticed."

"I'm most positive I had," Judy stated.

"He'd a way of jerking just before he went down a bank that I remembered."

"I couldn't be sure," said Helen.

"Were your horses bunched separately from those of the Wells Fargo people?"

"Oh, yes," answered Alberto. "I had ours tied together. There couldn't have been any mixing of them."

Señor Rojano moved restlessly in his chair. He was getting tired of this. Rick said to him in Spanish, "I have all I need now, I think." Then he turned back to the others and resumed, "And now I will tell you what happened. The murderer—I will use the pronoun 'he' for convenience, not as an indication of sex—made a series of mistakes. He hated Mrs. Masterson because she had stood in his way. Her own remark put the idea into his head and he toyed with it. He didn't know that it is quite a slow process to burn a body. Just shoving it into a crack of lava isn't going to consume it without trace. He thought that by the time searchers got there, it would be ashes and that certainly there would be no way of proving that she had been knocked on the back of the skull.

"By the time you started back, his plan had matured and he picked up the bottle. He took advantage of the rain and the mist, came alongside Mrs. Masterson, and when they reached the tracks leading down to the lava, either persuaded her to follow them or else stunned her and held her on the horse and led it down. The latter, I think.



These horses aren't afraid of the lava. It would have been quite simple to lead the horse down the bank, pulled her off and shove the body into the crack. Then he made a mistake. He mounted the wrong horse to come back. But before that, he'd made a worse mistake still." Rick paused and suddenly pointed to Peter's shoes. "Look! He'd scorched his shoes on the hot lava."

"But I didn't step—" Peter began and stopped, staring down at his shoes. Then he looked up and his face hardened. "That was a trick, you cheap—"

"A trick that worked," said Rick.

"Don't be too sure." Peter sprang from his chair, overturning it. Before the lounging policeman at his left knew what was happening, Peter had snatched the revolver from the man's holster. His right hand reached out, grabbed Judy and swept her in front of him. "Don't anybody move."

Judy gave one stricken cry of, "Peter!"

"Shut up, you little fool."

Rick had been standing at the side of the desk. He began to move forward a little. "You'd knock someone over the head from behind in the dark; you'd let an innocent man hang in your place. But I wonder if you'd manage to pull the trigger when anyone was looking at you," he said. There was a brass cuspidor near his foot and Gray wasn't far from Peter. He caught the lieutenant's eye and kicked the cuspidor with all his might. It made a frightful clatter as it rolled across the room and hit Alberto's feet. In the second that Peter's eyes flicked to it, Lieutenant Gray grabbed his gun hand and forced it down. There was a thunderous roar as the .45 slug hit the tiles, ricocheted and sped harmlessly into the wall. Judy fainted. Two of the lounging police came to life sufficiently to seize Peter. Señor Rojano, not really knowing quite what it was all about, but disapproving strongly of people who took guns away from his policemen and pointed them at him in his own office, shouted, "Arrest him!"

Rick wiped a wet forehead and sat on the edge of the desk. Helen looked up from tending Judy and said, "For a moment I was afraid you thought I'd done it."

He smiled faintly. "Judy thought that, and I let her. She might have warned him."

A little later, Peter explained sullenly, "I'd come almost to the end of my money, trailing around after them. If only the little fool would have made up her mind to marry me, I figured Mrs. Masterson would either pay me for an annulment or a divorce, or

else kick through with an allowance after a week or two. I was desperate and then, when she said there'd be no trouble with the body, I thought it was fool-proof."

"Murder seldom is," said Rick dryly.

Señor Rojano was shaking his head over it all. Suddenly he exclaimed, "Señores, I had forgotten to tell you. We have found the case of the dead señora. A little boy who went into the hotel to beg took it. His mother brought it back, not, I think, out of honesty, but because she thought it was dangerous."

"Then you can let Manuel go," suggested Rick.

Manuel came slowly over to the reporter. "I would like to serve you in any way, señor," he said gravely.

"Get along home to your family, Manuel. They must be worried about you," Rick told him.

"I and all my family will pray for you, always."

"I often need it."

The lieutenant struggled with red tape until almost dinner time and appeared, exhausted, in Rick's room, demanding a drink.

"Peter's a nasty little piece of work," he said, as he wrapped himself around a half tumbler full of Bourbon. "Apart from a general dislike of the species Peter, how did you really spot him? His shoes weren't scorched, you know."

"The mineral water bottle practically let Manuel out," Rick remarked.

"Except that it might have been tossed there by some other party. Or Helen could have used it equally as well."

"Peter's a good horseman," said Rick, "and yet most of his mistakes concerned horses. He was so anxious for everyone to know that he was back first. He called out that the horse had come home at a run and he couldn't stop him. Those animals are so emaciated and browbeaten that people who've never ridden anything but a wooden horse can handle them. Then a good horseman would know automatically if he were on the animal he had ridden before. Horses don't look alike to people who are used to horses. But what clinched it against Peter was the string that tied the stirrup."

"The string?"

"The stirrup was mended with an untidy piece of string. I noticed it when Mrs. Masterson rode out, and I noticed it when Peter came home. It showed he'd changed horses, and if Mrs. Masterson started home on the horse, why did Peter arrive on it?"



# THE WORD OF POWER

*A Short Novel*

By JOHN H. KNOX

*"Isis was a woman mighty in words and she was weary of the world of men—" From the grave of an ancient story rise the ghosts of a modern crime.*

## I.

"Good morning, Mr. Vane," said Jill Winter. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Ah, so it is," replied Babson W. Vane appreciatively.

He stood just inside the door. Water ran in rivulets down the gutters formed by the folds of his expensive slicker. He had an overshoe on his right foot, none on his left. His hat was on backward, which was lucky, since it let the accumulated rain in the brim spill onto his back instead of down his face.

Jill Winter began to laugh. In contrast to Vane's slim, washed-out blondness, his secretary was small, dark-haired and vital. Vane's scholarly, bespectacled eyes regarded her now in sober puzzlement, then he, too, smiled as he glanced at the window, whose pane was an opaque sheet of fluid silver.

"Ah, to be sure," he said. "I fear my mind was elsewhere."

"Let's hope so," Jill murmured. With a patient sigh, she yanked off his wet hat, peeled the slicker from his bony shoulders and went into the hall to shake them out.

Vane remained standing in an attitude queerly suggestive of a bird dog who has almost, but not quite, located his quarry. His eyes roamed over the shelf of books which lined the back wall of his office. Then, suddenly, he pounced. Charging the center shelf, he plucked out a red volume, scuttled to his swivel chair, plopped into it, elevated his long legs to the shiny desk top and began to read.

A gentle silence prevailed, punctuated only by the beat of the rain against the window. Jill sat down before her typewriter, picked up a stenographer's pad and began to make doodles on the blank page. After a while, she spoke:

"Mr. Vane, Mr. Walton asked me to tell you that he'd like to speak to you for a few moments today, and that he'll come at ten."

"Tell that abysmal pest to stay the hell out of here," Vane mumbled in a pauseless monotone. "What in hell does he think I keep this separate office for, if not to get away from the nauseous details of that abominable clipping business?"

It sounded like something on a phonograph record. It was, in fact, just Vane's routine reaction to anything connected with the thriving clipping bureau which he had inherited from his father.

"Check," said Jill Winter. "The clipping business buys us a lot of pretties though"—she gestured about the elegantly appointed office—"which is more than I can say for the detective business."

"What detective business?" asked Vane. "I am a consulting criminologist, a research man."

That was true. The cases which he handled were, or so he claimed, devoid of any interest to him from the purely human angle. They interested him simply as behavior patterns to be analyzed in brochures which he occasionally published and which only scholars ever read.

But he did get cases, the queer ones. The police frequently consulted him. They called him Bad Weather Vane, or the Anticipator, because he was so often like the prophet who saw a cloud the size of a man's hand and predicted a hell of a downpour. At this moment, Jill suspected, Vane's mind was knotted over some odd little acorn of fact which might be expected to suddenly sprout into a veritable oak tree of a crime.

Vane snapped the book shut and stared smugly over his spectacles. "Well, I found it," he announced. "I have traced the ugly idea to its very source and fountainhead."

"What ugly idea?" Jill inquired.

Van tapped a newspaper clipping on his desk. "An evil idea," he said, "spawned in some warped and subtle brain, which—"

There was a knock at the door. Vane



broke off, scowling. Jill opened the door and admitted Mr. Wilbur J. Walton, the manager of the Vane Clipping Bureau, with offices on the floor above.

Mr. Walton, a comfortably pudgy man of grayish and obliging mien, advanced into the room with a smile more dauntless than hopeful.

"Walton," said B. W. Vane, "I've told you a thousand times not to bother me with the details of that clipping business when I am—"

"One moment, one moment, Mr. Vane." Walton edged nearer, his hands fluttery and placating. "This is not a business matter. True, it is about a client of ours, a Mr. Virgil Treadwell, the mystery novelist. We've been furnishing his press clippings for years, so I thought—"

"I have read Mr. Treadwell's slaverings," said B. W. Vane. "I have expressed my opinion of them. However, you may keep him as a customer. I shall not insist that you refuse to serve him—"

"Oh, but it's not that, Mr. Vane. Mr. Treadwell thinks he is being persecuted."

"A frequent symptom of paranoia." Vane dismissed it. "Send Mr. Treadwell to Dr. Abner Klaussen's clinic at once."

"You send him," Walton suggested, with a forward jerk of his head. "He's right out here in the hall now."

"Hello, Vane." A man in his middle forties, with graying hair and a deeply lined face, pushed into the room. He came forward, extending a bony hand with long, nico-stained fingers. "I heard what you were just saying about my . . . er . . . works. Thank you. I got the first good laugh I've had in months. Now, if you can spare me a few moments—"

Vane indicated a chair and flung an angry glance at the door through which Walton had vanished. "You seem to be having some . . . er . . . psychological disturbances?" Vane asked with impersonal politeness.

The novelist laughed. "I've had them for years," he replied. "Usually, I publish and sell them. This, I'm afraid, is something more concrete. Somewhere in my writings I seem to have stepped on the toes of a dangerous crank. Writers are always being plagued by people who think their names, or lives, have been taken in vain. They threaten to sue or to kill you."

"This person has threatened to kill you?" Vane asked.

"No, he hasn't," Treadwell replied, "not directly. That's why I'm worried. An open

threat is something you can grapple with. It's the thrust in the dark that seems dangerous to me. Am I right?"

"I think so," Vane agreed. He was beginning to be interested. "Just what is the nature of these veiled threats?"

Treadwell looked a little embarrassed. "On the surface, they appear rather childish," he said. "However—" He drew out of his pocket a match box from which he spilled upon the table what looked like a mess of mummified angle worms. On closer inspection, they proved to be nothing but little worms of dried mud, such as a child might roll out quickly between the palms of his hands.

Treadwell looked at Vane apologetically, but the latter did not smile. He was peering at the exhibit closely.

"You don't find them . . . er . . . ridiculous?" Treadwell asked.

"Oh, far from it," Vane replied. "I imagine you've been finding these things lying around where you were likely to see them?"

"That's it," Treadwell said. "But you haven't made the obvious remark, that they are the work of some mischievous child."

"No, indeed," Vane murmured.

"Then," said Treadwell, running nervous fingers through his thinning hair, "you have evidently read that book of mine which came out last year, 'The Veil of Isis.'"

Vane shook his head. "No. But I did read an item from yesterday's paper in which a suburban grocer complained of finding these mud snakes in and about his store."

"Our neighborhood grocer." Treadwell nodded. "I help with the household shopping—servant shortage, you know. The things were left there for me. But I didn't mention it to the grocer."

"No." Vane's head was down close to the desk now, studying one of the tiny mud worms. "I notice the letters T. G. stamped on each of these," he said, "as if with a small type block."

"Treadwell Gale," the novelist explained. "It's one of the pen names I sometimes use. I used it on that book, 'The Veil of Isis.'"

"Ah," said Vane, raising his head slowly, "the secret name, the word of power."

"What's that?" Treadwell came to his feet. "You must have read that book of mine!"

"Why so?" Vane asked. "Its title tells me it deals with Egyptian mythology. And these mud snakes naturally suggest the legend of Isis and the mud serpent she used to get the secret name of the god, Ra. And



that, of course, is merely an instance of the word of power superstition, common to all ancient mythologies. And anyone, I assume, who read your book, would have learned enough to use this rather evil idea in an attempt to terrorize you."

"I hope only to terrorize," Treadwell muttered. "But will you help me find out who's doing it and put a stop to it? You can name your own fee."

"My fees are high," Vane warned. "I usually get nothing on police cases, and have to make it up on the others."

Treadwell nodded. They got the business end of it over quickly, and Treadwell signed a check. Then Vane asked:

"Now, where do you find most of these things?"

"Usually when I'm out walking," Treadwell said. "My place is in the suburbs, and I take walks in the hills. I find them along the paths, at places where I stop to sit down. I find them on the walk in front of my house, in the yard, in all sorts of places."

"But never inside your home?"

"No."

"I think that's significant," Vane observed. He got up. "I'll study the matter," he said, "and call at your house at, say, four this afternoon, if that's suitable. Then we'll look over the ground a bit."

Treadwell eagerly agreed, shook hands and left. Vane went over and stared out at the rainy street. Suddenly, he turned to Jill Winter who had been watching him silently.

"All right," he said sharply, "what's your trouble? Out with it!"

"My trouble? Why, I haven't said—"

"Of course you haven't. But don't confuse my habitual absentmindedness with faulty powers of observation. You've been as jittery as a cat this morning, and you haven't made up your face once. Has that seventeen-year-old brother Charles been giving you trouble again?"

"Why . . . why, no!"

"Give me that pad on your desk," Vane ordered.

She tried to draw it away, but he grabbed it, stared at the doodling marks she had made there with her pencil.

"So you draw pictures of little serpents!"

Jill turned pale. "Well, I heard you talking and—"

"No, no, my girl," Vane said. "They were on there before Treadwell came in. And you live out there in his neighbourhood, don't you? Is Charles mixed up in this mischief?"

"Of course not. Do you really think the things are serious?"

"I didn't tell him how serious. They're poisonous, the product of the sort of sneaking, vicious brain that deals in murder."

"You mean Mr. Treadwell is liable to be murdered?"

"Somebody is liable to be," Vane told her.

Babson W. Vane sat down and stared at the red book which had remained open on his desk.

"Miss Winter," he said, "call the nearest bookshop and have them send up all Treadwell's books, including 'The Veil of Isis,' published under the Treadwell Gale monicker. Then call Walton and have him dig up from the clipping files everything he can get from Treadwell."

"Walton won't cry," Jill warned.

"Of course he will," said Vane with satisfaction.

Jill made the calls and then sat staring at Vane. He had such a smug look on his face that she couldn't help saying, "Smarty! You really bedazzled the great Treadwell, didn't you? Pulling all that mythology stuff out of the hat without having read his book."

Vane shrugged. "That clipping had worried me all night. I knew I'd read the mud-serpent stuff somewhere. I should have known at once it would be in Frazer's 'Golden Bough,' since that's the classical authority on all ancient superstition. But here, read the story. It's quite thought-provoking. Read it aloud, if you don't mind."

He handed Jill the red book and she began to read:

"'Isis, so the tale runs, was a woman mighty in words—'"

"I like that phrase," Vane murmured approvingly. "Reminds me of you. But excuse me, go ahead."

Jill gave him a dirty look and started over, "'Isis was a woman mighty in words and she was weary of the world of men and yearned after the world of the gods. And she meditated in her heart, saying 'Cannot I, by virtue of the great name of Ra, make myself a goddess, and reign like him in heaven and earth?'" For Ra had many names, but the great name, which gave him power over gods and men was known to none but himself. Now the god was by this time grown old. He slobbered at the mouth and his spittle fell upon the ground. So Isis gathered up the spittle and the earth with it



and kneaded thereof a serpent and laid it in the path where the great god passed. And when he came forth according to his wont, attended by all his company of gods, the sacred serpent stung him and the god opened his mouth and cried."

"Charming picture of the old gentleman, isn't it?" Vane interrupted. "That's enough. The gist of the rest of it is that Isis got what she wanted—the secret name that made her a power in her own right. Very thought-provoking." He swung his swivel chair about and slumped there, gazing at the window.

In about ten minutes, a delivery boy appeared with a large parcel wrapped in heavy wet paper. Jill tore it off, stacked eight books in varicolored jackets on Vane's desk and went back to her chair. Vane continued to sit and stare at the rain.

"Well, aren't you going to read 'The Veil of Isis,' . . ." Jill asked, "and find out how Treadwell used the mud-serpent legend?"

"Eh?" Vane asked. "Oh! I don't think that's important. Probably wrote the usual idol's-eye formula. Young archaeologist, or whatnot, robs temple, or something, steals jewel, mummy, or what have you, is followed by vengeful priests with the serpent curse."

"You won't even read the book?"

"You will," he said. "Skim through it and jot down all the uncommon names he uses. Then check them against the city directory. I'll read the book later, but for another reason—to get a picture of the author's mind."

"You think maybe he's used the name of some crank who's out to jail him?" Jill asked.

"It's just a possibility," Vane answered. "By the way, is your brother Charles a reader of Treadwell's books?"

Again the frightened, evasive look came over Jill's face. "Oh, he reads everything about murder cults and criminals," she said.

"A normal boyish appetite," Vane told her. "Why are you so upset?"

"Me upset?" Jill grabbed the book and began to read.

Vane looked at her thoughtfully for several moments. Then he selected one of the other books and settled down deep in his chair.

At four o'clock, Vane's coupé stopped before Treadwell's suburban home. The rain had ceased, but there was a thin mist in the air and the old-fashioned stone

house, set back amid shielding greenery, looked snug and homey. This first impression of solid, old-fashioned comfort, rather than luxury, was later confirmed by the furnishings of the house. Treadwell, though a man who had made considerable money, appeared to be thrifty.

A large, efficient-looking woman, whose nearsighted eyes blinked behind thick spectacles, met Vane at the door. She introduced herself as Treadwell's mother-in-law, Mrs. Asgood. Since her daughter's death, a year or so before, Vane learned, the old lady had remained to keep house for her son-in-law.

Treadwell himself greeted Vane in the library where a low fire glowed cheerfully on the hearth and an atmosphere of careless, bookish ease prevailed. A thin, dark man, with a somber, rigid face, sat in one corner at a desk, busily typing a manuscript. A cane was propped against his chair. When Treadwell introduced him as, "My secretary, Mr. Valco," the man rose awkwardly, made a jerky bow and sat down to his work again.

"Join us in a drink, Valco," Treadwell invited. "Bernice can finish the typing when she comes in."

"If we depended on Bernice," Valco snapped over his shoulder, "there'd be few stories reach the publishers."

Treadwell laughed good-humoredly. "Valco is terribly conscientious," he said. "I don't know what I'd do without him. Probably nothing. I'm so lazy, it takes the whole household to get me to write a story."

Vane was ready to believe it when Treadwell, after downing his first drink at a gulp, poured himself another and downed it, too. Many lazy writers get a lot of work done, Vane knew, but there was a laxness about Treadwell which suggested that the man had completely lost his grip. Vane wondered if the little serpents had sapped him that much.

Treadwell began to discuss the matter in detail now, though he refused to go out and look over the places where the mud serpents had been found. While he was talking, Mrs. Asgood reappeared. She went to the desk where she removed her spectacles, dosed her weak eyes with some drops from a small bottle, and then picked up several pages from the manuscript. She made some comments to Valco, jotted on the margins of several sheets and presently went out again.



"She's a great help to me," Treadwell said. "My whole household is. They all help me with my work."

A few minutes later, the girl called Bernice arrived. Vane had expected to see a smart-looking girl, but scarcely the glamorous sylph who appeared. She had raven hair and long-lashed, slumberous eyes, and the heavy enamel of her make-up gave her the exotic look of an idol. Shedding her fur coat, she revealed quite a figure in a barbaric wine-colored dress with bronze trappings. Then she drifted over to peck Treadwell's forehead with a light kiss and be introduced as, "My fiancée, Miss Leland—a great help as well as an inspiration."

"Oh, silly!" Miss Leland pinched Treadwell's cheek, gave Vane the benefit of a smoldering glance and purred that she hoped he would be able to help dear Virgil. Then she glided over to the secretary.

"Oh, Valky," she exclaimed, "I'm fearfully sorry I let you down so. But I stopped for just one more cocktail—"

"'s all right," Valco mumbled, shooting her a quick look dark with venom. "I'll just finish, now that I've started," and he hammered the typewriter more furiously than ever.

Vane got nothing more out of Treadwell. The novelist's attention began to wander as soon as Miss Leland appeared. Besides, he was getting drunk. Vane assured him he was giving his best efforts to the case and presently took his leave.

## II.

ON the front porch he saw that the rain had stopped entirely. Gray clouds were scudding in the sky which shone with a silvery twilight glow. He passed between rows of ornamental cedars and had almost reached the gate when a movement to his left caused him to turn out and then plunge quickly into the wet foliage.

He came up short, grasping by the collar a lanky youth dressed in flashy slacks and sports coat, with his hair slicked down against his skull and a smear of pubescent fuzz beneath his nose.

"Turn me loose, damn you, Vane!" the youth grated in an undertone, looking fearfully toward the house. "What business have you got grabbing me? You and sis had better mind your own damned business!"

Despite his struggles, Vane gripped him firmly. "You're a young fool, Charles," he said, "to follow that woman around like a puppy!"

"Shut your damned mouth. I make my own money!"

"And spend it on a woman who's engaged to another man and who, for some perverse reason, is amusing herself with you. Have you been dropping mud snakes for Treadwell to find?"

Charles Winter looked startled. "Why, no, I—that is, maybe I did once. Did sis tell you she saw me with one? Well, Bernice—I mean, Miss Leland—says Treadwell's jumpy about them, so just once I—"

"You're not lying to me?"

"No, honest!"

"I hope you are." Vane dusted his hands as the youth shook himself and drew away. "But you're playing with dynamite. You'd better go on home now, and stay away from this place."

Charles went off mumbling to himself.

Vane returned to his office. Jill had waited for him, though it was long past closing time.

"Did you learn anything?" she asked.

He nodded. "Impressions. Bad ones. Hellish situation out there. Hate-filled atmosphere—explosive!"

"I got those names from the book," Jill told him, "if you want—"

Vane shook his head. "Doubt if we'll need them. Did you enjoy 'The Veil of Isis'?"

"I'm just a normal lowbrow," Jill said. "I found it exciting. Treadwell's other books are mostly on the straight detective order. This is a sort of adventure-horror story, very creepy."

"You haven't eaten, I suppose?"

"No, boss." She shrugged. "It's got to where I hate to go home. Charles is so uppity, he gets on my nerves. I was hoping—"

"That I'd buy you a dinner? I will. But I've got to work, read 'The Veil of Isis.' Suppose we have dinner sent up here?"

Jill agreed and telephoned their order. Vane shucked off his coat and settled down to read.

Vane had learned the art of rapid reading and went swiftly through the book's pages. He paused to eat hurriedly, then went on again. The frown which settled on his brow at about the middle of the book became a deep crease by the time he had finished. He slammed it shut and strode to the win-



dow. He stood silent, staring down into the dark chasm of the street where traffic lights lanced through the colored gleam of neon signs on wet pavement.

"What's wrong, boss?" Jill asked.

He turned. "The book."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I." He went over to the bookshelf, selected a volume and plopped into his chair again. "I have here," he said, "a book by a well-known psychiatrist I've often quoted from. He's dealing here with the possibility of picking out potential murderers in advance of their crimes. Listen. 'There are times,' says this famous man, 'when if he who runs will only read the writings of the person in question, and interpret with understanding what he reads, he will find in the trivial or more serious work of pen or pencil there are many harbingers of homicide.'"

Jill looked thoughtful. "Well, if you mean 'The Veil of Isis,' it is a bit gory, I'll admit."

"No, no," Vane said impatiently. "It isn't the blood and thunder. That's normal. It's repressions that are sinister."

"I don't follow you."

"What stands out in that book above all else?" Vane asked. "Hate—a thwarted, burning, undying hatred! The hatred of the vengeful villain who pursues the hero. It drowns everything else, the climax in which the hero is victorious, the love story, all of it. You feel that the author let the hero win simply because it was the conventional, expected thing, that the author's sympathies are really with that monster of hatred."

Jill was frowning. "I get you. It does seem unfinished, somehow. You feel that later the villain will get him!"

"That's it," Vane said. "The author let the villain be defeated, but not killed, you notice. You feel the author couldn't bring himself to kill him, that it would be like suicide."

"Maybe Treadwell was building up for a sequel."

"Maybe. But he's never brought it out, in spite of the fact that this book outsold all his others. No, there's something personal there, something stifled and terrible. And where does that get us? Treadwell asks for protection. Treadwell is threatened. If there is to be a victim, you feel that he is the victim. Yet, with the words of that psychiatrist in mind, I'm compelled to say that the author of that frightful book is a potential murderer himself!"

"You're pretty cocksure, aren't you?" Jill said. "If—"

The telephone buzzed. Jill answered it.

"Yes, yes, he's here, inspector. I'll tell him."

She hung up. She faced Vane with a half-frightened, half-triumphant look. "You were right about a murder, but wrong about the rest of it, Mr. Infallible. Treadwell's been murdered. Inspector Carr wants you to come out there."

Inspector Carr of the homicide detail met Vane at the door of the Treadwell house. "I heard you were already interested in this business, Vane," he said, "and I figured that was a break for us."

Vane's relations with the force had always been cordial. He followed Carr into the library, being careful to avoid kicking any of the cardboard boxes which were strung across the floor from the front door to the back of the divan. He noticed that the three members of the Treadwell ménage, whom he had met that afternoon, were huddled in a far corner of the room talking to a police officer.

Treadwell's body lay face down on the panther rug between the divan and the fireplace. An end table had been overturned and glasses, books and loose papers lay scattered on the floor. Across this litter a trail of blood drops ran to a poniard-type dagger which lay on the carpet halfway between the divan and the front door.

The photographers had finished their work. The fingerprint men were busy dusting various objects in the room. A medical examiner, holding his chin speculatively between a thumb and forefinger, was standing over Treadwell's corpse.

"Hello, Bad Weather," he greeted. "Well, here's your stageplay murder, even to the fancy dagger."

"Yes"—Vane nodded abstractedly—"too much stageplay, maybe." He was looking now at one of the tiny mud serpents which lay just a few inches from Treadwell's head. "Well, doctor?"

"I've made only a superficial examination," the doctor said. "But he's been stabbed very neatly between the ribs. Dead possibly an hour, possibly less. Rest of the household were all in bed, they say. He was getting pretty sodden, I judge, when they left him. Probably didn't put up much of a fight. The secretary, Valco, found him when he got up to see where a cold draft was coming from. The front door was open."



Vane nodded. "The front door would, of course, be open. And I suppose those boxes cover a trail of muddy footprints?"

Carr came up just then and said that they did.

"But"—Vane frowned—"I don't see any around the dagger, nor on the other side of the divan where the body is. They just come from the door to the back of the divan, and then go out again."

"I know. It's kinda puzzling," Carr admitted. "My guess is the murderer stabbed Treadwell from behind the divan. Treadwell spun around and fell where he's lying. Then the killer must have slipped off his muddy shoes to go around and see if Treadwell was dead—"

"And then started out with the knife," Vane added, "and then dropped it, then came back and put his shoes on and went out. Are you assuming the killer was crazy?"

"They get rattled," Carr said. "The dagger belonged to Treadwell. He's got a whole collection of such things." He nodded toward a glass cabinet near the fireplace in which could be seen other daggers, knives, strangler's cords and other weird weapons. "The case isn't locked."

Vane went over and stooped beside the dead man. "Any wounds except the stab wound that killed him?" he asked the doctor.

"Scratch on his face, slight cuts on his hands," the doctor said.

"Cuts?" Vane asked. "That's odd. Here's a little line of blood on his scalp, too, and the hair above it has been cut, too. See?"

"Well?"

"But, my good friend, you're assuming he was killed with that poniard-type dagger, a stabbing instrument, whose edges aren't sharp at all!" Still squatting, he pivoted on his heels and stared into the fireplace where low embers glowed faintly beneath banked ashes. He picked up a poker and began to rake out some glass, the fragments of a small bottle.

"Now don't go finding a poison bottle," the doctor exploded, "and try to tell us he was killed that way. From the amount of blood he lost, he was certainly alive when he was stabbed."

"A poison bottle?" It was Mrs. Asgood's voice. She had heard the doctor's remark and now came toward them. "You've probably only found the eye medicine bottle I threw in there tonight. It has a small eye dropper for a stopper—"

"That's it," Vane said. Among the glass

were fragments of the thin glass cylinder. The other had turned away and he was about to do so, too, when he noticed something lying in the shadow of one of the big firedogs. He picked it up. It was the small rubber bulb from the eye dropper which had formed the bottle's stopper. He started to toss it into the fire, but on second thought, slipped it into his pocket.

He got up, looked at the body for a few moments, then followed the blood trail over to the dagger. At a point where the trail crossed a litter of papers, he indicated a blank sheet and asked Carr if he could have it. The inspector nodded.

Vane carefully marked the position of the line of blood drops with regard to the body, then rolled the paper and held it in his hands while he regarded the three members of the Treadwell household. They stood in a group behind the divan and they stared back at him with wary interest. They were in robes and slippers.

"We did so hope you'd be able to save Virgil from his enemy," the glamorous Miss Leland cried, her dark eyes showing traces of tears.

"What I'd like to know," said Vane blandly, "is who inherits the estate."

The two women looked shocked. It was Valco who answered. His face was utterly rigid and masklike as usual. "Aside from a few thousand dollars which belonged to the former Mrs. Treadwell," he said matter-of-factly, "and which go to Mrs. Asgood, the estate is to be shared equally by Miss Leland and myself. It's valued at about twenty-five thousand dollars, I think."

"Virgil and I," Miss Leland explained, "were waiting until my divorce became final so that we could be married."

"And I might add," Mrs. Asgood spoke, "that Virgil generously offered to name me as an equal sharer in the estate, but I refused, since I have a small income of my own which is sufficient for my needs."

She looked at the others for confirmation, and they nodded.

Vane thanked them and pittered around the room a while longer. He stood for a few moments by the glass cabinet, staring at the display of murder instruments. Miss Leland and Mrs. Asgood came over and pointed out various items which Treadwell had used in his stories. There was even a curare pot, Vane noted, as well as poison rings.

"We all used to help him invent his murder devices," Miss Leland said ingenuously



Presently, Vane left and Carr walked outside with him.

"I hear you were working on the angle that some crank who thought himself injured by Treadwell's books was leaving those mud snakes around," the inspector said.

"I considered that," Vane replied. "But I believe we'll find our killer closer to home."

"Hm-m-m," Carr said. "He always found the snakes away from here, didn't he?"

"That's what I mean," Vane answered. "I wouldn't bother too much about those muddy footprints either. They were probably made by someone who came in after the murder."

He left Carr at the gate and walked on to his coupé alone. As he reached for his keys which he carried in his vest pocket, he noticed that his coat seemed to cling. He took out a small fountain-pen flash and snapped it on. Caught between his coat and vest was a cactus pod with long and extremely sharp thorns. A quick grab for his keys would have thrust the spikes deep into his hand. He recalled the stand with a collection of potted cactus near the weapon cabinet. In brushing past it, he might have—But there was that curare pot in the cabinet, too!

Vane pried the bur loose with his penknife and let it drop into a small box which he fished from the glove compartment of his car. Then he got in and drove away.

When Jill Winter opened the office door next morning, an alarming sight met her eyes. Seated on the floor, his lank body propped against the wall, B. W. Vane looked like a corpse. His clothing and hair were disheveled, his eyes red-rimmed.

In the center of the room, in a startled half-crouch, stood Wilbur J. Walton, whose red-stained hands and trapped-animal expression would have stamped him as the murderer at once, and a mad murderer at that. For the entire floor was covered with sheets of white paper, across which, like rabbit tracks in the snow, ran a looping, criss-crossing, endless trail of red drops.

"What on earth's going on here?" Jill demanded.

"I wish I knew," Walton whined. "He got me out of bed at three this morning, and I've been here ever since, just spattering red ink on the floor while he crawls around comparing the shapes of drops."

The corpse against the wall stirred. "Now, Walton," said B. W. Vane, "where's your sporting blood, man?" He picked up one

of the sheets of paper, flung his long legs under him and came upright. "This will do, I think. Send your janitor down here to clean up this mess."

Walton scuttled out like a crab escaping the boiling pot, and Vane turned to Jill as if he had just seen her. "Oh, good morning."

Jill stood just where she had stopped upon entering and now Vane saw the storm signals that were blazing in her dark eyes.

"So you've been here all night! And you wouldn't answer the phone! Do you know what's happened?"

"Is the war over?" Vane asked hopefully.

Jill rushed at him, her small fists clenched. "They've arrested Charles!" she cried. "They suspect him of murdering Virgil Treadwell!"

"I'm not surprised at that," Vane said. He sat down, lighted a cigarette. "I tried to get you to tell me about Charles yesterday."

"Is that all you've got to say?" Jill stormed. She swooped toward him and shook her fists in his face. "Oh, you monster! You and your crime theories and behavior patterns! That's all you care about, you cold-blooded—" She paused, brought the rest out with a rush, "You cold-blooded machine!"

Vane stared at her in alarm. "Miss Winter! You're mixing your metaphors insanely! Who ever heard of a cold-blooded machine? Please try to compose yourself. I have just spent the night building Charles an alibi."

Jill sat down at her desk then and had a quiet cry and Vane came over and patted her shoulder. The janitor came in and cleaned up the mess on the floor. When Jill finally straightened and began to dab at her eyes, she looked much better. She knew that B. W. Vane was not an idle boaster.

"But why weren't you surprised about Charles?" she asked.

"It was bound to happen," Vane said. "Charles may or may not have told you that I caught him out there yesterday and warned him. He's got a case of puppy love on the Leland girl, of course, and she's been amusing herself with him, as you probably know."

"Yes, I know," Jill answered. "Charles admits he went there to see her last night. He says she sometimes came out on the porch at night to talk to him. But he saw the front door open, wondered about it,



and walked on in and found Treadwell. He was so scared, he just turned and ran."

"And probably left his footprints across the wet lawn," Vane said. "And then some helpful neighbor tipped Carr off that Charles had been hanging around the girl. Now, tell me, did Charles have anything to do with that mud snake business?"

"He swears he only put one of the things on Treadwell's walk. That Leland girl had told him Treadwell was afraid of them, and he did it for a joke. I caught him making one of them and warned him about it, and he didn't do it again. But Inspector Carr claims he's got a case all built up against Charles, says he was jealous of Treadwell on account of the girl, and the dagger and all the rest fit into it—"

"Splendid," Vane said, lighting another cigarette.

"What do you mean, splendid?" Jill demanded.

"That's what I wanted him to do," Vane answered. "Now I shall smash his theories like a house of cards and his case against Charles will come with it."

"I'll bet that black-haired creature killed him," Jill cried.

"I wasn't much taken with Miss Leland, either," Vane admitted. "Playing Treadwell along and then messing up the emotional life of kids on the side. Not a woman to inspire confidence. But there's the mummy-faced Valco, too, who hates the Leland girl, incidentally. And there's the competent Mrs. Asgood, who doesn't appear sinister, but who could be. And there's someone else I've discovered,"

"Who?"

"A brother," Vane said. "I ran across it in the stuff Walton got out of our files. This brother, Thomas Treadwell, was serving a term for manslaughter at San Quentin. He broke prison about six years ago and hasn't been heard of since. I'm going to tell Carr to dig into that."

"Say, that's something! Anything else from the files?"

"Not a lot. Treadwell appears to have been slipping for the past two years. His books once had a big sale, but he's published fewer and fewer. Then, last year, 'The Veil of Isis' made a hit—a departure from his usual style. But he's done only short stories since."

"His wife died a little over a year ago," Jill observed. "Maybe that upset him so he couldn't work."

"And yet," Vane objected, "he seemed to

find consolation in the glamorous Miss Leland, who has been his stenographer for some years. Also, Treadwell and his wife seemed to have had trouble. She once filed suit for divorce, but later withdrew it."

"I'll bet the Leland girl murdered her, too," Jill said.

"It isn't impossible. Her trouble was diagnosed as gastro-enteritis. Might have been arsenic. But that's wild guessing. It struck me as interesting, though, that the faithful Valco was a friend of Mrs. Treadwell's before her marriage. It seems she got the job for him as her husband's secretary."

"Maybe Valco was in love with her and hated Treadwell."

"And waited until a year after she was dead to kill him? Well, Valco is the waiting kind, still—"

He shook his head and gathered some things together on the desk, the sheet of paper with the blood drops from Treadwell's room, the bulb from the eye dropper, and the cardboard box containing the thorny cactus pod.

"Don't touch that cactus," he warned Jill as she frowned at it. "I want you to take all these things to the Farnsworth laboratories and get a chemical analysis of everything. Give 'em the works. And if you go by to see Charles, tell him not to worry."

When she had gone out, he called Inspector Carr. He advised the inspector to dig into Valco's past and also to get all the information he could about Treadwell's convict brother.

Carr said he would. "I'm sorry about that kid, Charles Winter," he added. "I mean, on account of him being your secretary's brother. I don't blame you for trying to save him, and I'll give you every break I can. But I think you're wasting your time. The girl undoubtedly led him on, but he's guilty as sure as hell, admits being there, admits being jealous of the girl. We might make it manslaughter if he'd confess."

"He won't," Vane said. "He didn't do it. See you later."

He went to a barber shop. After relaxing for an hour under hot towels and the barber's ministrations, he looked and felt much better. He ate a hearty breakfast, then drove to the Treadwell house.

### III.

INSPECTOR CARR was just leaving, had stopped at the gate to speak to the patrol-



man on guard there. Now he walked back toward the house with Vane.

"What did the surgeon say about the stab wound?" Vane asked.

Carr gave him a quick, sharp look. "Well, the dagger could have killed Treadwell," he said, a little lamely. "The wound did seem rather deep, and a sharper instrument might have been used. But stab wounds are very deceptive."

"So are blood trails," Vane told him. "The dagger didn't kill him, Carr. He had cuts on his hand and scalp. The dagger was put there as a plant, to make it look as if the killer left by the front door. The boy's telling the truth. Those muddy tracks of his were obviously made afterward. You'd better look closer at Treadwell's household."

Carr frowned. "They are a cool bunch," he admitted. "Know what they're doing in there now?"

"Either checking his bank account or trying to rush the latest story in to collect on it," Vane hazarded.

"You got it!" Carr chuckled. "They're trying to finish that last story of his. They figure it ought to bring a big price now, with all the publicity. Can you beat that?"

Vane opened the front door quietly, and they stepped into the vestibule. Voices reached them from the conference taking place beside the desk. Valco sat at the typewriter, Mrs. Asgood stood over him, and Miss Leland lolled in a comfortable chair.

"Virgil really left that character in a jam," Miss Leland was complaining. "The kidnapers have got him in that vertical grave, with his hands tied behind him, a heavy rock over his head, and Fenshaw is coming with a hot iron to make him talk. You know a man couldn't get out of a jam like that—" She paused. "Wait a minute! I've got it. Jack notices a peculiar weed growing along the edges of his hole. It is deadly nightshade—*Atropa belladonna*."

"Our toxicologist speaks," said Valco dryly. "The simple way of poison. How she loves that idea, our Leland. So Jack pretends he'll talk, wins Fenshaw's confidence, gets a chance to crush the belladonna into Fenshaw's liquor. Oh, Lord!"

"Why not?" Miss Leland defended her suggestion. "Then, while Fenshaw writhes in agony—"

"Our hero doesn't have your gloating mind," Valco said. "I suggest that he slowly, patiently, saw his bonds with a piece of sharp rock. Finally, he pretends he's passed

out. Fenshaw gets worried, tries to lift him out. When his arms are down in the hole, Jack grabs them, pulls Fenshaw down, seizes his throat in his teeth—"

"God help us!" Bernice Leland exclaimed. "That shows Valky's sneaking werewolf mind, doesn't it, Mrs. Asgood? I think my idea—"

"I think," Mrs. Asgood said, laughing, "that you've both forgotten how Alexander cut the Gordian knot. Simplicity wins, my children. We'll have Jack talk to Fenshaw and sell him on the idea that Wolfgang, his partner, is double-crossing him. Wolfgang appears and the two fight. Then Jack, who's a powerful specimen of American youth, leaps out of the hole, gets his bound hands in front of him by wriggling his legs through the loop of his arms, grabs a club and knocks hell out of both of them. Now, let's get on with the story. We can't waste all day on that detail."

Carr and Vane stepped into the room and the three collaborators turned. Miss Leland rose and drifted toward them, trailing a dark silk dressing gown and a haunting perfume. "Oh, Mr. Vane, I'm so sorry for that Winter boy," she began. "I didn't intend to encourage him, really."

"He's all right," Vane said. "He didn't do it. He merely came in and went out, after the killer had done his job, planted the dagger and left the fake blood trail."

"Fake blood trail?" the girl asked. "How do you know?"

"Simple," Vane replied. "It ran in the wrong direction. It ran from the dagger to the body."

"Can you prove that?" Carr asked, chewing his cigar nervously.

"I spent half the night proving it," Vane replied. "You know that when a drop of liquid falls from a moving object, it makes a tear-drop pattern, that is, elongated, with the tail pointing in the direction of the movement."

"It didn't seem very noticeable in this case," Carr said.

"It wasn't. That's why I spent half the night on it. It wasn't noticeable because the blood dripped only a short distance."

"The killer was crawling?"

"No, the killer was stooping, carefully making the trail. The killer wanted us to think the killer went out the door, after dropping the knife halfway across the room. The killer couldn't foresee that those muddy footprints, made later, would spoil his setup by not fitting into it."



"I'm not convinced," Carr told him dubiously.

Vane shrugged. "All right. But I'll convince a jury, if you're fool enough to bring Charles Winter to trial. Don't forget that."

Carr scratched his head. "You could be right," he hedged. "But that kid's got a knife of his own—sharp dagger he made from some scrap steel in the plant where he works. We found it in his room. I'll get the chemists to work on that."

"Go ahead," Vane said, "but you'll do better to run down those leads I gave you this morning."

Carr left, and Vane returned the stares of three pairs of eyes now regarding him with intent appraisal. "Do any of you know anything about this escaped convict brother of Treadwell's?" Vane asked.

The two women looked at each other. Miss Leland said, "That was a subject we were forbidden to mention. Virgil was sensitive about it. He broke with his brother long ago. Virgil never heard from him after his escape."

Valco and Mrs. Asgood nodded. Gripping his cane, Valco hobbled over to the desk, removed a sheet from the typewriter and laid it with a stack of manuscript.

"I think I'll lie down," he said. "I have a headache."

As he limped out of the room, Mrs. Asgood went over to the desk and gathered up the papers. "Well, if he doesn't want to type, I'll just take this stuff to my room and look it over." She also went out.

The girl looked at Vane with sad eyes. The black dressing gown hung carelessly parted, revealing the whiteness of her throat.

"They hate me," she muttered in an undertone. "I think they hated him, too." She seemed about to cry. She took a faltering step toward Vane, clutched his arms. "They were jealous of my influence over him. Oh, I feel so alone now." She put her head against Vane's shoulder and began to sob.

Vane was conscious of the perfume of her scented hair. He cleared his throat. "At the risk of being called cold-blooded for the second time today," he said, "may I ask you why you had to kill him, Miss Leland?"

The girl sprang away from him. Her shocked, grief-stricken look faded before Vane's bland stare. "You're smart," she told him, and relaxed. "But I didn't. I was fed up with him, I'll admit. We all were. He'd got to be a drooling drunk. He

wouldn't work, and he was stingy, too." She stopped, glancing toward the curtained doorway through which Mrs. Asgood and Valco had vanished. "I could tell you—"

"Who killed him?"

"Maybe." She went over to the decanter on the desk beside the typewriter and poured two small glasses of whiskey. She came back to the divan. "Have one? Then we'll sit down and talk."

Vane eyed the drink dubiously. "It's a little early," but he took it.

They both sat down on the divan. They raised the glasses to their lips. Vane tilted his head back. The girl turned, as if a sound at the door had attracted her attention. She turned back. Vane was still holding his drink. He was smiling at her over the glass brim.

"Deadly nightshade?" he asked softly. "Atropa belladonna?"

All color had drained from the girl's face. She stood up, flung her glass into the fireplace. "No, cyanide!" she grated between her teeth. One hand went to the side of her gown and came out with a small automatic. She held it pointed at Vane. "Fool!" she said. "Stay where you are!" She started backing toward the door.

Abruptly, she turned, darted through the curtains and was gone.

Vane stood up. He dabbed at the perspiration on his brow. From beyond the curtains there came a scream, then a gun blasted, blasted again.

Vane sprang toward the door, flung the curtains aside. His own gun was in his hand now. He looked into a hallway. Halfway down it, directly in front of a partially open door, the girl lay on her face, one hand outflung, still gripping the gun. Vane turned as the patrolman from outside appeared in the library door.

"Go around to the back of the house!" Vane snapped at him.

The cop ran. Vane advanced cautiously into the hall. He stooped and grasped the girl's wrist. There was no pulse. A finger of blood was inching out from under the black dressing gown, crawling along the floor like a slow, red slug.

A groan from behind the door startled him. He pushed it wide. Mrs. Asgood lay sprawled on the floor. Her hands worked convulsively and the shoulder of her cotton robe was soaked with blood. She seemed to be trying to drag herself away from the door.



Hobbling footsteps sounded in the hall. Valco had stepped out of a room farther down. He approached, his masklike face set rigid. Only the black oil-drop eyes were alive. Limping up, he looked down at the girl, then at Mrs. Asgood.

"She shot Mrs. Asgood and then turned the gun on herself, I suppose?" he asked.

"So it would appear," Vane replied.

"I thought she was the one who killed Virgil," Valco said.

It was twilight again. They sat in the Treadwell library and Inspector Carr was summing up the case for Vane.

"It seems pretty plain," he said. "The girl was fed up with Treadwell, but she wanted that money. So she killed him. Charles Winter's being accused of it may or may not have been a part of her scheme. But when she saw you were out to clear him, she got scared. She tried to soften you up and then slip you the poison. When you caught onto that, she figured that Mrs. Asgood had warned you against her."

"That must have been it," Mrs. Asgood put in. She was seated in an easy chair, propped with pillows so that the strain was kept off her heavily bandaged left arm and shoulder. Bernice Leland's bullet had missed the bone, but had left an ugly flesh wound. "When Bernice rushed at me with the gun," she went on, "she gasped, 'You told him!' Then she shot at me. I was only stunned, but I had sense enough to drop down at once. She thought she'd killed me. She stepped back into the hall and turned the gun on herself."

"Quick thinking, ma'am," Inspector Carr complimented her.

"But what about the weapon that killed Treadwell?" Vane asked the Inspector.

Jill Winter, seated next to him on the divan, gave him a hard look. Inspector Carr was plucking his underlip. "It may have been one of those other daggers in the case," he said. "We'll have them examined."

"But if the wound was too deep for the poniard-type dagger, it would be too deep for them probably," Vane said.

Jill Winter jabbed him savagely with her elbow. She had come in only a few minutes before, bringing the report from the Farnsworth laboratories on the blood drops, the eye-dropper bulb, and the cactus. Vane had torn open the sealed envelope, glanced at the paper inside and then pocketed it. But Jill considered that the Leland girl's death

had settled the case and that Charles was safe. Now she was beginning to be worried again. She noticed that Vane was watching Valco who sat, stiff and detached, staring out into the thickening dusk.

"So you are the sole heir now, Mr. Valco," Vane observed pleasantly.

Valco glared at him. "So I am. What about it?"

"I merely made the observation," Vane said casually.

The telephone rang. Mrs. Asgood answered it, then called Inspector Carr. He cupped a hand around the transmitter and spoke in an undertone. Then he came back.

"I'm wanted at headquarters," he explained to Vane. "They've got a report from San Quentin on that convict brother of Treadwell's. We probably won't need it, but I'm going to check it anyhow."

Vane accompanied him outside and Jill trailed along behind.

"What did you learn about this convict brother?" Vane asked.

"Oh, just that they've got his record," Carr said. "He was shot in the leg by a guard during the prison break, but managed to get away and do a complete fade-out. But don't you think the girl killed Treadwell?"

"No," Vane answered, "nor was she trying to poison me today. One of the other two was trying to poison us both. Both of them had the opportunity to put the poison in the bottle, and they knew the girl was going to spill something, and probably prime me with a drink."

"The hell!" Carr said. "Look here, you mess up every solution we get. Maybe Miss Winter's brother killed Treadwell, after all. He's not completely clear, you know, even if we have released him."

After the inspector had driven off, Jill turned on Vane bitterly. "You see? Now you've got them sniffing around Charles again! Why can't you let well enough alone?"

"Hush!" Vane hissed.

Mrs. Asgood was coming along the walk. She stopped, and Vane saw that her usually confident expression had changed to one of worry.

"You're leaving, Mr. Vane?" she asked nervously. "I hoped—"

"Are you afraid, Mrs. Asgood?" Vane inquired.

"Well, not exactly"—the woman blinked her nearsighted eyes—"but Valco's been



acting so strangely. I don't know if I should tell you, but he's got a bag all packed and hidden down in the basement. I happened to stumble on it by accident."

Vane did not seem surprised. "Tell me, Mrs. Asgood," he said, "was Valco really a former friend of your daughter, Mrs. Treadwell, or was that just a story?"

She took a deep breath. "Well, frankly, I don't think she'd ever met him before. I think she just pretended she'd known him."

"That's what I thought," Vane muttered. "Is Valco still in the room there?"

"No, he got up and left as soon as you went out."

Vane started back to the house and the others followed. The library was empty. "How do you get down to the basement?" Vane asked Mrs. Asgood in an undertone.

"There's a door and steps leading down from the kitchen," the woman said excitedly. "But please don't tell him I told you."

Vane went through the curtained doorway, down the hall, into the kitchen. The door to the basement steps was open and a dim light shone from below. Vane went down soundlessly, paused at the bottom. Piles of old furniture, crates and barrels obstructed his view. But behind this obstruction, movements were going on which caused the low-hanging light to cast jerky shadows on the far wall.

Gun in hand, Vane crept to the edge of the pile and peered around it. Valco was sitting on a box, a leather handbag on the floor beside him. He had a pan of water and a box of cleansing powder and he was frantically polishing the long, thin sword blade which ran out from the handle of his cane. The lower part of the cane, which formed the scabbard, was propped against the box on which he sat.

Vane leveled his gun. "Just take it easy now, Valco," he suggested. "I thought there must be a sword cane about somewhere. Every weapon collection such as Treadwell's should have one."

Valco had whirled. Fear and hatred, straining against the rigid mask of his face, gave it a grotesque, inhuman look.

"I didn't kill him," he snarled. "I always leave my cane leaning against my bed at night. Somebody stole it while I was asleep."

"You are, however, Thomas Treadwell, the ex-convict, aren't you?" Vane asked. "I think perhaps your face has had some surgery, not too successful. But your finger-

prints are intact, I imagine. That pretense of being a former friend of Mrs. Treadwell's was, of course, a blind to divert attention from the fact that Treadwell had taken you in and was hiding you."

"So what?" Valco rasped. "That don't prove I killed him. Not that he didn't have it coming to him. He was a brute to his wife!"

"You were in love with her?"

"In a decent way. She was a wonderful woman. Virgil was a skunk. He only took me in to make a slave of me. I'd have been better off in prison. Holding my secret over my head, he got me to work for nothing."

"You helped him a good deal with his writing?" Vane asked.

But Valco didn't answer that. With the quick movement of a striking snake, he flung himself around, threw the whole weight of his body against the pile of crates and barrels.

They toppled, crashed. Vane, springing aside too late, was knocked to the floor, and Valco crossed the intervening space like a leaping tarantula. When Vane raised his head, the sharp point of the sword cane was pressed against his ribs, and Valco's twisted face was quivering like a madman's.

"You'll never turn me in! I'll kill you before—"

A gun exploded at the foot of the stairs. Valco, with a startled look, stiffened convulsively. The sword cane rattled to the cement floor and he clutched at his left breast and fell. Blood ran out between his clenched fingers, and he lay still, as Mrs. Asgood, the smoking gun still in her hand, came into the room, followed by Jill Winter.

The woman came forward like a sleep-walker, staring at the dead man on the floor. Then she flung one arm across her eyes and began to sob. "Oh, I can't bear it! To kill even him, a monster like him!" Careless now of her bandaged arm, she sank down on a crate.

Suddenly, there were hurried footsteps above, a voice was shouting, "Where is everybody? Where's Valco? Don't let him get away!"

Feet pounded on the stairs and Inspector Carr dashed in.

"Valco is Treadwell's brother. We just compared—" He broke off as he saw Valco stretched out on the floor. He took a deep breath. "Well, thank God he didn't kill anybody else. And there's the murder weapon, I see. We might have guessed—"

"You might have guessed," Jill Winter



said, "but the boss did!" She looked at Vane proudly now and began to smile. "The old anticipator! I begin to see things now, boss. You said that the author of 'The Veil of Isis' was a potential murderer, and I laughed at you when Treadwell was the one who was killed. But I get it now. Valco spoke of how Treadwell worked him for nothing. Valco wrote 'The Veil of Isis,' didn't he?"

Vane dropped Valco's wrist, which he had been feeling. He shook his head, stood up, dusting his clothes. "Eh?" he asked. "Oh, no, poor Valco couldn't write a book. He has heroes bite people's throats. And if he had killed Treadwell, he'd have washed that sword cane sooner. He just figured out himself that it was the weapon, or maybe somebody warned him." He looked at Mrs. Asgood. "As for 'The Veil of Isis,' I guessed who wrote that when I heard that little authors' conference today. I liked your solution, Mrs. Asgood. You solved the problem the way Alexander solved the Gordian knot, with one sharp stroke."

The woman looked at him. "Well, I wrote it. What about that?"

"'Isis was a woman mighty in words,'" Vane quoted softly. He stepped toward her. "May I see that gun, Mrs. Asgood?"

"You may not," she replied, and leveled it at him.

Vane stepped quickly back from her. Carr raised his police revolver. "Drop that gun. I don't get this, but I don't want any more gunplay around here."

"There needn't be," Mrs. Asgood said quietly. "But if you try to take my gun, I'll shoot him. Until I hear the rest of this nonsense, I prefer to remain able to take care of myself."

"Oh, you're able," Vane told her. "You handled Bernice Leland very competently, even though you were unarmed when she caught you behind the door of your room, where you were waiting for your poisoned liquor to take effect on us."

"My poisoned liquor?"

"Of course. You knew the girl was going to dish the dirt on you. But you knew she'd take a drink to steady herself, and offer me one, too. But we both smelled the cyanide. And she went straight for you. But even after getting a shot through your upper arm, you were able to twist her gun back around and shoot her in the chest, with the gun still in her hand. Then you shoved her, dying, into the hall and dropped down on the floor and pretended you were stunned."

"This is guessing," the woman said coolly. "And even if it's true, it was self-defense."

"Yes," Vane agreed. "But the murder of Treadwell, with Valco's borrowed cane, was not self-defense."

"And why should I murder him? I wasn't his heir."

"But maybe you are now, unless there are other claimants."

"Oh, but really! Are you suggesting that I gambled on being able to murder three people to get that inheritance?"

"No," Vane said, "you were forced into the last two murders to cover up the first one. The inheritance would be a sort of bonus. You didn't have to murder anyone but Treadwell to get what you were really after."

"And what was that?"

"Why," said Vane, "the secret name, the word of power, just as it was in the legend."

"What legend?" asked Mrs. Asgood.

"The legend you used in your book and, unconsciously perhaps, followed in your crime," Vane answered. "You remember. It begins:

"'And Isis was a woman mighty in words.' It goes on to tell how Isis, realizing that the drooling, incompetent god, Ra, no longer had any power except the power of his name, decided that if she could get that name, she would get the power for herself. Doesn't that suggest a parallel to your mind?"

"My writing 'The Veil of Isis,' you mean?"

"That," said Vane, "and publishing it under Treadwell's copyrighted nom de plume. Let's drop the sparring, Mrs. Asgood. I talked to your publishers by long distance today. They referred to 'The Veil of Isis' as a collaboration. You got a share in the proceeds from the book, and a half share in the copyright of the nom de plume under which it was published. But you could not use that nom de plume without Treadwell's consent unless he died, in which case you were to be sole owner. So as long as he lived, Treadwell had you hooked, didn't he?"

Mrs. Asgood's lips were set in a tight, white line. "You're lying!" she cried. "Guessing! But, of course, you can find out from the publishers that it is substantially true. I don't see that it matters."

"Oh, it matters," Vane went on. "You probably either wanted to write, or have written, a sequel. With the public clamoring for one, you're not the sort of person to



sit idle. But Treadwell was jealous of your success. He may have refused to let you publish it at all, or he may simply have insisted on his full share of the proceeds."

"Which was outright robbery," Mrs. Asgood muttered.

"Of course. And you couldn't publish the book under your own name because it concerned the same characters used in 'The Veil of Isis,' and covered by the copyrighted nom de plume. Yes, and I imagine Treadwell was pretty nasty about it."

She didn't comment, so he continued, "Probably at first you hoped you could worry him into drinking himself to death by using those mud serpents. He was doing a pretty good job of drowning in drink anyhow. But that night, when you came in here and found him drunk and quarreled with him, you must have reached your limit. So you killed him with Valco's sword cane. Then you made the mistake of faking that blood trail, making it lead outside, not knowing, of course, that the boy would stumble in later and spoil the setup with his muddy footprints—"

"Wait a minute," Mrs. Asgood interrupted. "I have admitted the facts about the book. But that's no proof that I murdered him."

"This is," Vane said, and he produced from his pocket the small rubber eye-dropper bulb and held it before her eyes. "You remember telling me you threw the eye medicine bottle into the fireplace, don't you?"

"Well?"

"But you didn't know that the bulb of the eye dropper bounced out. I found it. That blood trail had struck me as phony from the start. There was too much blood to have dropped from a dagger so thin-bladed. That led me to examine the blood drops. I found not only that they led in the wrong direction, but that it was difficult to duplicate their shape with anything but an eye dropper.

"And when a chemical analysis showed a trace of boric acid in the blood drops, and, more important, showed a sediment of blood inside the bulb of your eye dropper, which you admitted throwing into the fire with the bottle—well, that was pretty conclusive." He paused. "I'll just pass over the fact that there was curare on the spikes of the cactus you slipped under my coat. That wasn't a very brilliant performance, for you."

Mrs. Asgood came to her feet, stood

rigid, her fingers tight on the leveled gun. "Give me that bulb!" she commanded.

"Watch it," Inspector Carr warned. "I've got you covered with a heavier gun than you're holding."

"It won't prevent my killing him," Mrs. Asgood grated, "if he doesn't give that bulb to me."

Vane stood rooted, the perspiration beading his forehead. Suddenly, Jill looked toward the basement steps. "Charles!" she screamed. "Don't shoot her—she didn't mean to frame you!"

Mrs. Asgood did not bat an eye. "I've used that in stories, girlie," she said from the corner of her mouth. "Bring that bulb here to me, Vane, or I'll shoot you!" She started toward him.

Vane acted with the speed of a cat. Flinging himself quickly to one side, he dived for the shelter of the overturned boxes. The woman's gun spat twice before Carr's shot struck her wrist. Then the gun clattered to the floor and Jill grabbed her from behind.

They applied a tourniquet to the woman's arm, and Inspector Carr herded her out. Jill turned angrily on Vane who had crawled uninjured from behind the boxes.

"Oh, you idiot!" She grabbed his sleeve and shook him. "What do you mean by risking your life that way?"

"Well, I knew she'd be more likely to talk, as long as she was holding the gun—" he began. He stopped, cocked his head at Jill, smiled. "But were you that concerned? I mean, really terribly concerned? Why, you were! You're blushing—"

"Never mind that," Jill said. "I mean, you were an idiot not to let her have the bulb. What difference did it make, anyhow? You had the laboratory report. It wouldn't have mattered if she'd chewed up the bulb and swallowed it."

"Oh, my dear girl!"—Vane mopped his forehead—"she didn't want the bulb. All she wanted was to get me over there close to her. Her bad eyesight, you know. She didn't want to miss me. That's what I was gambling on, that and the knowledge that Inspector Carr is a crack shot. But I suppose," he added, "that I did look rather . . . er . . . ridiculous, making that nose dive. Not like a bold detective at all, eh?"

"Oh, but much more sensible," Jill consoled him.

"Hm-m-m," he said. "Like a cold-blooded machine?"

"No"—Jill began to laugh—"more like a hot-blooded research man."



# SOMEONE WILL DIE

By JULIUS LONG

*As a criminal lawyer, with a client's secret to protect, all I could do was to sit tight and wait for the crime to happen.*

It was pretty near to closing hour when the little man walked into my office. Miss Arthur introduced him as Mr. John Holton. I never had heard of him.

"I won't take up much of your time, Mr. Patrick," he apologized. "I just want you to answer one question."

"Shoot." I thought it odd that he didn't ask how much that one question was going to cost him. Generally, they do.

"I want to know if I'll be guilty of any crime if I keep quiet about a murder that I know will be committed."

It is a part of a lawyer's training never to show his surprise, but in this case, my training hadn't been good enough. My mouth dropped open.

"Do you mean, Mr. Holton, that you know a murder is going to be committed?"

"Positively. I even know when and where it is going to happen, and I know who is going to commit it as well as the name of his victim."

"Then, for heavens' sakes, why don't you speak up? Certainly, you don't want to stand by silently and see murder done?"

"Oh, but I do. You see, I even have considered murdering this man myself. Only I quickly gave up the idea. Murder is too much for me. I couldn't stand the strain of it. I would give myself away the first time an officer looked accusingly in my direction."

"So now you know that someone else has the nerve to kill your enemy and you're even afraid you'll get into trouble because you have knowledge of it?"

"That's right, Mr. Patrick. The way you ask the question indicates that I've nothing to worry about."

"You haven't. If you merely know about a murder to be committed without actively participating, you are in no way legally liable. Even if you approve and are sympathetic with the murderer."

Holton sighed deeply. "Well, that's a load off my mind."

"Is it? After all, there's a moral responsibility, if not a legal one."

Holton's eyes flashed an inner hatred. "You don't know this man, what he did to me. I want to see him die."

He got up, reaching into his pocket.

"How much do I owe you, Mr. Patrick?"

"One hundred dollars."

"You're joking!"

"I'm not joking. I consider the fee reasonable. Certainly, it's worth that much to your peace of mind to know you won't be held criminally responsible when your enemy is killed."

"Why, Mr. Patrick, I can't believe you're serious. Of course, I'm glad to have you tell me that I'm safe in this thing, but one hundred dollars! Why, it didn't take you a minute to answer the question!"

"You're wrong, Mr. Holton. It took me years to be able to answer that question. Not only were there years in a law school, but years spent in criminal practice. It took that long to make me an encyclopedia of criminal law. It is because I am such an encyclopedia that you came to me, isn't it, Mr. Holton? You knew my answer would be right, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"So legal advice is worth what good it does for a client, not how long it takes to give it. The fee, I remind you, is one hundred dollars."

"I'll give you fifty."

"Must we have this unpleasantness?"

Holton looked at me for a long moment. Then his hand emerged from his pocket, and he threw five twenties upon my desk.

"Thank you, Mr. Holton."

He left. Miss Arthur came in.

"For heavens' sakes! What are you going to do about that man?"

"Eavesdropping again, huh? Well, the answer to your question is that I'm going to do nothing about Mr. Holton. Only, for his own good, I hope he has an alibi when



the deed is done, for he admits that he has motive to do it himself."

"You aren't going to do anything to stop it?"

"How can I? Holton is a client. His communication is privileged. I dare not reveal it to a soul, much less the cops. All I can do is sit back and read the papers and try to figure out which murder he was talking about."

Miss Arthur looked aghast. Then she turned on her heel and stalked out, which was her right, for it was closing time. I sat there, wondering if she were right, if I were wrong. By all the rules of the game, I had to keep my mouth shut. Yet I wondered if there were other rules superior to my own. I gave up thinking about it, got up from my desk and walked over to my hat.

It hung on a hook beside a picture of Roger Brooke Taney, the great chief justice who had been damned for his decision in the Dred Scott case. I winked into his penetrating eyes. He had stuck to the rules, and I would stick to them, too. I would keep my mouth shut about Holton, though I was invited out to dinner at Cap Morrow's.

Cap was head man in homicide in the city detective bureau, and he would be the logical one for me to spill the beans to if I were going to. But I wasn't going to.

I went home to my apartment, cleaned up and then went out to Cap's. His duplex was on the north side. He had a pair of nice kids in high school and a wife who was holding her own at forty. He also had a kid sister named Louise. She was the cause of Cap's inviting me out there. I wasn't too much interested, but I didn't mind looking her over.

It was a quarter of eight when I got to Cap's, and dinner wasn't ready yet. Cap was running the phonograph while his kids, Johnnie and Lois, were jitterbugging.

"Louise and mom are in the kitchen," said Cap. "Louise is getting to be a better cook than mom."

He turned away quickly and put on a Big Sid Catlett record. The kids went to town on that while I sat wondering just how Cap was going to try to frame me into marrying his kid sister. Really, I felt a little bit complimented, for Cap was tops with me. As for the sister, I'd only met her once and didn't really know her.

It turned out there was nothing to worry about. I saw, when we'd all sat down to

the table, that she had tumbled to the big idea. She'd decided to take it out on me, and the only looks she gave me that weren't chilly were just plain dirty. So there was no fun getting through dinner, though Cap hadn't exaggerated about the cooking.

Afterward, the kids went out to the movies, and Cap and I sprawled out in the living room while his wife and Louise did the dishes. He was a little uneasy about the way his bid as a matchmaker was turning out. Me, too. The more I'd looked over Louise, the more I'd liked her.

I got to thinking about John Holton and his knowledge that someone was going to be murdered. I thought it would be too bad if that someone turned out to be a nice kid like Louise. Of course, Holton had talked about the victim being a man, but you never can tell. He might have been stating a hypothetical case. I always screen my clients' stories through the sieve of my skepticism, and it's seldom I pan out much truth.

"Any good murders lately?" I asked Cap. He laughed.

"If there were, you'd have the cases. No, things've been slow."

Before he had quite finished saying this, the telephone rang. He went to answer it. A moment later, he was back.

"Sorry, Sam, but I've got to go out. Nothing much, just a suicide. But the guy's pretty well off, and I'll have to double-check. Maybe you've heard of him. The name's John Holton."

For the second time that day, my astonishment showed. Cap looked me over. He said quietly: "Let's have it, Sam."

I told him all about Holton's visit. There was no need for silence now—my client was dead. I owed him nothing. Cap heard me out.

"Would you mind coming with me?" he asked. "I hate to drag you away, but it looks as if we've stumbled onto something."

"I'll go." We made excuses, then went out to Cap's car. I let him drive a block, then ventured, "If I were you, I'd take it easy. This may be just what it is supposed to be, suicide."

He shook his head. "No, Sam, I'd bet my shirt on it being murder. Whoever was going to commit this murder Holton'd found out about, got wise to the fact that Holton knew. He wasn't going to rely on Holton's keeping his mouth shut. He shut his mouth in his own way."



"Maybe." I noticed Cap was giving me sidelong looks. "Well?"

"Has it occurred to you that the murderer may have followed Holton to your office, that he knew Holton had talked to you?"

"I suppose that could be."

"And don't you suppose the murderer might be wondering just how much Holton told you? He might even decide Holton had mentioned his name."

"In which case I'm scheduled the next victim, huh? Lord, Cap, and so soon after dinner!"

"Well, it's an idea. And if you've a trick stomach, maybe you'd better not go in with me."

But I went in. Holton's place was a modest frame house in an almost low-rent section of town.

"The old boy was worth two or three hundred thousand anyway," Cap volunteered, as we went up the walk. "Nobody ever heard much about him because he was always a silent partner. He put in the dough and the other guys put in the work."

Holton was spread out on the floor of a room that he probably called his library, only the only books in it were the kind they gave away twenty years ago with magazine subscriptions. There was a rolltop desk, its opened top cluttered with papers. There was also a wooden filing cabinet and a small safe, which was locked.

"No wonder the boys decided it was suicide," said Cap. "Look at the powder burns on his temple. The muzzle of the gun had to be within a few inches of the skin to make those burns."

It had been done with a .32 revolver, which lay a few inches from an outlying hand.

"The picture's all right," said Cap. "Sometimes the fingers are still tight around the gun, but sometimes it falls free. Could be suicide, after all. All we need is a motive."

Holton's nephew and only heir furnished it. Clyde Holton said he had lived with his uncle for the last five years, doing the cooking and keeping the place tidy for his room, board and spending money. He was a poolroom punk if ever I saw one. As a matter of fact, he said he'd been shooting Kelly, this evening, then come back and found his uncle's body.

"Uncle John was taking three different kinds of medicine for his ulcers. Sometimes

they gave him a lot of trouble. I guess he just couldn't take it any longer."

Cap asked, "Who was his doctor?"

"Doc Tillitson."

"A good man." Cap went out to the phone and presently came back. "That's the McCoy, all right. The old man's ulcers were giving him plenty of pain." He eyed me speculatively. I handed him a paper which I had picked up from the litter on the desk. It was a summons. The Second National Bank had sued Holton for fifty thousand dollars. He was named as a partner in the firm of Dwight Scott & Co.

"So," said Cap, looking over the summons, "Holton was backing this outfit, too. Know anything about it, kid?"

Clyde Holton nodded.

"Sure. Uncle John put fifty thousand into the place to begin with. It's a wholesale grocery house that they just started a couple of years ago. This man Scott's a crook. Uncle John told me just this morning that he'd not only run through the fifty thousand he put in it, but had run up a hundred thousand dollars worth of debts."

"Well, well." Cap put the summons in his pocket. "Where can I find this man Scott?"

"At the company office, I expect. He's afraid to run away. It's a break for him. Uncle John's dead. Another day, and Uncle John would have had him behind bars."

Cap eyed him and nodded toward the door. As I started out, he asked Clyde Holton, "By the way, who's your uncle's lawyer?"

"Mr. Sprague. George Sprague."

The youth said this a little proudly. George Sprague was a ranking civil practice lawyer in town. Cap started after me, and we went on out. When we were in his car, he said:

"I'll stop at the first drugstore. I want you to call Sprague. Ask him if Holton had a will and who the beneficiaries were. Then ask him if he'd mind stopping over at Dwight Scott & Co. I know it's my job, but as a lawyer you can get the dope out of Sprague quicker than I can."

"Anything to help." Cap stopped at a drugstore featuring pink and white Teddy bears, and I went inside and made the call. Sprague was at home, all right. He hadn't heard the news about his client, and he seemed stunned.

"No, there wasn't any will," he said. "Holton asked me where his money would



go if he didn't have any will, and when I told him it would go to Clyde, he said that's where he would will it anyway, so he would save money, and not execute a will. He was like that."

"Know anything about this lawsuit the Second National filed against Dwight Scott & Co.?"

"My God! Did they sue? They said they would wait another week."

"Suppose you run over to the company office? Cap Morrow would like to talk to you there."

"Sure, Sam. I'll start at once."

Dwight Scott & Co. was lodged in a rather ramshackle warehouse on the south edge of the business district. There was a light in the office. Cap barged in, and I followed.

Two men were working at desks, a fat man and a medium-sized man. The fat man said he was Scott. When Cap announced the purpose of his visit, Scott looked at the medium-sized man, who got up at once and went out. Then Scott eyed Cap defensively.

"So Holton's dead? Well, what makes you think I know anything about it?"

"His nephew, Clyde, said you had run through a lot of money and the old man would have had you behind bars if he had lived another day. How about that?"

The fat man paled in spite of himself, and his chin began to quiver.

"Holton couldn't have proved a thing. We just got into the business at the wrong time, that's all."

"It strikes me that two years is a short time to run through a hundred and fifty grand. I don't imagine Holton would like losing that much dough very much."

Scott shook his head. "No, Holton wouldn't have lost all that money, just the fifty thousand he put into the business. You see, this is a limited partnership. I am the general partner, and Holton was the limited partner. All he could lose was his original investment."

"But I thought partners were personally liable for all partnership liabilities." Cap turned to me. "How about that, Sam?"

"Not if it is a limited partnership. Scott's right. Holton would be stuck only for his fifty grand which he originally put into the business, but Scott would be liable for all the partnership debts."

Cap faced Scott. "And I'll bet you haven't

got a dime! At least, that anybody can find."

Scott steadily returned his gaze. "No, I haven't."

Cap turned back to me. "Well, I never heard of such a thing as a limited partnership. I thought you had to incorporate to escape private liability for firm debts."

"No, Cap. The fact is, though, that limited partnerships are pretty rare. Maybe that's because lawyers make more money out of incorporating businesses than they do out of setting up limited partnerships. When you form a limited partnership, all you have to do is to file a certificate of partnership in the county clerk's office. It names the partners, their status in the firm and their liability. Then you stick up a placard on the premises showing the same stuff, and that's all there is to it."

"Well, you learn something every day. So old Holton stood to lose only his fifty thousand investment instead of another hundred thousand!" He wheeled on Scott. "But he wouldn't have liked losing even fifty. He would have put you away if he could have caught up with any finagling in the books!"

Scott was getting back some of his nerve. He sneered.

"If he could have caught up with me. Try and find anything queer about my books!"

"I suppose you've got an alibi for the last couple of hours?"

Scott rapidly lost his nerve again.

"I went over to the East Side to try and collect a bill." He faltered. "But the guy wasn't home. I can't prove it."

"What was the guy's name?"

Eagerly, Scott mentioned a name, even produced a statement from his pocket for a long overdue bill. It was an East Side address. Cap put the statement in his pocket and said:

"Don't think I won't find out if the guy was home or not."

Scott eyed him sullenly. "Sprague's coming over here," Cap told him easily. "Maybe he can tell us something."

Scott looked worried. We waited. I let my eyes rove around the place. There was a placard, all right, bearing the necessary data about the limited partnership. The placard had to be there and the certificate had to be filed in the county clerk's office in order to give legal notice to all people who dealt with the firm that it was a limited partnership, with restricted liability with respect to Hol-



ton. It was up to anybody who did business with them to find out and be on his guard.

"This is a very terrible thing," said George Sprague, when he walked in. He regarded Cap gravely. "Do you really suspect murder?"

"It's always possible. I thought that you, as Holton's attorney, might give me some valuable information that I'd have a hard time getting any other way. For example, you would know whether Holton meant to prosecute Scott here."

Scott's chair creaked as he leaned forward, glaring at Sprague. Sprague was not intimidated. He looked Scott squarely in the eye.

"That's an easy one to answer. Holton definitely meant to file criminal charges against Scott. The suit filed by the Second National would have brought things to a head."

Scott kept himself under control. He glared silently at Sprague. Cap said:

"I'll be sending a couple of men over with a writ to pick up your books. If you try to destroy them, you'll be hanging yourself." He faced Sprague again. "What else do you know about this thing?"

"Nothing. It came like a bolt out of the blue."

"Didn't Holton have any business enemies?"

"Not that I know of. As a silent partner, he didn't have many personal contracts, and Scott is the first partner who ever gave him any trouble."

"Go on," said Scott. "Just keep right on talking." He shut up when he saw the interested look in Cap's eyes. Cap got up.

"Well, I guess there's nothing more for us here. Thanks for coming over, Sprague. I'll probably see you later."

"Any time." We left Scott sitting glumly at his desk. Sprague drove away in his car, and Cap and I headed downtown.

"Let me out at the next crosstown car," I said. "I've had enough sleuthing for one night."

"You just aren't used to being on my side of a murder deal," Cap laughed. "I am sorry this thing spoiled your evening."

I said it was too bad, too. But I wasn't fooling Cap. He knew the evening had been spoiled because Louise and I hadn't hit it off. I felt a little bad about that. Louise was a nice girl, and Cap had been trying to do me a favor. I was a little flattered.

"I'll not be home in a hurry," Cap said. "Drop in and tell mom, will you? I'll have

to check on this nephew's poolroom alibi and run out and check up on this bill Scott says he was trying to collect. Then I'll have to contact the D.A. and get a writ for those books."

"I'll stop in." I did, but Cap's wife was at a neighbor's. Louise let me in.

"Sit down a minute," she invited. "I've a confession to make. I was putting away the silverware and couldn't help hearing your conversation with Cap. I think you're in a terribly dangerous position. Do you see why?"

"Of course. And I'm flattered by this sudden concern."

Her nose went up. "I'm thinking only of how it will look if you're killed and Cap is held responsible for letting you run around alone. I don't know why he did such a thing."

I laughed. "I'll take care of myself." I started to leave. Louise stepped forward.

"But we were supposed to have a date. Remember?"

"Sure, but it's late."

"It's no such thing. There's a new night club I've been wanting to see. It won't take me long to get ready."

When she left the room I got out a notebook, ripped out a sheet of paper and scribbled my apologies. Then I slipped out quietly. Louise meant well, trying to keep me in a public place until she could persuade her brother to put a bodyguard on me. But I had things to do.

I drove to the nearest drugstore, went inside and phoned Lizzie Snyder. Lizzie had been in the county clerk's office for forty years, surviving all political upheavals by virtue of her indispensability.

She had such an infallible memory about the records that many a lawyer, while running a real estate title, played safe by asking her if owners in the chain ever had been sued. They might make a mistake, but Lizzie never did. I knew she would be up—she read detective stories by the hundreds. And she did answer the phone at once.

"Hello, Lizzie. You can do me a favor. Tell me, how many limited partnerships are recorded in your office?"

"Three."

"Is Dwight Scott & Co. one of them?"

"Never heard of it till Second National sued them today. No, they've no certificate on file."

"Thanks, Lizzie, I'll send you a box of candy."



"Make it a new mystery novel instead. I've got to watch my figure."

I hung up before she could hear me laughing. She was sixty-five, as broad as she was long. I phoned police headquarters and told them to have Cap call me at my apartment. I stopped at a restaurant for a snack, then went on home.

There's no night man downstairs in these times, and I used the automatic elevator to get to my floor. I was just putting the key in the lock when I heard someone behind me. I turned. It was Clyde Holton.

He had evidently been waiting around a corner. The revolver he was carrying was pretty much like the one that had been used to kill his uncle.

"Just open up," he said, "and let me in."

I did this. Then I asked, "What's it all about, kid?"

"It's about that little talk Uncle John had with you this afternoon."

"Oh, so you know about that, huh?"

"Sure. I was tailing the old boy at the time."

"Then I take it you were the lad who was going to commit a murder."

"You got the idea. Only don't tell me you didn't know it was me."

"I didn't for a fact. If I'd known, do you think I wouldn't have told Cap Morrow?"

Clyde Holton sneered. "I know what a smart lawyer would do. He'd keep his mouth shut and try some blackmail. You'd probably wound up with half my inheritance before you were through."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it. Now that you're talking, would you mind telling me whom you were going to murder?"

"Not at all. Dwight Scott. He was going to double-cross me. We'd been working together on that partnership deal and making quite a nice thing out of it. You see, the old man trusted me enough to let me examine the books. Scott and I split fifty-fifty. When Uncle John finally got wise, Scott said he'd squeal on me if I didn't talk him into laying off. I knew I couldn't do that. So I made a deal with a guy down at the warehouse to drop a packing case on Scott. Uncle John got in the conversation. He tried to sneak away, but I heard him and knew he'd been in the house. I figured, when I followed him to your office, that he was spilling to you."

I tried to light a cigarette casually. But I used three matches.

"That's a laugh, kid. Your uncle was

going to let you get away with it. He even approved."

Clyde Holton eyed me incredulously. I tried to make it more convincing. "Your uncle probably had Scott's life insured. He might have seen Scott's apparently accidental death as a means of covering his losses. So you didn't have to kill your uncle to shut him up."

"I didn't kill him, wise guy. Do you think I'm that dumb? After I saw that he was blabbing to the town's hot-shot criminal lawyer, I wanted no part of any murder deal. I gave up the idea of taking care of Scott and was going to scam out of town. Then I walked in and found Uncle John dead. I figured then you had me over a barrel. But now it's the other way around."

"I get it. You wouldn't be talking like this if you thought anything you said would be repeated."

"Right. Say your prayers, pal."

I'll never know whether I would have said them. The bell rang then, and Clyde Holton said quickly:

"Let whoever it is in. And don't try nothing."

I went to the door and opened it. I tried to give the high sign, but Louise strode by me.

"You heel, walking out on me! I'm not going to let you out of my sight until I get hold of Cap. We're going to headquarters right now. I'll—"

She had seen Clyde Holton and the revolver. It was all I could do to meet her eyes when she stared at me. She'd been right, and now my stupidity had brought her into this deal, too.

"Come on in, babe," Clyde Holton told her. "It's too bad."

I said, "Listen, kid, you want money. I've got money. Name your price. You can take the money and get out of the country till this thing blows over."

He shook his head. "Money's no good to you after you've been fried. Sorry, but there is only one way out."

"I guess that's right." Evidently, he wasn't expecting it—that's why I managed to get within a couple of feet of him before he could shoot. I hit his wrist so hard that the gun clattered clear across the room. Then I hit Mr. Clyde Holton so hard on the button that he traveled almost as far as the gun. Next I called headquarters. Cap had just got in

"I've got a customer out here for you."



I told him. "Clyde Holton. He's taking a nap right now, but he'll be ready by the time you get here."

I hung up. Louise was staring at Holton.

"That was marvelous," she said, "but crazy. He had a gun pointed right at you."

"Sure. All over Europe there have been people with guns pointed right at them. But they got tired of it."

I sent Louise home in a cab. An hour later, both Clyde Holton and Dwight Scott were under lock and key with fraud charges against both of them and murder against Holton. Cap had got hold of George Sprague.

"As the old man's attorney," he said, "you're the one to take over."

"Of course," answered Sprague importantly. "First thing in the morning, I'll have myself appointed receiver of the partnership, also administrator of Holton's estate. Clyde, held for his murder, will be ineligible."

"You won't be doing anything of the kind," I told Sprague. "You will be looking out from behind bars yourself."

Sprague started, grinned as if he thought this was a very funny joke. Cap was eyeing me coolly.

"I don't think you're joking, Sam. What's on your mind?"

"Sprague killed old man Holton. He'd made a terrible mistake in not filing the limited partnership certificate in the office of the county clerk. I suspected it hadn't been filed when I found out how much credit had been extended to the partnership. The Second National, for example, would never have lent them fifty thousand when their capital was only that much, unless they had counted on Holton's personal credit.

"Their lawyers naturally checked to see if the partnership was limited. When they found it wasn't, they made the loan. Other creditors acted upon the same policy, so the partnership got indebted for a hundred thousand more than the original assets. Meanwhile, Clyde and Scott were milking the partnership dry. The payoff came when Second National sued.

"Old Holton probably never guessed what had happened, that there'd been a mistake in not filing the certificate. But he naturally got in touch with Sprague. Sprague knew there was something wrong or Second National would never have extended such a

loan. He discovered his mistake. He knew that old Holton would ruin him, sue him for malpractice and expose him to the public for his carelessness. So he went out to Holton's place, killed him and tried to make it look like suicide. He figured on no future trouble from Holton's only heir, the weak-sister Clyde. How about that, Sprague? Have I left out anything?"

Sprague was white. "You're making that up out of whole cloth! I'll admit I made a mistake and filed the certificate in the recorder's office, thinking that was where it should have been filed. But that doesn't prove I killed Holton."

Cap eyed Sprague coldly. "Of course, you can prove an alibi."

"No, I can't. I spent the entire evening at home alone. My wife's visiting her folks. But that doesn't mean you can prove your crazy theory."

Cap said, "It doesn't seem crazy to me. It seems like damned strong circumstantial evidence."

Sprague sneered, "You're forgetting that you're talking to a lawyer, not some moron who doesn't know how to protect himself!"

"Better take a plea," I said. "I'd hate to see a fellow lawyer go to the chair."

"You go to hell."

"All right, then. You asked for it." I turned to Cap. "Let's have that summons you found on Holton's desk."

Cap handed over the summons. I held it so that Sprague could see it.

"You slipped up on one thing, George. You never dreamed that Holton would talk to any other lawyer but you. But he needed the advice of a criminal lawyer this afternoon, so he came to me. He mentioned that you were his regular lawyer and that he'd just been to your office about a lawsuit against him. And he happened to mention that he'd left this summons there. How do you account for it turning up later on his desk?"

Sprague leaped out of his chair.

"You're a damned liar! I never saw that summons until Holton showed it to me tonight!"

Sprague stopped short then, stared wordlessly, as if he wished that he had never uttered a word in his life. I laughed a little sorrowfully.

"Sure, George, I'm a liar. Please forgive me. You see I had to lie. I knew I was talking to a lawyer, not just some moron who didn't know how to protect himself."



# MEMO FOR A SHAKEDOWN

*A Novelette*

By ROLAND PHILLIPS

*There was more behind the mystery of the missing heirloom than met the eye—and it looked like murder.*

## I.

LIEUTENANT CASSIDY slammed the receiver back on its hook, relieved himself of a few choice expletives and glowered around at Sergeant Holliday, who had strolled into the office in time to catch the reverberations.

"I've a faint suspicion," Holliday observed, as the lieutenant mopped at his glistening face and went on muttering under his breath, "that our old chum Cornelius H. Rossmore has been on the line."

"You should have heard him," Cassidy stormed. "What he called the police force and me in particular would burn you down. And I'm supposed to sit back and take it. Anybody else and I'd haul 'em down here and give 'em the works. If we don't recover that fool heirloom of his before long, I'll start chewing the rugs. Know what the old coot threatens now?"

"Jump off a bridge, I hope."

"He's going to take matters into his own hands."

"Yeah?" Holliday said. "And just what does that mean?"

"I didn't give him a chance to do any briefing. I hung up on him."

"Wow! That's downright malfeasance or something. He'll—"

"I don't care what happens to me," Cassidy exploded. "I've stood for all I'm going to. If that phone blats again, as it probably will when Rossmore recovers from the shock I've handed him, you're going to tell his lordship that I've taken off for the South Seas."

"Maybe he's decided to employ a private dick," Holliday said.

"That's his privilege. And it would just be our luck if the guy made good and showed us up," Cassidy grumbled. "Things do happen that way occasionally. You boys seem to be laying down on the job. Why the devil can't you get somewhere?"

"Matt Gibson said he had a hot lead this morning," the sergeant replied. "Me, I've been running my legs off. Our quarry's either holed up for the duration or skipped town."

Two weeks before, Rossmore's daughter and her escort, a Mr. Sabin, had been held up and robbed on their way home from a late party. Among the valuables of which they had been relieved was a bracelet. That fact, however, was not revealed to the police at the time, and of course failed to appear in the newspaper story. Cassidy learned of it later from the stricken Rossmore himself, who spoke of the bracelet in hushed tones. It was, he stated, a priceless heirloom, and had been worn and cherished by three generations of his family. The loss of the other property, which included a necklace and purse, and Mr. Sabin's watch and wallet, were of no importance and could be replaced, the bracelet never. Needless to say, it must be restored.

Cassidy had listened politely and sympathetically, but wanted to know why the article in question had not been listed among the stolen items at the time the robbery was reported. After some hesitancy, Rossmore admitted that his daughter had taken the bracelet from the safe without his knowledge or consent, had withheld the fact until the loss was discovered at home, which brought on a tearful confession and sent the distraught father scurrying to police headquarters.

Once he had unburdened himself, Rossmore insisted there must be no mention of the missing ornament; that no whisper of the loss should reach the outside world. Since anything remotely pertaining to his family always made rare copy, the knowledge that a treasure from the house of Rossmore had been snatched would provide a choice morsel for the gossip columnists to



chew on. Moreover, the news of his daughter's rôle in the affair might leak out and that would be a catastrophe.

To this Cassidy was agreeable. In fact, he preferred it to remain strictly hush-hush. It would keep the news hounds off his tail. Neither Miss Rossmore nor her escort was able to give any too good a description of the culprit. He had waved a gun in their faces. He was slender, had a rasping voice, and was nimble-footed. The irate Mr. Sabin had pursued the man for several blocks, but had been outdistanced.

Having promptly decided that the meager description fitted one Rudy Mullin, an old-time petty offender given to stick-ups and purse-snatching, Cassidy expected to make short shift of the case and assured Rossmore to that end—a mere routine job as he termed it.

Unfortunately, Rudy was not to be found. He avoided his usual haunts. Two of his unsavoury playmates were rounded up and grilled. Both disclaimed any knowledge of the fugitive's whereabouts or his movements. Even the few trusted stoolies, called upon in the emergency, were unable to sniff out the suspect's hide-away or to pick up his trail. It was after a week of these rebuffs that Cassidy began to squirm. Rossmore communicated with him several times a day, becoming more apprehensive as time passed, and more abusive. Being a man of means and influence, his grievances soon had the ear of the powers, and the harried lieutenant reached more often for an aspirin tablet and increased his doses of bicarb.

"It might be," Holliday ventured, "we got started off on the wrong foot. Some other mug could have pulled the job. I know a couple—"

"I still say it was Rudy," Cassidy declared. "A skinny guy with a gravel voice. Fits him, don't it? The only thing I'm afraid of," he went on dismally, "is that the louse will bust up the bracelet before we get our hands on him. He won't know its value and certainly won't risk hocking the thing. It's solid gold a couple inches wide and set with a flock of colored stones which Rossmore claims aren't worth much. He showed me a picture of the creation. Looks like a piece of costume jewelry that women are wearing these days."

"If Rudy doesn't tumble that the thing's gold, he'll chuck it in a hurry," Holliday said, and grimaced. "Lovely thought. The Rossmore heirloom in an ash can."

"The Lord forbid!" Cassidy groaned.

"I'd been hoping Louie Burke would steer us somewhere," the sergeant went on. "I know he's trying. Rudy's so much poison to him."

Cassidy shrugged. "So he says. I wouldn't trust any stool. The best of 'em play both ends against the middle when it's to their advantage."

"Burke's different. He's done me a couple good turns. Got himself a bowling alley and making honest money now."

"It's a nice front," Cassidy snorted. "Any time a mug like Louie reforms, you can bet—"

He broke off as the phone rang, stiffened in his chair. "Take it. If it's you know who, tell him I'm out for the afternoon."

But it wasn't Rossmore. The sergeant grinned and passed the receiver across the desk. "Stop biting your nails! It's Matt Gibson and he seems to be excited."

"Hello," Cassidy greeted, visibly relieved. "You got some cheerful news?"

"You might call it that," Gibson responded. "I got Rudy Mullin."

"Got him? Where—how—" Cassidy was almost incoherent. He turned and bellowed to Holliday. "Matt's nabbed Rudy! Bring him down here," he shouted into the phone.

"That would be a little awkward. You'll have to send for him."

"You mean you can't handle the shrimp?"

"I mean he's dead. I had to do it. Popped him square between the eyes. First time I've squeezed a trigger since Bougainville."

"I'm not feeling hurt about that," Cassidy boomed, and immediately braced himself before asking the all-important question. "How about the bracelet?"

"Got it right in my mitt," Gibson replied jubilantly. "Found it in Rudy's pocket."

Cassidy let out a whoop. "Not damaged any?" he inquired.

"Can't see that it is."

"That's great, Matt. Where you talking from?"

"Tenth floor, Lakeview Terrace Hotel. A swank hide-out for a punk, eh? He's been camped here under the name of Robbins. Everything's quiet so far. Guess nobody heard my cannon go off."

"Well, hold everything," Cassidy said. "I'll be right up."

"Wait a minute," protested Gibson. "Don't crash up here yet. Just before I rang you there was a phone call which I answered and somebody said, 'I'm on my



way, Rudy. Wait for me.' So I'm waiting. We might as well collect a dividend while we're at it. You lay low till you hear from me."

"All right," Cassidy agreed reluctantly. "I'll mark time. But don't make it too long."

He hung up, tipped back in his chair and relayed the news to Holliday. "Told you it was Rudy, didn't I?" he chortled. "Looks like we'll collar one of his buddies, too. This is certainly our day to howl."

"How'd Matt ever stumble onto him in that ritzy dump?" the sergeant muttered. "Be the last place I'd expect to find—"

"That's what he must have figured, but Matt dug him out. Didn't have time to ask the particulars. They can wait."

"Hadn't you better break the glad tidings to Cornelius?" Holliday suggested.

Cassidy reached for the phone, abruptly stayed his hand. "No, by golly! I'll let the old so-and-so stew a little longer. Do him good."

"Matt didn't say anything about the other stuff, did he? The girl's beads and her boy friend's watch and wallet?"

"We should worry about those trifles. This Sabin, who I understand is engaged to marry the Rossmore bud, must be in the money himself and won't miss a few extra bank notes, though he was belly-aching because of his lost timepiece. Said it had a sentimental value."

"It'll probably turn up in some pawnshop," Holliday said.

"You know, I'm tickled pink that Matt pulled off this trick," Cassidy declared. "It'll buck him up. Felt pretty bad over his medical discharge and seemed to feel he was washed out. Didn't want to come back on the job at first, didn't think he could make good. Maybe the marines couldn't use him again, but I can. We'll hold a little celebration tonight."

"Count me in on it," the sergeant said.

The phone rang and Cassidy pounced upon it, but the call wasn't from Matt Gibson. The men talked and kept an eye on the clock. When a half-hour passed and no word came from the hotel, the lieutenant grew impatient.

"Tell you what," he broke out. "You chase yourself up to the Lakeview Terrace, get hold of Trotter, the house dick there, and hang around downstairs. If any mug you know breezes in, nail him. I'll join you soon's Matt gives the word."

Holliday picked up his hat and started for the door just as it opened and an attendant looked in. "The big noise is outside, lieutenant," he whispered. "Are you receiving?"

"Rossmore?" Cassidy exclaimed, bounding to his feet. "Here?"

"In the flesh, and Mr. Sabin's with him."

"Huh, a double-barreled assault." Cassidy chuckled and grinned at the sergeant. "This is going to be one of my pleasant moments. I'll let the pair roar their heads off and enjoy the sensation. All right, Joe, show 'em in."

"How about me staying to enjoy the fun?" said Holliday.

"I'll give you a full report of it round by round. On your way!"

The sergeant reluctantly departed. Still chuckling, Cassidy plucked a cigar from his desk drawer, lighted it and strolled to the window. Mr. Rossmore stepped briskly into the office, a wiry, fiery little man, ruddy of face and immaculately dressed as usual. Behind him loomed Sabin, young and blond, a stick tucked under his arm.

The lieutenant turned as his visitors entered, smiled, and was prepared to murmur a greeting when Mr. Rossmore cut him short.

"Why did you hang up on me awhile ago?" he demanded indignantly.

"I thought I'd let you cool off a bit," Cassidy responded. "You were shouting so I couldn't make out half—"

"What I wanted you to understand," Mr. Rossmore again interrupted, "is that your services, such as they have been, are to be terminated. Immediately! I am and always have been a man of action, and I insist upon that virtue in those with whom I have dealings. Your miserable, futile efforts in my behalf have exhausted my patience and I have made other arrangements—definite ones. Is that quite clear to you, Mr. Cassidy?"

The detective nodded. "I seem to get your drift," he acknowledged mildly. "You are giving the police the boot. Right? I believe you did say something to that effect over the phone."

"Precisely."

"Are you taking over the job?" Cassidy inquired, beaming at Sabin and wondering if that accounted for his presence here.

"Certainly not," Sabin snapped. "However, I'm as much distressed—"

"Sure, sure," Cassidy said. "I don't sup-



pose you care to explain just what other arrangements you have made. Or is it any of my business?"

"Your suppositions are correct," Mr. Rossmore replied, "but I can assure you they are the most promising."

"That's fine. You'll let me know when your property's restored, of course. I'll want to write the case off the books."

"You may as well do so right now," Mr. Rossmore came back.

"Don't tell me you're that sure!"

"I have every reason to believe so."

"Well, well, this is certainly amazing news," Cassidy declared. "Whoever you've engaged will be a genius if he makes good. I admit we've had some difficulty," he went on. "In fact, we should have disposed of the case long before now. However—"

"I agree with you on that point," Mr. Rossmore broke in tartly.

"However," Cassidy pursued, "in view of recent developments I think I can promise you—"

"Bah!" Mr. Rossmore exploded. "You've been making promises for the past two weeks. I'm not looking for a miracle to happen now."

Cassidy laughed. "You never can tell. Sometimes we do get a lucky break."

"Bah!" Mr. Rossmore repeated, nodded to Sabin and moved toward the door.

"Want to bet?" Cassidy called after them. "Want to bet I won't get the bracelet before you do?"

But the door slammed behind the pair and, a moment later, the phone rang.

"You hear from Matt yet?" Holliday asked. "No? Funny, isn't it? How much longer do you intend to wait? I'm down in the lobby with Trotter. Don't you think I'd better go up and investigate?"

Cassidy hesitated. Evidently, the visitor Matt Gibson expected had been delayed or scared off. It didn't matter so much, after all, so long as Rudy Mullin was accounted for and the Rossmore heirloom recovered.

"Suppose you give the room a buzz?" he suggested. "That'll be enough. I'll hold the line."

He waited, somewhat disturbed now, the receiver clamped to his ear. He hadn't realized it was so late, almost dark outside. Matt had reported fully an hour ago.

The sergeant's alarmed voice reached him. "We can't get any response from the room. Want me to go up?"

"Wait till I get there," Cassidy ordered.

He bolted from the office and down the stairs, hopped into a waiting police car, barked an address and was shot away. Five minutes later, he climbed out to meet Holliday and Trotter in the hotel lobby. With no words between them, the three ascended to the tenth floor and the house detective led the way to the room assigned to the alleged Robbins. When his knock went unanswered and the door was found to be locked, he used a passkey.

## II.

CASSIDY pushed into the dark room, groped for the wall switch, and the premises came to life. Matt Gibson lay sprawled face down on the floor beside the bed. The back of his coat was stained. The lieutenant stifled an exclamation and dropped beside him. Holliday cursed softly as he closed the door.

"Dead, is he?" the sergeant asked at length.

Cassidy got to his feet, his hands knotted, his throat constricted. He nodded, and for a moment was too stunned for speech. Holliday moved beside him.

"Got it in the back," he said, and swore again.

Cassidy made a circuit of the room, jerked open the door of the closet and bath, found nothing to reward him, stood with narrowed, troubled eyes fixed upon the quiet form of his associate.

"Matt goes through all the hell in the South Pacific without a scratch," he burst out. "Has to come home to be shot down by a damned, cowardly little dip!"

"He must have been excited," Holliday ventured. "Must have just clipped Rudy's scalp and knocked him out for a minute. I've seen it happen. Rudy comes to and drills him, probably just after he talked with you."

"It don't make sense," Cassidy rumbled. "He said he got Rudy square between the eyes. He'd never be fooled, not after what he's been through."

"Well, sometimes the best of us—" the sergeant began.

"Nonsense! You mean to tell me a man of Matt's experience wouldn't know the difference between a clipped skull and a punctured one?"

"Yes, but Rudy's gone, isn't he? How are you accounting for it? He couldn't have been badly hurt if he got out of here."



Cassidy couldn't deny that. "What can you tell us about Mullin?" he asked, turning to Trotter.

The house detective said the man had registered at the hotel a few days before as Robbins, seldom left the premises and had most of his meals served in his room.

"I saw him come in late this afternoon," Trotter went on. "First I knew there was anything wrong, your man, Gibson, shows up right behind him and wants to know where the bird's roosting. I tell him and he goes upstairs. I ask did he want any help, but he told me to stick in the lobby and if Robbins, I mean Mullin, reappeared, to nab him. I kept an eye on the elevator and stairs, but I never saw the fellow."

"Any of your guests report a disturbance on this floor?"

Trotter said he hadn't had any complaints, that the residents of the two top floors were most permanent and at business.

"All right," Cassidy said glumly, and waved the officer outside. "That'll do for the present. Just keep your trap shut."

The moment Trotter vanished, Cassidy knelt beside Gibson and swiftly explored the dead man's pockets.

"Didn't expect to find the bracelet, did you?" Holliday queried, as the lieutenant got to his feet empty-handed. "What a chance! Rudy copped it, all right. And if he overheard Matt phone, he must suspect the thing's worth hanging on to."

Without commenting on that observation, Cassidy stepped to the phone, got headquarters and broke the news that would speed the homicide squad to the scene. As he replaced the receiver he glanced down at the memo pad on the table, scowled and ripped off the top leaf.

Holliday, watching him curiously, edged over to squint at the penciled numerals on the slip of paper. "Somebody's phone number," he declared, and immediately brightened. "Say, that might be a good lead."

"Couldn't be better," Cassidy said.

"Let's have it. I'll find out—"

"Needn't bother. I already know. I've heard from it often enough lately. It happens to be Rossmore's."

The sergeant fell back, incredulous. "What? You think Rudy's been in touch with the old boy? Figuring on a shakedown?"

"Looks that way, doesn't it?" Cassidy scowled at the evidence in his fingers. "I'm a son-of-a-gun," he muttered. "Now I see

what Rossmore had brewing. Expected to put something over on us. No wonder he was so cocky this afternoon."

"Meaning what?" Holliday asked.

The lieutenant revealed what had taken place in the office an hour before. "I never suspected what he had in mind, and he wasn't tipping his hand, of course. I concluded, as you had, that he'd engaged a private dick who promised him immediate results. So I kidded him along, thinking all the time we had the bracelet and that Rudy was ticketed for the morgue."

"But how in thunder did the two ever get together?" Holliday grumbled. "Imagine us scouring the town for this lug and now we find he and Rossmore must have been holding conferences."

"Hard to take, isn't it?" Cassidy agreed. "Rossmore meant to get back his precious heirloom and to hell with nabbing the culprit."

"Well, he's got a shock coming," Holliday averred with a chuckle. "Rudy's queered the deal by putting pencil to paper. He wasn't trusting himself to remember the phone number, so he had to jot it down. This little memo is a break for us. We don't have to know any of the particulars or what arrangements were made. All that's necessary is to put a tail on Rossmore."

"Might not be as simple as that," Cassidy said. "I doubt if Rossmore intends to take part in the performance. He'll stand for a shakedown, all right, but chances are he'll arrange for his lawyer or Sabin, or some trusted friend, to act as a go-between."

"Yeah, maybe you're right," Holliday admitted, sobering. "I imagine he'd be a bit timid about keeping a rendezvous with a lifeline like Rudy Mullin."

Cassidy tucked the slip of paper into his pocket and crossed to a window. Far below, the lake and the landscaped grounds surrounding the hotel were barely visible in the dusk. Twin rows of lights followed the promenade along the shore.

"The thing that doesn't register with me," he growled at length, "is Matt being so sure he got Rudy, and now we have to think the mug was only stunned, turned the tables on Matt and made a clean getaway."

"Rudy could have potted him while down on the floor. From the position Matt's in now, looks as if he'd just finished phoning us. It was at least an hour before we got up here. That would give Rudy time to revive a little and—"



"It still don't click," Cassidy protested. "There's a page missing from this scenario."

"Maybe that visitor showed up, helped Rudy out," Holliday ventured. "Trotter claims he kept an eye on the stairs and elevators, but there must be service exits that weren't watched."

The lieutenant did not respond. His troubled eyes had shifted to the broad window sill, remained fixed there. The deep scratches on the enameled surface seemed freshly made. He reached over and raised the window with a bang that threatened to shatter the glass. The revealing marks on the weathered stone coping were even more distinct. He leaned out and looked down, but the area below was pitch-black.

Cassidy turned into the room. "Wait here! I'll be right back," he shouted, and was out the door before the amazed sergeant could open his mouth.

Down in the lobby, Cassidy hastened toward the main entrance, shooing off Trotter, who ambled toward him. Once outside, he followed the broad walk that skirted the hotel, reached the far corner, stepped off into the dense growth of shrubs and conifers banked against the towering wall. There he struck a match, shielding it with his palm, pushed slowly ahead until the flickering light disclosed what he had expected to find.

The crushed body was almost hidden by the shrubbery. Cassidy bent down to peer into Rudy Mullin's white face just before the match winked out. He straightened and pushed his way back to the walk.

Ascending the steps into the hotel lobby, he stopped as a police car rolled up to discharge the homicide squad. Cassidy directed them to the proper floor and room.

"Holliday's there," he informed Probert, the lieutenant in charge, "Tell him to come down. And don't leave until you see me again," he added. "I've got another job for you."

"Here?" Probert asked

"Not far away."

Cassidy fumbled through his pockets for a cigar, found none, and headed toward the newsstand at the end of the lobby, bumped into a heavy-set, pink-jowled man who was leaning against the counter. It was Louie Burke, the sergeant's pet stool pigeon.

"Hello," Burke greeted, and lowered his voice. "Something stirring around this dump, eh? I see—"

"You live here?" Cassidy demanded, bristling.

"Hell, no. A couple blocks down the street. Just dropped in for a paper." Burke eyed the lieutenant narrowly. "Could it be Rudy?"

"Holliday said you were trying to smell him out," Cassidy parried.

"Hub, you're damned right! I'd like to find him first, rough him up a bit before turning him over to you. I been laying for that baby."

Cassidy bought his cigar and lighted it without comment.

"Do I keep on looking for him?" Burke queried.

"Holliday hasn't found him yet," Cassidy replied, and moved toward the elevator from which the sergeant had just emerged.

"What the devil did you see at the window awhile ago?" Holliday began. "The way you busted out of the room—"

"I saw how Rudy made his exit," Cassidy said, steering his companion to a far corner of the lobby.

"Yeah? Sprouted wings, did he? That room's ten floors above the street."

"Sure. A good hundred-foot drop. But the tumble didn't hurt him. He was dead when he went out. I made sure of that after I found him in the shrubbery below the window. Matt wasn't fooled. He got Rudy square between the eyes as he claimed he did."

Holliday seemed dumfounded at the news. "Dumped out the window, you mean?" he gasped finally. "Great Scott! Then he couldn't have blasted Matt. That visitor must have shown up, after all."

"Somebody did," Cassidy agreed. "You see what we're up against now, don't you? Who walked in on Matt, shot him down? Why'd he take the trouble to get rid of Rudy? And does he know about the deal with Rossmore?"

"He must have taken the bracelet," Holliday said. "I'd say he was wise to what was cooking and saw a chance to grab off the shakedown for himself. More than likely, one of Rudy's playmates."

"Or a professed enemy," Cassidy intimated. "I had a few words with one of them. He's just going out the door."

The sergeant turned. "Louie Burke! What's he doing here?"

"Just dropped in to buy a paper, he said. Tried to pump me about Rudy. I'm not accusing him," Cassidy added. "It's just that he should be on the scene. Besides, the way he keeps plugging his grudge against Rudy, I'm beginning to think it's phony."



"Want me to pick him up?" Holliday asked.

"Certainly not. We haven't anything on him yet. You stay here with Probert, tell him about Rudy. I'm calling on Rossmore."

Holliday nodded approvingly. "He's our one and only bet, provided Matt's killer is wise to what was in the making."

"I'm saying he is. He wanted that bracelet and he wanted us to think Rudy potted Matt, made a getaway."

"I don't get that angle. Why'd he want to get rid of the punk's body?"

"Simple enough. If Rossmore learned that Rudy was dead, he'd figure the deal was off, wouldn't keep an appointment that's probably been made. Of course, the killer knew we'd find Rudy, but gambled it wouldn't be until morning. That would give him time to do his stuff."

"Sounds reasonable," Holliday agreed. "Now all you have to do is put the screws on Cornelius H., make him come across. If you tell him what's happened here—"

"I've a better idea," Cassidy said. "You head back to the office when things are cleaned up at the hotel. I may want to call on you in a hurry."

### III.

THE Rossmore home was on the opposite side of town, a three-story mansion set back from the street and inclosed by high brick walls. Cassidy dismissed his car there, mounted the steps and jabbed at the bell. The servant who appeared said Mr. Rossmore was not to be disturbed at the moment, but promptly changed his mind at sight of the cupped shield and led his visitor into an upstairs library.

Mr. Rossmore was reading a newspaper and Sabin was writing at a nearby desk. Both men got to their feet as the detective entered the room.

"Sorry to bust in on you like this," Cassidy began abruptly, closing the door behind him, "but it's time we went into a huddle, talked fast and to the point."

"Talked?" Mr. Rossmore repeated, glowering. "About what, sir? Didn't I make it perfectly clear this afternoon that—"

"You did not," Cassidy cut him short. "That's why I'm here. You didn't tell me you've been conniving with Rudy Mullin, expected to get back your bracelet at a price."

Mr. Rossmore stiffened. "What gave you that idea?"

"I'm asking questions, not answering them."

"I've nothing to say," Mr. Rossmore returned firmly, "except that I resent this unwarranted intrusion and I'll thank you to leave."

Cassidy endeavored to hold his temper. "That's final, is it?"

"Absolutely."

"You propose to deal with this blackmailing crook, pay the shakedown he's asking, block our efforts to arrest him?"

"I'm not at all interested in your surmises," Mr. Rossmore declared.

The detective started toward the door, turned. "I've respected your wishes in this affair, Rossmore," he stated. "So far there's been no publicity, and I've preferred it that way. But now that you refuse to play fair with us, I intend to shoot the works. You're going to find the story of your missing heirloom in tomorrow's newspapers, the whole story with trimmings."

"Wait!" Mr. Rossmore cried, as Cassidy opened the door. "You won't . . . you can't do that."

"Why not? Why should I cover up for you any longer?"

"But . . . but—" Mr. Rossmore protested.

"I want to know when and where you expect to meet this man," Cassidy broke in. "That's all. What are you afraid of? You'll get your property back and save a bankroll. What more do you want?"

Mr. Rossmore cast a dismayed glance at Sabin and sank back into his chair.

"I'm waiting," Cassidy snapped. "What's it to be?"

"You may as well own up," Sabin advised with a resigned shrug.

"It . . . it was to be at the north gate, Rock Creek Park," Mr. Rossmore wavered. "At nine o'clock. Mr. Sabin was to keep the appointment."

"Good," Cassidy said, and consulted his watch. "Almost two hours yet. I'll overlook the conniving," he added. "It may turn out to our advantage, after all."

"But . . . but what if Mullin fails to appear?" Mr. Rossmore spoke up. "We have only his word. Something may happen, or he may suspect a trap."

"When did you make the arrangements?"

"This morning," Sabin replied. "We've heard nothing since then."

"How'd you first contact the man?"



"I didn't," Mr. Rossmore said. "He phoned me several days ago, identified himself. At least, he claimed to be Rudy Mullin and I remembered that was the name of the man who had been under suspicion."

"Oh, I see," Cassidy nodded. "You took his word, did you?"

"Not at all. I was skeptical, although I had Mr. Sabin listen in on the conversation, and he was almost certain he recognized the thug's husky voice. But I demanded proof that he had my property before . . . before going any further, and this morning I received a photograph of the bracelet in the mail."

Cassidy nodded again. "What was he asking for its return?"

The detective grimaced. "A nice little windfall."

"What am I to do now?" Mr. Rossmore asked. "About the money, I mean? I have it in a sealed envelope, but I could substitute something else."

"No, don't do that," Cassidy warned. "I want the crook to get the money. It'll be better that way. I'll guarantee to return it to you."

"You won't fail to be near the gate, will you?" Sabin put in quickly. "This man will probably be armed and I couldn't prevent him from escaping."

"I'll be there," Cassidy assured him. "And I'm depending on you to go through with your part of the program. Nothing to be afraid of. Well, I guess that's all for now. I'll phone you from headquarters later, Rossmore. You can come down and claim your property."

The detective left the house and swung briskly down the street, heading toward a café a block beyond. Then he phoned the office. Holliday hadn't returned yet, and he called the hotel, finally reached the sergeant.

Rock Creek Park was no great distance from the Rossmore premises. The north gate, an ivy-covered stone arch, gave access to a winding footpath that led through the trees to a baseball diamond. The street alongside the wooded area was unpaved and poorly lighted, and the few lights scattered through the park provided scant illumination. An ideal rendezvous, Cassidy agreed, as he strolled past the gate a half-hour before the scheduled appointment and halted among the shadows to take up his vigil.

There was no moon, but the stars were bright. A few cars passed. None stopped or

even slowed down. Several pedestrians appeared, hurried on out of sight. Cassidy chewed meditatively on a dead cigar and wondered if perhaps he hadn't gone to too much trouble, hadn't taken what seemed to be unnecessary precautions. Holliday, who had reached the café in response to the phone call, wasn't at all taken with the plans. Still, it was better to play safe, not risk a slip-up now. There was more at stake than the recovery of the Rossmore heirloom. Cassidy wanted to lay hands on Matt Gibson's murderer. That was the all-important thing.

The minutes dragged. The luminous hand of his watch finally pointed to nine, crept past. No one appeared. The park and the street were silent, deserted. When five minutes had elapsed and Cassidy began to stir impatiently, a faint cry reached him, brought him alert. Running footsteps sounded. Peering beyond the gate, he saw a bare-headed figure racing down the path toward him, waving his arms, shouting the detective's name. Recognizing Sabin, Cassidy stepped out and caught the runner, who went limp in his arms and for a moment seemed too breathless to speak.

"What happened?" Cassidy asked.

"The . . . the man met me back there in the park," Sabin gasped. "Said he was . . . was Rudy Mullin, demanded the money. He must have suspected a trap here. He had a gun and—"

"You gave him the money?"

"What else could I do? You . . . you were too far away to help. I called out, tried to grapple with the man. He knocked me down, disappeared. But I got the bracelet," Sabin added, fumbling in his pocket. "The man returned it."

"But you gave him the five thousand," Cassidy repeated, taking the wide, gem-studded band from Sabin's shaky fingers.

"I . . . I had to. He had a gun and—" Sabin stopped short, turned to gape at a man who came along the path toward them.

"All right, Holliday," Cassidy greeted. "Let's have your story. Sabin's already spoken his piece."

The sergeant came up, grinning. "I hung back a little to give him a chance to explain. Well, I tailed him from the Rossmore house, kept him in sight all the way. He stopped off at the café where we met awhile ago, bought himself a couple drinks. Then he headed for the park and started through it. Just before we reached the baseball field he tossed away his hat, let out a yell and



began legging it toward the gate. I sort of figured what was in the making and—"

Sabin wheeled swiftly, bowled Holliday over and started toward the street. Cassidy thrust out a leg, sent the man sprawling into the dirt. The sergeant, swearing, got to his feet, jerked Sabin erect and pinned him against the gate.

"Frisk him!" Cassidy snapped.

Holliday began exploring Sabin's pockets despite the man's frantic struggles, got his fingers on a bulky envelope and passed it over to the lieutenant. Cassidy slit the envelope, ruffled the sheaf of bank notes it contained.

"So you swapped this for the bracelet, did you?" he charged derisively, moving up to Sabin. "Thought we'd fall for that, eh? Well, what do you say now?"

Sabin had nothing to say. He tottered back. His nose and forehead, skinned in the spill he had taken, bled freely.

"I was wondering how you hoped to get away with the bank roll," Cassidy said. "Had to think fast, didn't you? Had to put on a lively one-man act."

"We could have cracked down on him when he left the house," Holliday grumbled. "Saved all this hocus-pocus. He had the jewelry on him."

"I wasn't sure of it," Cassidy explained. "Besides, I could have been mistaken in my man. Louie Burke might have had a finger in the plot, and I meant to be here if he showed up. I don't know how you met Rudy Mullin," he went on, addressing Sabin, "but I've an idea the robbery the other night was arranged between you two. You may have persuaded the girl to filch the bracelet, wear it. We'll check on that later.

"You can thank Rudy for tipping me off," the detective continued, as Sabin merely shrugged and wiped the blood from his mouth. "He had jotted down a phone number, left it on a pad in his room. It was Rossmore's, and it happens to be a private number, carefully guarded. That little two-bit punk never could have got hold of it unless someone close to the family told him.

And he wouldn't have suspected the bracelet was worth a healthy shakedown. That news wasn't broadcast. Someone put him wise. That's when I began to bring you into the picture, Sabin. I was more certain of my suspicions after Rossmore told me Rudy had contacted him by phone, and when I learned you were slated to act as go-between."

"I still don't see how this bird could have walked in on Matt so easy, knocked him off," Holliday spoke up. "He was expecting a visitor and should have been on the alert."

Sabin abruptly came to life. "You . . . you can't hang that on me," he burst out. "I wasn't—"

"How'd you know anything about the murder?" Cassidy demanded sharply. "And how did you get hold of the bracelet? You must have lifted it from Matt Gibson. He had it when he phoned us."

"You . . . you're trying to frame me," Sabin mumbled.

"No need of that. You walked in on Matt, all right, shot him, took the bracelet. And to prevent Rossmore from learning Rudy was dead and calling off the appointment, you dumped him out the window. It was growing dark then and you figured we wouldn't find him until morning, would believe him the killer and still at large. We found him, but I wasn't saying so.

"You would pretend to keep the appointment tonight, return with the bracelet," Cassidy ran on. "Rossmore would have been satisfied, you would have pocketed the five thousand, and both of you would keep mum. It must have handed you a jolt when I appeared, scared Rossmore into confessing. If he had substituted anything for the currency, as he suggested, you would have been sunk. That's why I warned him against doing so. It gave you a last desperate chance to get away with the money, and it gave me the chance to show you up. All right Holliday, let's go! I'm all primed for a session with Cornelius H. Rossmore. Perhaps now he'll admit that the police occasionally do get results."





# THE STRANGE DEATH OF AMOS ORTH

By FRANCES BECK

*Considering the age and wealth of the deceased, and the exceptional beauty of his young widow, the case of the late Mr. Orth promised to be interesting.*

INSPECTOR MCINERNEY did not look like a detective. His expertly tailored clothing sat well on his lean body. His voice, with its Harvard accent, was smooth and unhurried. His movements, too, were smooth and unhurried. In action, he seemed always a little unconcerned, with the apprehension of criminals. He seemed so unless you watched his eyes, piercing gray in the quiet brownness of his face.

In manner, the inspector was gentle, persuasive. He never pushed anybody around. He was more likely to take out his gold cigarette case, pass it over to the suspect, and ask courteous, casual questions until he found out precisely what he wanted to know. The simpler cases of homicide—the street fight, tavern brawl, stickup type of thing—did not interest him. These he left entirely to his lieutenants. Only when finesse was required did he personally enter the case.

Such a case was the death of rich old Amos Orth.

Dr. Williams' voice on the phone was not decisive. He sounded nervous, uncertain. "It has to be heart failure, inspector," he said, "but could you run out for a minute? I'd feel better about it."

That, coming from Dr. Williams, was a trifle odd. Besides being a close personal friend of the deceased, Amos Orth, he was one of the city's duly appointed medical examiners. He would have had full authority to make his own report, sign it and turn in his findings, if suspicious, to the police department through regular channels. Instead, he had asked the inspector to come personally to the deathbed. It promised, together with certain other aspects of the case—the age, wealth, prominence of old Mr. Orth and the exceptional beauty of his young wife—to be interesting.

The doctor's bearing, as he admitted Inspector McInerney to the palatial Orth residence, was half apologetic.

"Afraid I've brought you on a wild goose chase, inspector," he said. "Don't know what made me go off on a tangent and phone you. Couldn't have been anything but heart failure. I was right here myself when it happened."

The inspector pushed the door shut and stood leaning for an instant against it. He smiled down at the humble little doctor and brought out the gold cigarette case.

"What struck you, doctor," he asked, when he had held his lighter to the two cigarettes, "as being peculiar?"

The doctor hesitated. "Well, I don't know exactly. I guess the suddenness of it. I'd just been in to see him, thought he was showing improvement. Pulse was good, heart sounded all right. But that's just the trouble—you can't tell by listening. I told him to have an electrocardiogram two months ago. But I never thought— Well, I'd just stepped out of his door, started downstairs—"

The inspector cast a leisurely glance toward the open library. "Suppose," he suggested, "that we go sit down for a bit?"

"Of course," the doctor said hastily. "Sorry. I guess I'm pretty much upset."

"And now," said the inspector, when they were settled in the library, "you had just started downstairs—"

"Yes. And I heard Mrs. Orth call. It was a sort of scream. She said, 'Doctor, quick!' I ran back in there. She had a bottle of smelling salts and was trying to hold him up in bed, but it wasn't any use. He hadn't fainted. He was dying, was practically dead. I knew the instant I heard that peculiar respiration—short inspiration with expiration prolonged and forcible. By the



time I could get my stethoscope out of the bag, he was dead."

"Fast, rather," commented the inspector. "Must have been quite a shock to you. Well, I guess there was nothing anyone could have done, unless a pulmotor."

The doctor shook his head. "There wasn't time."

"Were there only the two of you present, you and Mrs. Orth?"

"And the nurse. She'd asked me to wait for a minute and give her a lift downtown. Elena—that's Mrs. Orth—was going to sit with him for the afternoon."

McInerny's lean body lounged comfortably in a deep chair, eyes fixed in idle abstraction on the doctor's somewhat shabby shoes. Presently he asked, as if the answer mattered not at all. "The nurse—anybody you know?"

"Mary Keifer," answered the doctor. "She's Amos Orth's niece, incidentally, his only relative, except his wife. A fine nurse. She's been taking care of him for the past two weeks."

"Had Mr. Orth been ill very long?"

"He's been a semi-invalid for above five years. Injured in an automobile accident shortly after his marriage to Elena. But it wasn't anything organic—I mean, nothing that would have caused his death. This last illness was influenza with strep complications. But he was improving. I was sure he'd recover."

"You'd known him for a long time, hadn't you, doctor—rather close friends, weren't you?"

"Oh, yes, since we were boys. Amos was two years older than I. That would make him sixty-five now. And he got rich and I didn't, but it never made any difference in our friendship."

There was a flicker in McInerny's gray eyes, an imperceptible narrowing. Then he abruptly changed the subject.

"Tell me something about Mrs. Orth," he suggested. "I've heard that she's young and quite beautiful."

"Yes," the doctor agreed, "she is both. Oh, not a child by any means. I suppose she's about thirty-three now."

"Were they happy together, would you say?"

"Why, yes, they always appeared to be. Oh, I see what you mean—the difference in their ages. I used to wonder about that myself, but no, I think it was one June-and-December match that was successful. She was devoted to him, with him con-

stantly. You know how most young women would have been, chasing off alone if their husbands couldn't take them. His death was a terrible shock to her, poor girl."

The inspector said, "I'd like to see her for a few minutes, if I may."

The doctor looked worried. "I'd rather you didn't, inspector. Not before this evening. You see, she's suffering from shock. Fainted up there when he died, and I had the nurse put her to bed."

McInerny stood up. "There's no hurry," he answered agreeably. "I can run out again this evening. But now, while I'm here, suppose we have a look at the body."

The two men paused at the head of the stairs.

"Miss Keifer," Dr. Williams spoke to the nurse on guard at the closed door, "this is Inspector McInerny. We'd like to go into your uncle's room for a few minutes." And to the inspector, "Perhaps you'd like her to come with us?"

The inspector's well-groomed hand waved a negative gesture. "Not now, but if you'd wait a bit, Miss Keifer"—he spoke graciously, as if asking a favor—"I may ask you to help me a little later."

Inside the large, luxurious bedroom, the keen gray eyes took quick inventory and came to rest on the bedside table.

The table held a vase of flowers, a magazine, a pair of spectacles, a bottle of smelling salts, a glass of water with a drinking tube, and a pharmacist's bottle three fourths full of a pink liquid.

Inspector McInerny's eyes dwelt for an instant on the table. Then he moved forward to the bedside. He looked closely at the still, white face with its bluish lips and tightly shut jaws. He noted the peculiar appearance of the eyes, open and glistening, with widely dilated pupils, and the contorted hands, blue at the nails.

"You see," Dr. Williams said uneasily, "I left him just as he died. Nothing has been touched."

"I think," the inspector told him slowly, "that you'd better straighten him out a bit." He indicated the clenched hands, touched one of them gingerly. "*Rigor mortis* seems already to have started."

The doctor swallowed nervously. "Hardly seems possible," he said, bending to straighten the stiffening limbs. "It's only been an hour, and it's warm in here."

The inspector had turned back to the table. He lifted the glass of water, sniffed at it and put it down.



"What is this pink stuff in the bottle?" he asked. "Luminal?"

"Yes, luminal—phenobarbital. He was inclined to be restless and I prescribed it as a sedative."

"We might as well have a test run on it," McNerny said laconically, "also the glass of water. And I'd like a post-mortem on the stomach, please, doctor."

The nurse was waiting outside the door when Inspector McNerny came out.

"Ah, Miss Keifer. This is good of you. Where can we talk for a few minutes?"

"We can go into Elena's—Mrs. Orth's—sitting room," the girl said, and she opened the door to a charming room, feminine and gay with chintz.

"Lovely house, isn't it?" the inspector observed. "Do you live here?"

"Only for the past two weeks," the nurse said, "since Uncle Amos has been ill. He and Elena have urged me to live here, but—well, I like my own quarters."

"Of course," the inspector agreed pleasantly. "Cigarette, Miss Keifer?"

"Thank you. I would like one awfully. My nerves are a little jumpy."

"Naturally. I'm sure your uncle's death must have been a great shock, especially the suddenness of it."

"Oh, inspector, it was dreadful—" The girl's voice broke and she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "I'd just turned my back, just stepped over to the dresser to take off my cap and straighten my hair—I was going to ride down town with Dr. Williams—"

"Yes?" the inspector prompted gently. "And then what happened?"

The nurses' hands, white at the knuckles, worked nervously at the damp ball of handkerchief. "I . . . I didn't know he was very sick, really. The doctor had just told us that he was very much improved. We were so glad. Elena was even humming something. I hadn't heard her do that for ages—she used to sing, you know, in musical comedy. Then I heard him say, 'Elena.' She was sitting right by the bed, and it seems to me she bent over him. They were reflected in the mirror, but I wasn't paying attention. I think she said, 'What is it, darling? Do you feel faint?' And the next instant she made a strange noise, a sort of scream, and I could hear that terrible breathing—"

The nurse hid her face in her hands and

drew a shuddering sigh. The inspector waited in sympathetic silence while she struggled for control.

"I'd seen people die before," she went on presently, "but not like that. Dr. Williams couldn't do anything. It happened too fast. One minute he was all right, we thought, and the next minute he was gone."

"I'm deeply sorry," the inspector said. "Please give my sympathy to Mrs. Orth, also. It must have been very bad for her. I believe the doctor said she fainted."

"Yes. I could see she was going to and I reached for the smelling salts, but she'd already folded up, limp as a rag and completely out. Poor Elena, she was so devoted to uncle. It's rather unusual—I mean, being so much younger and so beautiful. You'd rather have expected her to—well, you know, want more fun."

"Yes," assented the inspector gravely, "you would have. And what did you do then, Miss Keifer, after she fainted?"

"We put her to bed," Mary Keifer said. "She came to presently, just before you arrived, and Dr. Williams gave her a sedative."

"What sedative did he give, do you know?"

"Luminal, I think. I know he told me to get the bottle from uncle's room."

The inspector nodded. "And you took the bottle back to your uncle's room?"

"Why, yes, I think I did, just automatically, I suppose. I don't actually remember doing it."

McNerny was silent for a moment, his eyes studying a small water color above Elena Orth's desk. "That's a lovely thing," he said softly. "Ah, well— Did you . . . er . . . undress Mrs. Orth completely?"

The nurse blinked in surprise. "Yes, of course. I undressed her and put a night-gown on her. Then I bathed her face with cold water and—" The girl broke off with a puzzled frown that was followed quickly by comprehension.

"I had forgotten for a moment," she said stiffly, "that you are a detective. Elena had nothing hidden on her. She was wearing a one-piece jersey dress without pockets, sandals on her feet, no stockings, and the usual underthings. I can show you if you like."

The inspector smiled. "Thank you, no. That won't be necessary. And now, Miss Keifer, I have only one more question, if you will bear with me. Has anyone, other



than yourself, Mrs. Orth and the doctor, been in your uncle's room today, any of the servants, for instance?"

"No, no one. I take care of his room myself except on the regular cleaning days."

Glañcing casually at the watch on his wrist, the inspector stood up. "Thank you, Miss Keifer. Thank you very much," he said softly. "You have been most helpful."

Back in his office, Inspector McInerny picked up the telephone.

"Please get me," he told the switchboard operator, "the law firm of Burdick & Johnson. I want to speak to Mr. Johnson . . . I'll wait."

He sat for a few moments with the instrument cradled on one shoulder, idly drawing tiny cat faces on a scratch pad.

"Hello, Johnson? McInerny here. About the will of the late Amos Orth . . . Yes, died this afternoon . . . Oh, Dr. Williams has told you? . . . Yes, thank you, if you will, please."

Beneath the tiny cat faces on the pad, he wrote down the words as they came over the wire—"one half to my beloved wife, Elena Orth, one fourth to my beloved niece, Mary Keifer, one fourth to my dear friend, Dr. Claude Williams."

McInerny folded the slip of paper, tore it twice across, and dropped the scraps with a faint gesture of distaste into the wastebasket.

He was finished now with the Orth case, except for that interview with Mrs. Orth to complete the records. He knew who had murdered the rich and unfortunate old man, and by what means. He had no need for the laboratory analysis on the luminal or the glass of water, or on the contents of Amos Orth's stomach. He was not, therefore, surprised when Dr. Williams handed them to him, all negative.

There was relief on the doctor's face. "I acted like an old fool," he said apologetically, "calling you out there. There couldn't have been anything wrong—it was impossible. I'm ready to put death by heart failure on the certificate. And I hope, inspector, that you'll forget the whole thing." He waited in humble embarrassment.

The inspector stifled a yawn, straightened the papers on his desk and picked up his gray Homberg and gloves.

"Want to come along?" he asked the waiting doctor.

"Along—where?"

"To see Mrs. Orth?"

"You . . . you still think that's necessary? She's not very well."

"I won't trouble her long. Half an hour will be long enough, perhaps less."

It was the nurse, Mary Keifer, who led the inspector to Elena Orth's room, with Dr. Williams plodding behind.

At the door he dismissed them, saying, "I'll speak with her alone, if you'll both wait, please."

Elena Orth was on a chaise longue, her slim, lovely body supported by pillows. A softly shaded light above her made a halo of fair hair that was tied back simply, childishly, with a blue ribbon. There was no make-up on her face. Even her lips were pale, and under the candid blue eyes were deep-purple shadows. But she was beautiful—they had not exaggerated.

The inspector's face was grave. "I regret this necessity, Mrs. Orth," he said gently. "Words of sympathy are futile, I know, but I should like to say that I am deeply sorry for you."

"Thank you," Elena Orth answered tonelessly.

"I shall try not to intrude too much upon your . . . your grief," the inspector went on, as he seated himself beside a small table facing the chaise and its fragile occupant. One lean brown hand toyed absently with the objects on the table, lifted the lid from a cloisonné cigarette box, then brought out his own gold case. "May I?"

"Of course," Mrs. Orth said wearily, waving aside the proffered case. Long lashes drooped over the clear blue eyes, then raised again as if remembering, vaguely, that the soft-voiced, well-dressed man was there for some purpose.

"I should like to ask you, Mrs. Orth," the inspector began, eyes narrowed against the smoke from his cigarette, "whether you have been informed of the provisions of your husband's will."

The faintly surprised expression in Elena Orth's lovely eyes was a reprimand. "Will?" Her lips scarcely moved. "My husband has been dead only a few hours, inspector. I have not thought of his will."

"He was a very wealthy man, Mrs. Orth. Would it surprise you to learn that he left half of his estate, nearly a quarter of a million dollars each, to his niece, Miss Keifer, and to his friend, Dr. Williams?"

"No, it does not surprise me." There was neither interest nor resentment in her voice.



"He has always been generous with both of them."

"And you are a very wealthy woman," went on the inspector. "Half of his estate is now yours. That's a half million dollars, Mrs. Orth."

There was no brightening of the blue eyes, only a shuddering sigh and a vague gesture of abnegation with one slim hand.

"A moment ago," said the inspector, "you mentioned the fact that he always had been generous with his niece and with his friend, the doctor. Did you mean generous with money?"

The fair head inclined affirmatively. "There were loans to Dr. Williams, if you choose to call them that—my husband never expected payment—and gifts to Mary, trips to Europe, before the war." Speech seemed an effort, almost too great an effort.

"I see. He was a generous man, a very good man, wasn't he?"

The figure on the lounge stirred restlessly. "Yes, he was good."

The inspector sighed. "It is too bad that he had to die."

He could see the look of pain, of protest, in her eyes, the rise and fall of her chest under the filmy negligee.

"I . . . don't feel well," she said. "Must we talk of him?"

"Don't you know, Mrs. Orth," the inspector asked gently, "that your husband was murdered?"

The last vestige of color drained from the beautiful face. The blue eyes widened with horror, and the negligee rose and fell more rapidly. From the lips came a strangled "No!"

"It must have been a painful death," the

inspector went on in his soft voice. "He must have had a frightful instant of wondering what had happened—he must have clutched at the three people dearest to him. And then that breathing—Had you ever heard anyone breathe like that, Mrs. Orth?"

Elena Orth sprang to her feet, throwing the down puff from across her knees. Her breath came in sharp little gasps.

"Stop!" she cried. "You're mad! You're trying to torture me!" She took a step toward the door, swaying dizzily. "Mary! Dr. Williams!"

But the inspector was at her side, supporting her. "Steady, Mrs. Orth, you aren't going to faint." He thrust a small bottle into her hand. "There, your smelling salts."

She snatched the bottle, fumbled with trembling fingers at the stopper, but the inspector caught her wrist.

"Wait," he said softly. "I think I should tell you it is the same bottle of smelling salts that you gave your husband today, just before he died. You see, I took it from his table."

Elena Orth looked down at the bottle in her clenched hand. Her soft features contorted into rigid terror. A silent scream formed on her drawn lips and she hurled the bottle violently from her.

Inspector McInerny stepped out into the hall where the doctor and nurse waited.

"You can make out your certificate now, doctor," he said casually. "Death by inhalation of potassium cyanide. Amos Orth was murdered by his wife."

He paused long enough to answer the shocked amazement on their faces. "It was very simple—cyanide powder with sulphuric acid, in the smelling salts bottle."

# DWARF'S HEAD

By CURTISS T. GARDNER

*The painted eyes of a gnome probe into a woman's soul and grin mockingly.*

VERA TYNDALL loathed the garden. Yet the garden was a lovely spot. With the evening sun making delicate lacery of the great weeping willow and turning the spray of the fountain in the ten-foot pool to liquid silver, it was an incarnation of tranquility and peace. Nothing about it could

possibly suggest a prison. Nor an incubating ground for murder.

Neither could anyone suspect Vera of being a prisoner, and a potential murderess. Too wildly improbable. With her slim, golden beauty, she was simply not the type.

Even the old man had no inkling. Yet



Bennett Tyndall knew Vera better than most. And he alone had always sensed the inner hardness beneath the satin surface of his only son's wife.

Bennett Tyndall's small, pointed, white beard lent an air of distinction to his austere features. He leafed the pages of the evening paper, cast it from him suddenly with an exclamation of disgust. The giant schnauzer, Wotan, dozing at the old man's feet, looked up at his master, stretched luxuriously, then went back to sleep.

"They've gone crazy," Tyndall declared in the harsh, fretful tone which always rasped Vera's nerves like the blade of a dull saw. "All mankind is mad! The labor, the wealth, being wasted in warfare! Enough to make the whole world into a garden spot." He swung his skinny old arm in a gesture to indicate the smooth velvet lawn. "Like this."

Vera made no reply. She didn't want to talk. Anyhow, she knew he was speaking more to himself than to her. She sat quietly, knitting needles flying in her slender fingers. She hated to knit and she knitted constantly.

But, involuntarily, she followed the sweep of the old man's arm. Her gray-green eyes focused on the dwarf.

All the bitterness and frustration in Vera's secret mind was symbolized by the dwarf. A grotesque, cast-iron figure, it stood bandy-legged by the side of the rock-lined pool, angling eternally in the clear water for bright, darting tropical fish. Vera loathed the gnome.

"Poor Dick!" The old man's Adam's apple bobbed in his scrawny throat. "I lie awake nights when I think of him over there. With nothing but ugliness day after day. How he must long to be back in this placid spot!"

"He's had a great adventure," Vera said. She knew she was inviting argument, but even the sound of the man's voice irritated her beyond endurance.

"You don't have the faintest conception of what it's like," Bennett Tyndall answered sharply. "Filth. Mud and suffering and death. He's bound to be changed by it."

Her smile was bitterly mocking, but only in her mind. Outwardly, her face was the serene mask she'd learned so well how to wear.

"Changed? I'll say he is! He's dead, you old fool! Dead! Wouldn't you rave if you only knew!"

She knitted to the end of a row, started to purl back. Another sweater for the Red

Cross. If anyone had asked the Red Cross, they would have labeled Vera one of their most loyal and devoted workers. Not only on account of her knitting, but because she gave her time so liberally as a nurse's aide. A splendid example of a young woman with a husband at the battle front, doing all she possibly could to help the war effort and speed his return.

The Red Cross couldn't know, of course, that she had no interest in the war effort. That she was working, not for an unselfish cause, but for herself. Same as always.

Looking out for herself had brought Vera Rausch a long way from Streeper Street. And from the job as a hostess at the Blue Goose where Dick Tyndall had found her. The drudgery for the Red Cross was simply insurance against ever having to retrace that road.

Old Tyndall got up, moved the hose connected to the lawn sprinkler and resumed his seat. Then, "What does the doctor say about our baby?" he asked. There was a new note of concern in his voice.

Our baby! His proprietary air made her want to shriek at him. She bit her lip, managed to sound unconcerned.

"Ben has a slight temperature, but it's nothing serious. He'll be all right in two or three days."

That wasn't true. Dr. Exeter had been noncommittal. Ben's fever, his continued listlessness, might be the prelude to something with dangerous consequences. But the old man would be dead before anything could happen to the baby.

How very fortunate the wire from the war department had come while the old man was away, thereby giving her time to think, to plan for her own protection.

The baby, too, had been insurance. Vera never wanted to be tied down with a baby. She realized the truth in the old saying that he travels fastest who travels alone. But Dick Tyndall had been the sort of sentimental fool who believes all the copybook phrases. Nobility of self-sacrifice. Responsibility of parenthood. Carrying on the old family name.

It made Vera shiver to think where she'd be right now if she hadn't consented. But she'd known Dick would be shipped across before long. Some intuition must have told her he would not be coming back. And she'd considered the old man's will.

The will left all Bennett Tyndall's wealth to Dick. There was no provision for Vera if Dick should die first. The old man was



shrewd. Although he knew nothing of Octavio Padillo, he did not approve of his daughter-in-law. Which was one of the reasons Vera despised him.

Still, it was she who had insisted the baby be named after his grandfather. She had thought perhaps the old man would do something for her on that account. He hadn't. But she'd gained her additional insurance. The will had been changed so that everything would go to little Ben if Dick did not survive. That's why the baby was such a solid anchor to windward for Vera now.

"I've been thinking," Tyndall interrupted her somber thoughts, "maybe we should take Bennett south for the winter. With his sensitive Tyndall throat, this climate can't be very good for him."

For an instant, her resolve weakened as her hopes rose. Then, "Some quiet place," he added, "where Bennett can have the sun, but where there'll be no frivolity and waste."

She ceased to listen as he rambled on. His narrow, sanctimonious outlook would build a fence around her until he was safely in his grave.

Safely in his grave!

Then she'd be free. The court appointing her guardian of her child. The purse strings firmly in her grasp. Many things could happen during the long years before Bennett Tyndall, 3rd, would be old enough to control his own inheritance.

The old man was going to meet with an accident. One artfully contrived. He was going to get his feet tangled in the garden hose and fall face downward into the fish-pool. That would be plausible.

Vera looked up to meet the painted eyes of the gnome across the pool from her. She had an odd feeling that the little monstrosity had divined her intention. That the dwarf's crooked grimace was a malevolent challenge, doubting her ability to escape the invisible shackles it personified.

The accident itself was, of course, only a detail. The really important part, the part that had required such careful planning, was to make sure no possible suspicion could touch herself. That she had an unshakable alibi for the moment her father-in-law should die.

That's where the volunteer hospital work she was doing to humor the old man was really going to pay dividends. The thought made her want to laugh aloud.

Jimmy Holden was to be her alibi. In the first wave to land on Saipan, Jimmy had

been blinded and his face dreadfully seared by the burst of a Jap mortar shell. He lay now in the hospital, head swathed in bandages, bravely facing a dark future. To help him pass the weary, dragging hours, Vera had been assigned to read aloud to him in the afternoons.

Jimmy never interrupted while she read. And with everyone at the hospital so busy, no one ever came into Jimmy's room while she was with him. So, if Bennett Tyndall should die while her voice droned Plato's "Republic" to Jimmy, how could anyone suspect she had been anywhere near the garden?

The home-recording device on her big radio-phonograph was what would turn the trick. Plus the fact that devoted war service workers had supplied Jimmy's hospital room with a small radio and phonograph combination.

The vital thing was proper timing. She had worked that out this morning while the old man was visiting his safe deposit box downtown. Walking the one short block to the hospital to the back garden gate, with her eyes on the wrist watch which had been Dick's going-away present.

Behind the locked door of her room, she acted out the other moves, rehearsing each a dozen times to make sure she had it letter-perfect. Then she made the record, beginning a few paragraphs from where she had left off her reading yesterday.

She spoke in a loud, clear voice, since Jimmy's head bandages made his hearing less acute. Jimmy would never notice the faint scrape of the needle on the record.

The recording ran for a few seconds short of seven minutes. It should take only five for her to do what she had to do.

Nothing now remained except actual execution of the plan.

The waiting, next day, for time to go to the hospital, drew her nerves taut, like the strings of a bass viol tuned near the breaking point. By afternoon, when she got into her nurse's aide costume, her whole body felt tense. Like the first time she had ever appeared behind footlights. Her fingers were trembling as she tied the white headpiece with its small Red Cross insignia around her blond hair.

Nerves were something she could not afford today, of all days. If only she dared take a stiff shot of rye to steady them. She couldn't, of course. But she knew her tenseness always passed when the show began. And this was a show. Her last performance,



She must make it a masterpiece, the best of her career.

Her mirror gave back an encouraging reflection. Slightly more color than usual, but that was the only outward sign. She went lightly on the rouge, stepped back to admire the finished picture.

"I've got what it takes. Plenty of good years ahead for me. Once I get my hands on the old man's fortune."

The white shoes were low-heeled for comfort, rubber-soled to be noiseless on tiled hospital corridors. She hefted the right one before slipping her foot into it. The rubber would cushion the blow, but Bennett Tyndall was an old man. All she needed was to stun him. The fishpool would take care of the rest.

She waited until she saw him from her window, ambling around the garden, turning on the lawn sprinkler, settling into his favorite chair with his back toward the warm sun. Just as, familiar with his habits, she had expected. She knew he would stay there all afternoon.

Before she left the house, she took care to visit the nursery, ostensibly to look at little Ben. He was asleep, his delicate skin flushed from the fever, no apparent change in his condition.

"I'll be at the hospital as usual," she told Gertrude. "You can phone me there if I'm needed. Dr. Exeter said he'd be here about three. Stay right here in this room with the baby until he comes. Don't leave him."

That would keep the nursemaid on the side of the house away from the garden. High hedges, fencing off the adjoining grounds, would screen her in other directions for the ninety seconds or less she would need in the garden.

It was now twenty to two. By three, when the doctor arrived, she'd have finished what she had to do.

Covered with a fold or two of wrapping paper, the record made a flat, thin package that fitted into her huge handbag. She stopped for a moment in the long hospital corridor to speak with the stout, matronly woman on duty in the chart room. So they'd know she was with Jimmy Holden and not come barging in at the wrong time, while the record was playing.

Some of the other nurse's aides had failed to show up today, it seemed. The stout woman was full of talk about it.

"It would be so nice," she sighed, "if everyone were as devoted as you, Mrs. Tyndall. We've all commented how you're the

most dependable helper we have. You've got the right spirit."

Well, at least the hospital people didn't suspect that all this tiresome bother was the old man's ideas and not hers. That Bennett Tyndall's money was the whip which had made her jump through the hoop of righteousness.

"Hello, Jimmy," she greeted the blind boy as if she were really glad to see him. "How are you feeling this afternoon? Ready for more Plato?"

"Been looking forward to it," he told her cheerfully. "You know, your reading is my best medicine."

While Jimmy held the clinical thermometer in his mouth for the routine chart entry, she got the record from her bag and put it on the phonograph turntable. Finally, the sickroom chores were done and she was ready for the reading.

She did not settle herself in the chair today, but stood beside the phonograph ready to drop the needle into its groove at the proper instant.

"Let us suppose that philosophical minds always love knowledge of a sort which shows them the eternal nature—" She broke off as she had planned to do. "Would you like your pillow a little higher, Jimmy?"

"I'm fine, Mrs. Tyndall," he said.

She came to the end of the paragraph, let the phonograph needle down gently, eyes noting her watch.

Her voice went on smoothly from the record, "He will be absorbed in the pleasures of the soul—"

The door made no sound as she let herself out of Jimmy's room. The short corridor to the side street entrance was empty. She drew a sigh of relief.

Fifty seconds from the hospital to the garden gate. She walked briskly, but not so fast that she might attract attention. Excitement still numbed her slightly. The act of walking was a relief. Her throat felt dry, but she had herself under perfect control.

At the back gate, the sound of voices brought her to a startled halt. Through a chink in the hedge, she could see the old man had a visitor. The acid-faced old woman who lived next door, Mrs. Critchley.

"You must be dreadfully worried about Dick," she heard Mrs. Critchley saying, "not having a letter from him in so long."

Under her breath Vera muttered an unladylike word. This was completely unexpected. The gossip old neighbor was ruin-



ing her beautiful scheme. Delay was impossible, for in less than six minutes she had to be back in Jimmy Holden's room.

Then she saw the yellow cat at Mrs. Critchley's feet. The pedigreed Persian, Darius, upon whom the old woman lavished her affection. Vera's eyes narrowed. Her two-minute leeway might be enough, after all.

Keeping out of sight behind the hedge, she went around to the side yard and through the gate there. The house screened her from being seen by the two in the garden.

She snapped her fingers to Wotan, pulled the wire door of the dog's pen open as he came toward her, tail wagging. Delighted at his freedom, the schnauzer trotted out, made a beeline for the garden and his master.

Vera heard him bark joyously, heard Darius spit and snarl. She saw a yellow ball of fur scoot past the end of the house and under the hedge.

Swiftly, she darted back to the rear gate. Just in time to glimpse the back of Mrs. Critchley's velvet dress disappearing after her pet. The delay had cost less than the two-minute safety factor.

As she came through the gate soundlessly, the old man was half risen from his chair, a thin, blue-veined hand steadying him against its arm. He settled back as she crossed the grass behind him.

She plucked off her right shoe, struck down with the heel, putting plenty of force into the blow.

The old man's breath sighed out like air released from a tire valve. He crumpled, started to pitch forward. But Vera didn't let him fall. Neither did she make the mistake of dragging him across the grass. There must be no telltale marks left by trailing feet.

She was quite strong enough to carry him. The fact that the old man was frail and skinny with age had been a part of her calculations.

Seconds only were required to ease the body face down into the water beside the angling gnome. And to seize the garden hose, looping it around Bennett Tyndall's left foot.

There, it was all done!

The painted face of the dwarf grinned at her crookedly, sharing her guilty secret. A swift, unreasoning fear of the squat little ornament gripped her. As if it remained a menace to her future happiness.

"I'll take a hammer to it later. Beat it into a heap of broken scrap."

Sudden impulse made her kick it viciously across its bearded, grinning mouth.

She hadn't intended to break it now, but the cast-iron was brittle. It made a sharp, cracking noise and the head dropped off into the pool. Through the water she could see it leering up at her with the same old mockery on its painted lips.

Her watch showed less than two minutes remaining. She resisted a frightening urge to run on the way back to the hospital. But when she crept back safely into Jimmy Holden's room, the record was still intoning Plato's dialogue with Socrates.

She lifted the needle. "Are you getting tired, Jimmy?" she asked.

The blind man's face creased into a smile beneath his bandages. "On the contrary, Mrs. Tyndall. You don't know what it means to me having you read."

She slipped the record off the turntable, stuck it back in her handbag. It must be disposed of at the first good opportunity.

She was able to relax now. It had been more of a strain than she thought. She could see where a dozen hazards might have tripped her. She could have been seen entering or leaving the room. She could have run into someone she knew on the street. She'd taken a long chance. But she had won!

The broken dwarf wouldn't matter. They'd think Tyndall had fallen against it. It might even make his accident seem more plausible.

What would happen when they found the body? Would they call her at the hospital? She must show the proper amount of horror and surprise at her father-in-law's tragic end. Her act was not quite finished, but the dangerous part was past. She'd put on a convincing performance.

She went on reading to Jimmy Holden. It was hard to concentrate. Part of her mind was thinking of Octavio, how she'd make him give up the job at the Blue Goose. They'd go away together. She'd let Octavio show her South America. He'd like to do that, on her money. But she'd make him toe the mark. She'd keep him like Wotan, on a leash.

Three o'clock came and went and there was no telephone call. Dr. Exeter must have been to see Ben by this time. The fact that she didn't hear must mean that the baby was better. But what about the old man? Could it be that he had not yet been discovered?

At four, she put the book away with a



promise to Jimmy that she would return tomorrow. But tomorrow she'd have a reasonable excuse to quit the hospital work. The old man's tragic end, followed by the devastating news about Dick. For she must not keep that secret any longer. There would be some record in the telegraph office as to when the message had actually been delivered.

A neatly dressed man with a wedge-shaped face and cold blue eyes met her in the hall of the big house at home. Lieutenant Harmon of the homicide squad, he introduced himself. There were other men in the background, some of them in blue uniforms.

The police! She stifled a surge of alarm. But, of course, when a person died suddenly, it was always necessary to notify the police.

"Mrs. Tyndall," Harmon was saying, "I regret to inform you that your father-in-law has met with an accident."

"An accident!" Just the right shade of alarm and anxiety. "But what—how serious—"

"Very serious," Harmon said gravely. "Mr. Tyndall is dead."

Simulating weakness from the shock, she dropped into the nearest chair. Not neglecting to provide the proper dash of woman interest for him by crossing her shapely legs. And his eyes were missing nothing, from the top of her white headpiece to the crêpe soles of her nurse's shoes.

"When did it happen? How?" She let her words tumble out fast. "Why wasn't I notified? I was only just down the street at the hospital."

Harmon said, "Yes. I know. Suppose you come out into the garden with me."

He put his hand on her arm. She didn't like that, but she followed without protest. She must be very careful now. She wondered if the old man's body was still lying in the pool.

It wasn't. But other men were in the garden. One of them lurking beneath a black cloth, as he focused a big camera on the pool. Another with a steel tape, measuring from the pool to the old man's chair, entering figures in a small notebook.

"I don't understand—" she began.

"It was cleverly staged," he said. "We were supposed to think Mr. Tyndall had

fallen into the pool and drowned accidentally. We might have let it go at that if there had not been a little scrap of evidence overlooked by the murderer."

"Murderer!" No need to pretend weakness now. Her knees were about to give way beneath her. She sank down into a garden chair.

"We had a rush autopsy performed," Harmon went on quietly. "The medical examiner found no water in Tyndall's lungs. He was dead before he was placed in the fishpool. The murderer, or maybe I should say the murderess, hit him over the head with something. What did you hit him with, Mrs. Tyndall?"

She was having to fight now for self-control. "I?" she said. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. "Why, I was at the hospital. I can prove—"

"We'll find out later about that," Harmon informed her. "No doubt you rigged up a convincing alibi."

She thought with terror of the record in her handbag. She should have disposed of that record before coming home.

"We know you were here," the police officer said coldly. "That bit of evidence I mentioned proves it conclusively."

She followed the direction of his pointing finger. A thin, grayish sliver clung to a jabbed bit of metal at the broken neck of the cast-iron dwarf.

"But wh—what—"

"Rubber!" Harmon seized her right foot, jerked it up off the ground roughly. "From the sole of your shoe. I saw it when you sat down in the house a moment ago. Why did you kick it?"

"It happened yesterday," she began, thinking desperately.

"Your next-door neighbor," he said coldly, "has told us she was here with Mr. Tyndall until just before the time of his death. And she will swear that the dwarf was unbroken when she left."

She knew then it was hopeless. That sliver of rubber might as well be her signature on a written confession.

As Lieutenant Harmon put his hand on her arm and turned to take her from the garden, she saw the dwarf's head leering at her for the last time. Undoubtedly, distortion of its image by the water was what gave it such an expression of mocking triumph.



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