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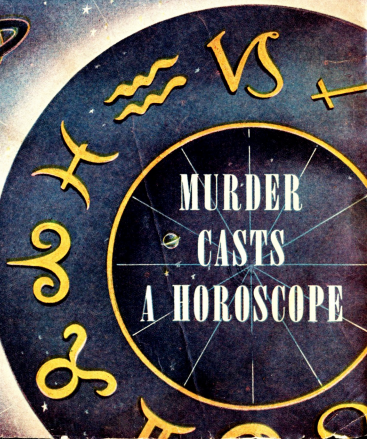
OCTOBER 1946

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Story Magazine

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

OCT. '46





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They jolly well know that infectious dandruff is nothing to fool with . . . that it is prevalent and contagious . . . and that Listerine Antiseptic and massage is a wonderful precaution against it, and a tested treatment as well.

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This is the stubborn germ that so many dermatologists call a causative agent of infectious dandruff. Listerine Antiseptic kills it readily. Listerine Antiseptic is the same antiseptic that has been famous for over 60 years in the field of oral hygiene.

Infectious Dandruff? .. LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC ... QUICK!

Street & Smith's **DETECTIVE** *Story Magazine*

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

OCTOBER, 1946

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Editor
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THEY

A Novelette

BY ROGER TORREY

I.

Houston was young, possibly twenty-four, but his face held lines no man of his age should have. His hands weren't steady, and he sat nervously on the edge of his chair. He looked at the big man across the desk from him with pleading eyes, and his voice was shaking when he spoke.

He said, "I haven't got any money, Mr. Dougherty. I guess maybe I won't even have a job very long. But you're the only man who can help me."

"Marines pretty tough, kid?" Dougherty asked.

Houston straightened, and his face showed pride. "Not too tough. It isn't that. I got malaria after I got one through the shoul-

der, and then I got shipped back for combat fatigue. I got a cluster on the Purple Heart, Mr. Dougherty."

Dougherty knew that, as he knew just about everything that had happened to Houston since he'd been a little boy. He said, "You did fine, kid. You guys had it tougher than we did in the first one; we didn't have a bunch of jungle to mix it in. The marines did swell."

Houston slumped in his chair again. "I'm afraid, Mr. Dougherty, that's going to go against me, too. A lot of people think because we were trained to fight, we still think that way. That murder and robbery will come easier to us than it did before. And—well, you

CARRIED HIM OUT

● *When a guy vanishes into thin air with fifty thousand bucks, it's a cinch the dough won't do him any good on earth.*



know my record wasn't so good before you talked me into joining up."

Dougherty laughed heavily and said Danny had done what a lot of fresh kids had done—made a fool of himself with a series of petty misdemeanors which didn't amount to a hill of beans.

And then he buzzed for Amanda Miller, told her to bring her notebook and make a record of the conversation, and turned back to Dan Houston.

He said, "Now give it to me from the first," in a voice that was oddly gentle for the size of him.

The story was simple, almost too simple. Houston, getting out of the marines with a medical dis-

charge, had gotten a job driving for Big Bill Farnham. He started to tell Dougherty who Farnham was, but Dougherty stopped him, saying he knew all about Farnham.

And he did. Farnham was an ex-sand hog and was now a contractor, doing a lot of city work. He'd made money, a lot of it, and it hadn't changed him in the least. He was still rough and ready, still spoiling for a fight with anyone over anything. Dougherty knew his career had been spotted with battles fought with everything from fists to the kind in which stocks and bonds were used as weapons.

He said, "I know the guy. Go on, kid."

Houston went on. He said that

the Farnham boy, Clyde, had the same disposition as his father, even though only seventeen. That his father worshiped him, but could do little with him. There was just father and son, the mother being dead. And then he came to the crux of the case and Dougherty leaned forward so that he wouldn't miss a word.

Houston went on, "We'd been out in the country—Big Bill's got a place about fifty miles out. But the kid had a date that night and I drove him back to town, about seven. It was just getting dark. I let him out at the town house and drove the heap around the block to where it's garaged, then went back to the house and up to my room on the fourth floor."

"Did you stop any place?"

"Sure. For a cup of coffee in a place next to the garage. Maybe fifteen minutes, I guess. That's all I know. I went up to my room, read for a while, and then went to sleep. I never heard a thing. I got up about seven and went down to the kitchen for breakfast, and right after that, we discovered the kid was gone. Big Bill came in then and found the money was gone, too."

Dougherty made a steeple of his fingers. "Maybe they went together? Maybe he kept his date, decided to marry the girl, and thought his father should give him a wedding present?"

"Not Clyde. He's rotten spoiled, but he's no thief. If he'd taken the money, he'd have left his dad a note telling him

about it. He wouldn't just pick up and go."

"What about his clothes? Any missing?"

Houston looked dubious and said he didn't think so.

"What about the girl? Anybody called to see if she's missing, too?"

"I don't know that, either, Mr. Dougherty."

Dougherty observed, grumpily, that apparently nobody knew much about anything. That it sounded like a tempest in a teapot.

And then Houston said, "You don't get it, I'm afraid, Mr. Dougherty. Big Bill knows I served a term in the reform school. He hired me, knowing that. He also thinks I'm a tough cookie, what with the reform school and the war and all, and I can tell what he's thinking. It's that I took the money and put the kid out of the way, so that suspicion would fall on him. Big Bill doesn't have to say it; I can feel what he's thinking. For fifteen months I had guys after me, and you get so, you have a feeling about things like that. I don't know how to explain it, but you just sort of know."

Dougherty told him he knew the feeling, had it too often for his own peace of mind.

Amanda Miller sniffed and said, "The men after you are bill collectors. That's what gives you that feeling. If you ask me, the best thing to do is wait until the boy is heard from. Seventeen-year-old boys can't just drop out of sight, you know. There's no reason for

fuss and fuming until you know there's something to fuss and fume about."

Dougherty waved a hand and Amanda sniffed again and went back to her notes. He said, "Now, you say the kid wouldn't take the dough? At least without telling his old man he'd taken it?"

"I'm sure he wouldn't. He—well, he's a good kid. He thinks I'm a swell guy. Honest! He talks to me about the marines, all the time. He tried to join, last year, but he'd just turned sixteen and his daddy got him out in a hurry."

Dougherty remarked, "The marines are too tough for kids that age. O. K. Was he crazy about this girl he had the date with?"

"I don't think so. Just kid stuff, that's all. I've driven the two of them to quite a lot of places and all they ever did was giggle a lot and pet a little in the back seat."

Amanda Miller, who was thin, fiftyish and far from good-looking, snorted.

"And the safe was opened, not cracked?"

"That's right. I saw it. Not a mark on it."

Dougherty lifted his two hundred and thirty pounds out of his chair and said heavily, "I guess maybe I'd better look into it."

Amanda Miller protested, "But you've got that Stedger case, Mr. Dougherty. And they've got—well—"

Dougherty grinned and slapped her on the shoulder. "They've got

money, you mean. So what the hell! Us ex-marines have to hang together, Amanda, or hang apart."

He poked Dan Houston in the ribs with a sausage-like thumb and said, "Ain't I right, kid?"

Houston said he thought Mr. Dougherty was right and that he'd thought Mr. Dougherty had been right in just about everything, ever since he, Danny Houston, had been a little boy running the streets and going to Dougherty for help when he got in trouble.

Big Bill Farnham wasn't alone when Dougherty and Houston went into the library. He looked up, scowling, and Dougherty beamed and nodded at him, saying, "Well, well, well! How are you, Mr. Farnham?"

Then he turned to the thin, hatchet-faced man who'd been talking with Farnham and made his smile even wider. "And you, Mr. Keeley! I haven't seen you since that reform candidate made all the fuss about the powerhouse location."

Martin Keeley returned in an acid voice, "And if I recall correctly, Mr. Dougherty, you were working for the reform candidate in that matter. I also recall that you were unable to find evidence substantiating the reform candidate's charge of graft and collusion in the matter."

Dougherty didn't lose his smile for a second. He made a gesture and admitted that he'd been hired by the wrong man and said that

somebody was bound to come out loser in any argument.

He kept looking inquiringly at one of the two other men in the room.

Keeley said impatiently, "My secretary, Dougherty. Hale, this is Jim Dougherty, a private detective."

Hale nodded. He was pale, even thinner than his employer, and had mean, shifty eyes that were as bright and beady as those of a fox.

Dougherty said he was glad to meet Mr. Hale and almost wrung Hale's hand off proving it. And then he turned to the fourth and last man.

He said, "Ah-ha, Hansen, the ape man. How you manage to keep out of the zoo, guy, I don't know. So help me, guy, you don't look even human."

Dougherty told Houston, "Hansen is Keeley's bodyguard. He does everything but sleep with Keeley."

Houston noted that Keeley's cheeks showed an angry red when he snapped, "Your idea of humor is something original, at least, Dougherty. It's a case of the pot calling the kettle black. You're no beauty yourself, you know."

Farnham asked, "Is it something important, Mr. Dougherty? Mr. Keeley and I are discussing something that is, if that means anything to you."

"If your kid and fifty grand mean anything to you, it's important," Dougherty answered. "If not, I'm in the wrong pew."

Farnham shot an angry glance at Houston and said, "That's a personal matter, Dougherty."

"I've got a straight proposition. If I get the dough back, I want ten percent of it."

"It's a private matter. I'm handling it my own way."

"The way I hear it, it may not be a private matter very long."

"I'll take care of my own business, Dougherty. I've been doing it quite some time."

Dougherty's neck reddened and swelled, and his heavy shoulders bunched out his coat as he leaned ahead. He snapped, "It's a private matter, is it? Like hell it is! You've got the eye on Houston, here. You've got a silly notion in your fat head that he's mixed up in it. You'll raise hell with him, and him still a sick man, and you'll end up by firing him. Then you, with Keeley to help you, will blackball him on every decent job he can get in town. Like hell it's a private matter. He's a friend of mine."

Houston saw his job going up in smoke, then and there. He said anxiously, "Now, Mr. Dougherty!"

The butler broke it up by stalking in with a telephone and connection. He plugged this into the base board and said woodenly: "It's Mr. Clyde, sir."

Farnham grabbed for the phone and Dougherty followed the butler out of the room.

And Houston stood and listened to half of a conversation that made no sense to him.

Farnham was practically incoherent when he hung up the phone. He rang viciously for the butler, glared at Dougherty, who tagged the solemn servant back into the room, and told the man to bring whiskey in a hurry.

He said to Dougherty, "I've got a job for you, after all, Dougherty. That kid of mine is at the North Shore Hotel on Michigan Boulevard. He didn't say so, but he's probably with that girl he's been taking around. I've got a notion they're married. He took the fifty thousand from the safe and asks me not to go to the cops with it. Says he'll explain it when he gets back."

"Handy it was there for him to take," Dougherty observed.

Farnham reddened. "It was for a business deal. I can replace it, of course. But I want that boy back here in a hurry and I want you to bring him back."

"And the money?"

"That, too, of course."

"Ten percent?"

"Yes, dammit! Your main job is to get the boy."

"I'll need Houston with me."

"Why?"

"I've got a reason."

Farnham waved a hand angrily. "Take him, take him. But get going."

Dougherty said, "We're on our way," and left the room, followed by Houston. He asked, "What was the girl's name?"

"Norma Granville. The number's Bascombe 6154."

Dougherty used the telephone in

the hall and talked briefly into it, and when he hung up and turned back to Houston, his face was moody.

He said, "The girl herself answered the phone. She says she didn't even see young Clyde last night and hasn't heard a word from him. Now, what d'ya make of that?"

Houston said he didn't understand anything about any of it, and Dougherty scowled and said he was afraid he understood it too well. And that he already had a pretty good notion of just what he was going to find in the Chicago hotel.

II.

The North Shore Hotel on Michigan Boulevard, where Clyde Farnham had supposedly called from, was small, expensive, and believed in the personal touch. The clerk, young and looking like a collar ad, remembered Clyde Farnham perfectly.

He said, "Why, yes, Mr. Dougherty. I recall it. The young man took a suite, but he didn't stay in it. He paid two days in advance and told us he'd be leaving town at that time. But that's the last we've seen of him, sir."

"Paid in advance?"

"Why, yes, sir. He had no baggage, you see. Though his father always stops with us while in town, I frankly didn't remember the boy except by name. You see, it's our rule that a guest without baggage pays in advance and we can make no exceptions."

Dougherty grinned and said there was no reason for apologies, that he quite understood.

And added pleasantly, "I don't suppose you have any idea of where the lad went, have you?"

"I'm sorry, I haven't."

"Would the doorman?"

"I'm sure he doesn't. I asked him that myself. You understand, with Mr. Farnham a steady guest and all—"

Dougherty thanked him and turned away, beckoning to Houston to follow. Once out of the hotel, he said gloomily, "Here we go to the police. If they haven't got him, the morgue or one of the hospitals has. It's a hunch."

The hunch paid off. A police sergeant named Mowbry went with them to the morgue, stood with them while the attendant pulled out a numbered drawer and showed them a thin white body that had two puckered, purplish bullet holes in its chest.

Dougherty looked at Houston who shook his head.

"You sure, kid?" Dougherty asked. "I figured it two to five that the lad who made the phone call to Farnham was a ringer."

Houston nodded. "This kid's about the same age, I guess, but he's thirty pounds lighter. He doesn't look at all like him. Clyde's teeth were straight—"

The sergeant began, "They look different—"

Houston finished, "When they're dead! You're telling me. Fifteen months combat service in the marines."

Dougherty stepped into the situation. He said, "We'll check the hospitals. On the chance that Clyde was smacked on the head and robbed of his clothes by this guy who was probably wearing rags."

Houston said that Dougherty certainly knew best, and Dougherty told him he could see no sense in coming to a dead-end alley without finding out what was at the end.

Farnham looked ten years older than when Houston and Dougherty had left for the Chicago trip. He waved them to chairs.

Dougherty said, "Clyde made that call all right, Mr. Farnham? Sure it was his voice you heard?"

"Positive. He was excited, but I'd know my own boy's voice anywhere."

Dougherty sighed. "I'd hoped it was the ringer who'd called. I got on the extension in the hall too late to hear much of your talk, Mr. Farnham. About all I heard was the boy telling you he was keeping notes about what he was doing and would tell you about it when he got back home."

"Why," asked Farnham, "did Clyde tell me he was in Chicago, and name the hotel where I usually stay? Where he stays when I take him with me?"

Dougherty shrugged. "The boy who registered at that hotel wasn't Clyde. He's still unidentified, but the desk clerk at the hotel positively placed him as the lad who'd

registered under Clyde's name and then disappeared."

Farnham said fretfully that he didn't understand.

"It's this. Some strange boy, wearing Clyde's clothes, registered at that hotel under your son's name. He was found dead, early the following morning, shot twice through the chest. The police haven't found out who this boy is as yet, and when they do, I'm afraid they'll find out he's some young hoodlum who'd pull a caper like that for a five-dollar bill. I figured the Chicago thing was a fake, that the Clyde who was supposed to be in that hotel was a ringer. For my dough, I'm willing to bet that the call Clyde made to you was local. Gone along with me on this?"

Farnham said, "I understand, Dougherty. It means the kid's in serious trouble."

"Very serious trouble. Serious enough that the ringer they used for him was killed, so there'd be no slip."

Farnham stood up and began to pace the floor. He asked, "But what can I do? I haven't heard a word from him since that call. The boy's just dropped out of sight."

"So has your fifty thousand."

"Oh, damn the fifty thousand!"

"The two went together," said Dougherty.

"But how?"

Dougherty considered this gravely, and finally admitted he didn't know as yet.

And then Houston timidly offered

a suggestion. He said, "When I was here before, I remember that Mr. Keeley pulled a lot of weight in—well, I guess some people call it the underworld. With ward heelers and ward bosses and people like that. People who'd have a pretty good notion of what was going on in their districts. Maybe Mr. Keeley could put the heat on some of those guys and find out something."

"What could he find out?" Farnham demanded.

"Well, he could find out if any of the local characters have suddenly turned rich, spending your fifty thousand, Mr. Farnham."

Farnham thought it over and nodded. "I'll give Keeley a ring, Dougherty, and you go over and talk to him about this. It's a move and it can't do any harm."

Keeley's office was in his home. He saw Dougherty and Houston in the library, a dreary place that featured heavy furnishings and even heavier paneling.

He said, "Frankly, Dougherty, if it wasn't for Farnham's asking me to do it, I wouldn't turn a hand."

"You and I are not friends and never will be," Dougherty agreed affably. "That doesn't mean we can't have a friendly drink together, does it? We're certainly working together on this."

Keeley grudgingly sent for drinks, and Dougherty stared around the room and asked, "Where's the ape man?"

Keeley smiled thinly and said to

Houston, "Mr. Dougherty doesn't like me. He doesn't like my body-guard." He turned to Dougherty. "O. K. The ape man has a couple of days off. His mother's sick. And now, Dougherty, you've got your drink. Let's get down to business. Whom do you want me to get in touch with and what shall I ask them?"

He pulled a pad and pencil from a table drawer. And Dougherty looked around the room again. He said, "Now, where's what's-his-name? Hale, wasn't it? There'll be a lot of names and a lot to go along with them."

"He's on leave, too," Keeley answered impatiently. "Suppose you forget my affairs and get down to yours. Farnham said that you wanted me to ask various people I know to keep an eye open for free spending. Right?"

Dougherty pointed a lumpy forefinger at him and said, "Only part of it, Mr. Keeley. I'm going to give you the names of some people who might not be so obliging. So I'm going to give you a little history of these people. For example, let's start with Augie Kuhlhoff. He runs the third ward for you. You just remind him that I know where he's getting the alcohol that he's using to cut his bar whiskey."

Keeley said grimly, "I'll tell him. Thanks."

Dougherty grinned. "Always glad to pass out information to a friend."

Dougherty and Houston left the Keeley home, and they left Keeley

with the phone and a list of fifty-odd names in front of him.

Houston said positively, "I think it'll work. Any guy in the world suddenly falling into fifty thousand dollars like that, would celebrate."

"The guys that got that money weren't hungry," Dougherty answered. "They had money in their pockets. What's bothering me is the boy. You say he was a pretty good kid?"

"A swell kid," said Houston. "He's spoiled, all right—his father gives him everything—but he doesn't let it go to his head. He's—"

Dougherty interrupted, "I'm afraid it's 'was.' Not 'is,' Danny."

"I can't believe that, Mr. Dougherty. The kid's a fighter. He's plenty husky, too."

"That makes it all the worse, Danny. If he fought back, they'd put him out of the way fast. That is, one of them would. The other one would have run like a rabbit."

Houston stopped stock-still in the street. He said, "You sound as if you know who's got him."

Dougherty said he thought he had an idea, but that was all that Houston was able to pry out of him.

Dougherty was busily engaged in going through police records that night and Danny Houston was left to his own devices. He called upon Big Bill Farnham who went over with him again, hopelessly, Clyde's

movements on the night that Houston had driven him to town.

Then Danny remembered the first name Dougherty had mentioned to Keeley, that of Augie Kuhlhoff, and decided to make an investigation of his own. At least, he thought, he'd be able to see if Kuhlhoff was keeping an eye on the heavy spenders at his bar.

He dug up the address listed in the phone book, finding it as Kuhlhoff's Bar and Grill on South Tenth, and put on the gun Dougherty had given him.

He went to the Farnham garage and took out his own battered wreck, the car he'd had since before he'd gone with the marines.

He found Kuhlhoff's to be a dull, dingy place, but much bigger than it appeared from the street. And found Kuhlhoff to be a short little man, built like a barrel, who at the time he strolled in, was helping out a snowed-under barman with orders.

Houston ordered a beer and took it to a booth to drink it, and that action kept him out of the start of the riot that began five minutes after he'd entered the place.

A big man started it. Danny Houston thought he stood at least four inches over six feet and he was built in proportion. The first sign of trouble Houston caught was when the big man bellowed, "Damned whiskey ain't fit to drink. Cut all to hell!"

He looked over then and saw the big man pounding his glass on the bar, with Augie Kuhlhoff

hurrying up to quiet him. Then he saw the big man reach a ham-like hand across the bar, catch Kuhlhoff by the front of the white jacket he wore, and yank. And he saw Kuhlhoff come across the bar as though he were being lifted by a block and tackle.

But he also saw that Kuhlhoff wasn't coming over empty-handed, saw that Kuhlhoff was clutching a quart-size beer stein, and he saw Kuhlhoff swing with it and catch the big man in the face squarely. The mug was of heavy china, and Houston didn't think a man in the world could stand up after taking a blow like that.

He was wrong. The big man stepped away from the bar, still holding to the front of Kuhlhoff's jacket, and Kuhlhoff cascaded across and to the floor on the outside, taking glasses and bottles with him as his chunky body swept the bar.

He started to cry out something, but Houston only heard the start of it, something that sounded like "Han—"

Then the big man's foot caught him at the point of jaw and cheek, and Kuhlhoff went silent as he thudded back against the bar.

The big man kicked twice more, then reached across the bar in time to take away a sawed-off piece of baseball bat from the barman. He dropped this, slammed a fist against the barman's jaw, and the barman dropped down out of sight like a puppet in a show.

The big man turned back to Kuhlhoff again and Houston

thought it time to interfere. He didn't want to—he'd thought that when he'd been discharged, he was through with fighting—but he had no intention of sitting there while a man was being beaten half to death.

He slid out of his seat, took the gun from under his arm, and jammed the muzzle into the big man's back.

He said, "Hold it, chum!"

The big man whirled like a cat, ignoring the push of the gun barrel. The move threw Houston back, put him in range of the fist the big man drew back to strike with, and Houston acted instinctively, with speed. He stepped in, lashing up, then down, with the gun, and the tip of the barrel caught the big man fairly between the eyes. It skidded down from there, pushing the big man's nose to the side and flattening it as the gun fell.

The man went down as though pole-axed, and Houston stepped back, breathing hard. He looked down at the big man who was lying half on top of the unconscious Kuhlhoff and as dead to the world. The barman poked a cautious head above the bar level, saw Houston and the gun in his hand, gave a startled squeal and ducked again.

Then Houston heard the thin wail of a police siren and decided that while explanations might be in order, they'd be no help to him at the time, that he'd be better off in Farnham's house, where he belonged, than in a station explaining his part in a barroom row that

hadn't concerned him in the first place.

He tucked the gun back where it belonged, grinned at the fifty or more customers standing silent and wide-eyed, and sauntered casually out of the place, but once out, he legged it down the street.

And in his car, driving back to Farnham's house, he thought he'd been lucky in getting out of it as well as he had. The big man had made him think of Dougherty's description of Keeley's missing bodyguard, "By Gargantua, out of Toto."

III.

Clyde Farnham's body was found the following morning, by three little boys who were playing in a vacant lot. It was bruised and broken, but death had been caused by three bullet wounds, all in the region of the heart. The police doctor said the body had been there at least two days, possibly three, and that he could give no closer estimate until he'd gone through his autopsy, but that was close enough to back up Dougherty's theory.

He said heavily to Farnham, "It's like I thought, I'm afraid. The kid fought back. They probably caught him when he came in the house and tried to get him to open the safe."

"Clyde wouldn't have done that," Farnham said. "He'd let them kill him first. I know. My boy had courage, in this case too much so."

"They'd have killed him, any-

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"Clyde wouldn't have done that," Farnham said. "He'd let them kill him first. I know. My boy had courage, in this case too much so."

"They'd have killed him, anyway," Dougherty said. "They'd have had to."

Farnham looked seventy instead of his probable fifty-five. He raised a haggard face. "I don't quite understand that last, Dougherty."

"They had to because he'd recognized them," Dougherty explained. "They didn't have any choice. They tried to make it look

like a snatch, put on in conjunction with the robbery, and I don't doubt but that you'd have got a fake ransom note if the body hadn't been discovered so soon. Just to back up the kidnap idea. But they didn't take the kid along for money; they took him along so he couldn't talk."

Farnham's eyes had sharpened and he was leaning across the desk.

"Who, man, who?" he demanded, in a shaking voice. "Tell me. You know, or you act like you know."

"I know, all right," Dougherty said.

Then the butler opened the library doors and announced, "It's Mr. Keeley, sir."

Keeley came in, smiling, and Houston thought he certainly hadn't heard about the finding of Clyde Farnham's body. This was proven by Keeley's first words.

Keeley said, "It may not mean much, but I've got a line on twelve men who have money now and were flat before. Most of them, of course, will be able to explain their sudden prosperity, but there'll be a couple of them that won't. I think you had a good idea there, Dougherty, damned if I don't."

"It wasn't mine—it was the kid's," Dougherty said, nodding toward Houston.

"It may work, whoever it belongs to," Keeley answered. "I had every barman on the whole South Side watching for heavy spending from men who'd been broke. I've got the list, right here. You can check and narrow it down. The more I think of it, the better the idea seems to be."

Dougherty said, "Why stall, Keeley? They've found the boy."

"What?"

"They found the boy. This morning."

Keeley looked over at Farnham for confirmation. Houston followed his glance, and suddenly realized why Farnham had got the nickname of Big Bill. He was sitting back of his desk, his eyes blazing, and he seemed to be a bigger man than Houston's common sense told him he was.

He said, "Go on, Dougherty. Both Mr. Keeley and I are listening."

Dougherty said, "it's simple. The boy didn't open the safe for the thieves—he didn't have to. They opened it themselves, probably had it open when the boy walked in on them."

"Who?" asked Farnham.

Dougherty held up a hand and said, "I'm taking it in order, just the way it happened. We'll have proof I'm right, and pretty soon, I think."

Keeley exclaimed, "Good Lord, man, if you know who did it, call the police!"

"No police," Dougherty answered. "The guy I'm after could only be charged with being accessory after the fact and wouldn't do more than eight to ten for it."

Keeley reached under his coat and said, "I think the police should be called."

Dougherty snapped, "You would!" and put meaning into the words. Dougherty went on, speaking to Farnham, "That's about the size of it. Only one of the thieves shot him, of course, but the other one will be equally guilty in the eyes of the law."

"Who, Dougherty? Who?"

Dougherty said, almost casually, "Why, Keeley's secretary and bodyguard, of course. They've been here with him plenty of times. Enough so that they could have figured out your moves when you opened your safe."

Farnham spoke, and Houston's eyes jerked to him. He said quietly, "Well, Keeley, it's your move."

Houston noticed his hands were out of sight, below desk level. So were Keeley's. He looked at Keeley then and saw the man was perspiring, heard the shake in his voice when he answered:

"I know nothing about it, Bill. I think it's ridiculous. Hansen, my guard, is away, visiting his mother. Lane, as far as I know, is in New York. He always takes his vacations there."

Dougherty said, voice still casual, "And that you know damn well is a lie, mister. You sent Hansen down last night to beat up Augie Kuhlhoff. I knew you had a piece of that joint and I was needling you about Augie knocking down. You went for it and sent Hansen down to work him over. Hansen did it, but some strange guy worked him over in turn."

Houston put in, in a small voice, "I guess I was the one that worked this Hansen over, Mr. Dougherty. I just happened to be in there when he started to kick hell out of that man Kuhlhoff, and I couldn't stand seeing a guy twice as big, picking on a man twice his age."

Dougherty said, "You'll do to take along, Danny."

Farnham hadn't taken his eyes from Keeley, during the byplay. He repeated, "Well, Keeley, it's your move."

Keeley said, "I . . . I hardly know what to say. Of course, I thought Hansen was out of town, visiting his mother. I'm as surprised as you to hear he's still at my house. But it's

large, of course—he could go in and out a dozen times a day and I'd never know it."

Dougherty put in carelessly, "Of course, Hansen was the guy who did the killings. Lane was a full partner and will burn along with him. But, of course you, Keeley, will only get nicked as an accessory after the fact."

He turned, then, and walked to the telephone. He saw Farnham's hand slide smoothly into sight, saw Farnham level the gun, heard it sound out three ripping, crashing reports, and he saw that Farnham was deliberately shooting low into Keeley's body, placing the shots below belt level.

Dougherty cried sharply, "Don't chump it, now, Farnham. The kid and I saw Keeley start to go for a gun, after I'd accused him of complicity in the boy's murder. You protected yourself and us and you'll clear on it. Let it go—I'll take care of the others."

Sanity came back to Farnham's eyes. "They might beat it," he said. "They'll maybe be able to throw it all on Keeley."

Dougherty told him, "Hansen, the real killer, won't stand trial, Farnham. I'll personally see to that. He killed your boy and he killed that unknown kid in Chicago. He's too tough a gent to take a chance with in front of a judge and jury."

A few minutes later, Dougherty and Houston were in the car, heading for the Keeley place, with Farnham waiting in his house for the police to pick up the inert body of Keeley.

Houston said, "But, Mr. Dougherty, you can't just walk in and kill this Hansen. That'd be murder."

Dougherty laughed. "You don't know Hansen, kid. That guy'd shoot it out now with the State militia. He can't burn but once, kid, and he knows it. He'll be carried out of that house and you can depend on it."

Dan Houston had gone into combat action several times and recognized the feeling in his stomach, the tightness and the nausea.

A neat maid opened the door for them and Dougherty wasted no words. He snapped, "Which way to the basement, sister? And fast! We're cops."

The girl pointed back down the hall, her mouth open. Dougherty slid the gun out from under his coat and held it up for Houston to see and do likewise.

He said, "They'd have rooms up above, of course, but they won't be using them.

They'll be ducking around the basement, keeping out of sight. In a house this size, there'll be room enough down there to hide an army."

Houston thought of night patrols on Pacific islands and decided it was lucky he'd served his apprenticeship. And found, as he'd always found before, that the tenseness was leaving him now that he was going into action. He went down into the dimly lighted cellar after Dougherty, with no trace of the feeling he'd had on the way over, even with the sense of doing a well-remembered thing.

The basement was lighted by a row of windows above head level, dirt-encrusted and letting but little light through. They saw the bulk of a massive oil burner, almost in the corner of the floor, a giant tank behind it, kept off the floor by concrete braces, and a row of rooms with closed doors facing the furnace.

Dougherty whispered, "Store rooms, I guess. They'll be hiding in one of them. Stand to the side so we can get 'em under a crossfire."

Houston said, "Give 'em a chance."

Dougherty looked hurt. "Didja think I wasn't going to?"

Then he raised his voice and shouted, "Lane! Hansen! Come out and come out right!"

They heard no sound, and Dougherty shouted again. Then he went to work.

He went to the side of the first closed door, well to the side, motioning Houston to the other side and away from the door. He reached over and turned the knob, slowly and noiselessly, and when the catch had cleared, flung the door clear back on its hinges. They saw an empty room—empty except for two trunks stacked in a far corner.

The next room showed them liquor in racks and cases, but it also showed them no place where Lane and Hansen could possibly be hiding.

But the third door took them past the furnace's protecting bulk, and the fireworks started.

There were in position—Dougherty at the side of the door with fingers stretched out toward the knob. With Houston back and at the other side, gun cocked and ready and eyes straining for either the expected gunfire that would meet them or the emptiness they'd found before. Dougherty's big fingers closed on the knob, and as he touched it,

a gun crashed out behind them and Dougherty jerked and fell against the door casing.

He caught himself, swung around and shot, even as the hidden gun slammed out noise again.

Houston had the furnace between him and the hidden shooter. He stepped ahead to clear his view, and as he did, Dougherty shot three more times.

Then Houston heard a sound behind him and turned in time to see Lane scuttling across the floor and making for the basement stairs. He went after him, diving low in a tackle, and as he left the floor for Lane's knees, Lane squealed and shot.

And then Lane was down, with his head making a satisfactory bumping noise as it hit the concrete floor.

Houston turned to Dougherty, saw him edging warily to the oil tank and stooping low to peer under it. Dougherty beckoned him and spoke with pride in his voice.

He said, "I told you, kid, they'd have to carry him out. I shot the whole damn face off him. They were hiding under the tank here, so they could line up anybody that came looking for them up against those doors."

Houston told him, "I got Lane, Mr. Dougherty. He sort of knocked himself out, I guess."

Then Houston saw the blood dripping down from Dougherty's left hand to the basement floor, and cried out, "You're hit!"

Dougherty laughed and said, "Just through the upper arm, kid! It isn't even broken—it isn't even worth a wound stripe."

Houston thought then, as he had before, that Dougherty had probably been a swell marine.

Dougherty, sitting broad and massive behind his desk, but with his left arm in a sling, tossed a folded slip across to Amanda Miller and said, "Take it to the bank. The balance will stand it nicely. It's from Farnham, for five thousand, and I didn't even have to ask him for it. I didn't even have to hint. We found the dough on Hansen."

Amanda Miller smiled grimly and admitted that was considerably more than he'd have collected on the Stedey case, the one he'd been on before interfering with Farnham's business.

Dougherty grinned at Houston and told Amanda, "It isn't all clear. Make Danny a check for a grand, before you go, and

cash it for him when you take the big one down. And don't charge it against his salary and drawing account. Put it under the bonus heading, or however you do it."

"Salary and drawing account?"

"Sure. Danny's going to try his hand at being a detective."

Miss Miller said, acidly, that Dougherty needed an assistant just as much as he needed a hole in his head; and left, with her nose in the air.

Dougherty laughed heartily. He told Houston, "You'll get used to her, Danny. She talks a lot and don't mean a word she says. If you got in trouble, she wouldn't give me a minute's peace until I got you out. She'll make a detective out of you even if I can't."

Houston said, "I'll never make one, I'm afraid, Mr. Dougherty. I don't understand all that's happened on this Farnham thing, even, and it went on right in front of me."

"That's simple. You told me the kid was a battler and wouldn't steal from his old man. He might take money, but he'd tell his dad about it, not just snitch it. Right?"

"Well, yes."

"And you said he wouldn't give in without a fight. It's a cinch they couldn't have tortured him into opening that safe without him making some noise, and that house is on too busy a street for such noise to go unnoticed. So he wasn't tortured into opening the can. Right?"

"Why, yes. I think they could have killed him before he'd have done it."

"O.K. So that leaves us somebody who knew the combination. Lane, Keeley's bodyguard, were there in the room with Keeley, time and time again. They probably took turns in sitting where they could watch Farnham open the safe. One of them would get one number one time and the other one would latch another number, or the number of spins between them, the following time. They were the logical suspects from the start. Then, too, they knew Farnham well enough to know he wouldn't drag the cops in if he thought his boy had taken the money. That knowledge pointed to somebody who was in the house often. Taking the boy as they did was another sign."

Houston nodded and said he began to understand it better.

Dougherty grinned. "And then I checked records and found that Hansen had done a three to five for safe-cracking out in Minnesota. And that Hale had done a two-

spot for embezzlement in Ohio. But the payoff was with the boy himself. He just the same as told us Hale had him."

"I guess I didn't hear that."

"Farnham heard it, and so did I, when I was listening in on the extension, when the boy called his father. The boy said, 'I'm keeping notes about what I'm doing and will tell you all about it when I get home.' And he said that with that gorilla of a Hansen standing by him. That took nerve."

He saw Houston's puzzled look and took mercy on him. He explained, "Don't you get it? Farnham missed on it, too. Notes! Now, what does a secretary do but make notes? Who had a secretary? Not Farnham, but Keeley. That made it Lane, and who would Lane work with except Keeley's guard, the man he was with all the time because of both working together? And then they both were missing, at the same time, and that was just about proof they were together, even if it wasn't legal proof. Then Hansen turns up to work Augie Kuhlhoff over. He did all of Keeley's muscle work for him in addition to being body-guard, you see, and that put him right on the spot."

"Think they kept the boy in that cellar, Mr. Dougherty?"

"Sure. In one of the little rooms. Nobody much went down there and one of them could always stand by him on guard. Then, after he'd made the call that kept the cops off them, they had no use for him, and Hansen killed him. They had to do it—he'd have told who they were the second he got out. Lane will probably get only life; there's not a prosecutor in the world who could make a jury think the guy had nerve enough to kill a man. Farnham is already cleared, and Hansen and Keeley will be blamed for everything by Lane's lawyer."

Houston said, "That Hansen was a tough egg, all right."

Dougherty grinned. "I just thought of something. I said they'd carry him out of Keeley's house, and they did. But I just remembered that the cops carried him out of Augie Kuhlhoff's bar, too. He was still out cold when they answered that riot call, and they had to lug him out to the police wagon."

Houston remembered the satisfying feel the gun in his hand had had, when he'd smacked Hansen in the face with it, and said he didn't wonder.

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the Water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the War my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck, and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan.'"

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week: "For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that . . . who won £2,000 in a competition, has one because I gave it him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless 'Queen Joan.'"

JOAN THE WAD

is Queen of the Lucky Cornish Piskeys. Thousands of persons all over the world claim that she has brought them Wonderful Luck in the way of Health, Wealth and Happiness

HISTORY FREE FOR A STAMP

If you will send me your name and address a 1/- stamp and a stamped addressed envelope for reply, I will send you a history of the Cornish Piskey folk, and the marvellous miracles they accomplish.

All you have to do is to send a 1s. stamp
196, JOAN'S COTTAGE,



**DO YOU
BELIEVE IN
LUCK**

AS SPECULATOR.

A man writes: "I had some shares that for several years I couldn't give away. They were 1/- shares, and all of a sudden they went up in the market to 7/6. I happened to be staring at Joan the Wad. Pure imagination, you may say, but I thought I saw her wink approvingly. I sold out, reinvested the money at greater profit and have prospered ever since."

and a stamped addressed envelope for the history to
LANIVET, BODMIN

MURDER CASTS A HOROSCOPE

BY HOWARD C. HEYN



The velvety claws of a cat, poised for action, scrawl an ominous prophesy of death across the zodiac.

I.

BRETCH CRAIG, adjusting a shoulder holster against his barrel chest, suddenly chuckled.

"I'm a dope," he said, "packing all this iron to a cat show, of all places."

"You'll wear it," I told him flatly. "You always do. As for being a dope—"

"Never mind. I know it's nuts. Cat show! Well, it's a switch, anyhow."

"Yeah," I agreed. "The only pussy cats we know have long blonde hair and crimson claws. You're out of your field. But come on. It's getting late."

Bretch completed the holster operation, made one final effort to smooth his unruly red hair, and slung a fawn-colored tweed jacket on his big frame. Watching him peer sidewise into the mirror as he dressed, I thought about how we got into this cat business.

It started this morning, when Rollo Murchison came into our office, with the daffiest tale we'd heard in months. Bretch Craig is a private eye, and a good one. I hang around for laughs and, maybe, a little love of the guy. It's a cinch the dough he pays is no attraction. The salary I get as assistant and general factotum would never break the Little Steel formula.

This Murchison was a pert little egg with thinning gray hair and a long nose. He puzzled Craig from the start.

"Let me get this straight," Craig had said

to him. "You say you are a feline fortune teller?"

Mr. Murchison's pale-blue eyes opened wide in a mildly shocked expression.

"Oh, dear me, no, Mr. Craig! An astrologer. I fear you haven't understood me at all. You see, I do not tell fortunes. I cast horoscopes for pets, which is—"

"Yes, yes," Craig interrupted, "I know. I got that. Dogs, cats, monkeys—what's the difference?"

"Well, I don't like the loose way you phrase it," observed Mr. Murchison in his squeaky voice, "but it is true that I work with cats as well as dogs and many other animals. Horses, too. Now, there—"

"Whoa," Craig broke in again. "Let's stick to cats, and ride the ponies another day. The real point, Mr. Murchison, is, just what in hell do you think I can do to help you in such a business?"

Rollo Murchison's brown-gloved forefinger probed between his thin neck and its high, old-fashioned stiff collar. He looked worried.

"You are a private detective, Mr. Craig. I don't expect you to help me cast horoscopes. Indeed not. I merely hope you can save Tinker Susanbelle of Marlowe."

Craig started. So did I.

"My prize smoke Persian," Mr. Murchison explained quickly. "You see, I'm a cat breeder, too. I have some very beautiful stock, all smokes. Tinker Susanbelle is

entered in the Pan-Pacific Cat Show which opens today, and I'm afraid something may happen to her, to keep her from winning, you know."

Bretch took this with a gulp he tried to hide behind cigar smoke. Finally, he managed to ask:

"Now, who is blazes would want to knock off Tinkerbelle, Mr. Murchison?"

"Tinker Susanbelle. Well, I have reason to believe that a man, a fellow cat fancier, has designs upon my entry. You see, sometime ago, I cast horoscopes for one of his litters, and I must admit the results were none too promising. The stars foretold nothing illustrious, Mr. Craig, for this man's new kittens, but then his stock really wasn't the best. No, definitely, it was quite second-rate."

"And this guy resented your . . . ah, prophesies?" Craig divined.

"Yes. The litter turned out quite as badly as I forecast—nasty dispositions, noisy, generally bad personalities. The kittens did poorly in their first show, and were never entered in another. Too hard to handle—scratched the judges, you see. And then—"

Mr. Murchison paused to sigh faintly, and twist his gloved hands together.

"This man," he continued, "practically went out of business after that. You can't get the best prices if you haven't got show stock, you know."

that. You can't get the best prices if you haven't got show stock, you know."

"I take it he's back in business now, and wants no interference from you?" asked Craig.

"Exactly. That is, indirectly he has threatened me. He has an entry in the show, and for several weeks, he's been sending me very odd notes."

"Does he sign 'em?"

"Er . . . no. But I'm certain he's sending them. They have been taken from horoscopes, and each is accompanied by a zodiacal aspect, in symbols, penciled in the margin. The point is, these notes, the meanings of the aspects, obviously apply to someone else. Since I cast my own horoscope, naturally, I know that these messages have been taken or paraphrased from activity guides prepared for someone born under an entirely different sign."

"I'll have to say Bretch hung onto his patience. He said:

"Suppose we forget about zodiacal aspects as quickly as possible, Mr. Murchison, and get down to what the notes say. You got 'em with you?"

"Well, no. But I shall be happy to show them to you later. They suggest that I enter into no business transactions or any competitive activity for at least ten days, more or less like that."

"I get it. Disaster awaits, but the notes don't say what brand. Right?"

Mr. Murchison nodded gravely.

"And," Craig continued, "since

these horoscopes don't apply to you, you think they refer to Tinker's Dam?"

"Tinker Susanbelle, Mr. Craig. Yes, the date is right for Tinker, although that may be an accident. And I foresee no such fate for Tinker, from my own observations."

"Yet you're scared. All right, so you want us to protect a pussy. Gosh, you must have been referred to us by a cop! The police would think this is just about our speed. Things are a little slack, but really, Mr. Murchison—"

The brown-gloved hand came out of nowhere with a wallet.

"I am prepared, Mr. Craig, to pay you three hundred dollars to protect Tinker Susanbelle at the cat show. And when she's safe at home again, with a ribbon, a hundred-dollar bonus."

The bills, three centuries, dropped on the glass top of Craig's desk. Bretch rolled his fat cigar in pursed lips, and I grabbed the filing cabinet to keep from leaping at the dough.

"Where's the cat now?" Craig asked quietly, his palm enveloping the bills.

"My daughter Alice has taken her to the auditorium," said Mr. Murchison. "She will stay right there with Tinker Susanbelle, and give her a final grooming before the judging tonight."

"And this guy who you say is sending you notes—who is he?"

"You'll see him tonight at the show," Mr. Murchison answered. "His name is Samuel Harmon, and

"I regret to say he's a lifelong acquaintance. We are almost the same age, grew up together in the same town. Not a bad sort, really, until this cat business came along."

Mr. Murchison got up and buttoned his Oxford-gray jacket.

"More about that tonight," he said conclusively. "You can pick me up at my home, about seven. I'll show you the notes then. The address is on my card. Good day, gentlemen."

That was Rollo Murchison. But the morning brought something else, too—a telephone call. From Sumner Rockwell, president of Rockwell, Carbury & Dinn, a stock brokerage house.

Mr. Rockwell's beef was a little matter of embezzlement. He suspected an employee of his firm, and he wanted to see Craig tonight at—where else?—the cat show. Seems Mr. Rockwell was a fancier, too, and in charge of the judging.

Bretch said that cinched it. Otherwise, he would not have fiddled with kitties. But I knew the three hundred bucks Mr. Murchison had tossed into our own private kitty had really turned the trick.

Bretch was now giving his shoes a last-minute swipe with a soiled towel. He tossed the towel into the closet and bit off the end of a fresh cigar.

"O. K., let's go. Into the lion's den," he said.

At the curb he flagged a cab, and I slumped against him.

"Ixnay on the act," he said sourly, pushing me in. "This is an occasion. It isn't every day we get an invite to a snazzy affair like this, plus three hundred smackers, so we ride."

"Maybe we shoulda worn tails," I mumbled, settling on the cushions. Bretch burned me down with a look, and gave the driver Mr. Murchison's address.

Lion's den was right. We walked right into it, and before we got within five miles of the cat show, too.

Mr. Murchison lived in a nice little California ranchhouse near Santa Anita racetrack. The days are long out here, and it was still light when we got there.

Bretch told the driver to wait, and we went up on the columned portico and pushed the doorbell. Nothing happened.

I stepped to the big front window, where the Venetian blinds were up halfway. As I peered in, Bretch tried the door. It was unlocked.

"Better go in," I said quietly, after my look. Bretch raised an eyebrow and pushed the door open.

The room I'd seen through the window was to the left of the entrance hall. Bretch opened its door a crack, but he closed it again in a hurry when we heard a hissing, spluttering sound, like a leaky radiator.

It was followed almost imme-

diately by the most soul-searing *m-e-e-r-a-a-o-u-w-r* I ever heard.

"Cat," I said, when I had caught my breath. I must have looked sort of stupid.

"Do tell," observed Bretch, opening the door again cautiously.

We saw the green eyes first. Pussy, and a plenty mad pussy he was, too, had retreated across the room, his tawny back a hairpin curve and his tail puffed up like a Yucca blossom. With every hair straight up, he looked more porcupine than Persian.

We went in warily, the cat still spitting and moving farther back into the corner. Then we looked at Murchison.

He was on the floor near his desk. On the carpet beside him was a stout pasteboard carton, with a couple of holes punched in it. A piece of hemp cord lay along-side.

The cat growled deep in its throat and glared at me with eyes that flashed like opals.

"We gotta get rid of that thing first," said Bretch, pointing at the cat.

The room we were in was the library. On the side where we stood was another door which, Bretch rightly divined, opened into a large closet for storing magazines, stationery and the breeders' and astrologers' forms Mr. Murchison had used.

We maneuvered Pussy, yowling and screeching in terror, into the closet, and closed the door. He yelled once more, and then was silent.

I said, "Whew," and mopped my brow.

Bretch quickly examined Murchison. Both hands bore several long scratches, the cat fancier's trademark. There was no blood, no serious wound, no evidence of a blow, and yet the astrologer was most definitely dead.

Bretch reached into the man's coat pocket and pulled out his brown gloves. He stuffed them back after a cursory glance.

"Looks like a heart attack," he said, frowning.

I was looking at the pasteboard box on the floor. Bretch came over and pushed it with the toe of his broad shoe. He stared at it while he got a cigar out of his vest pocket. Without taking his eyes from the box, he cut the cigar squarely in two with the little gold knife that anchored his watch chain, stuck one half of the weed back into the cellophane wrapper and put the other half into his mouth. He didn't light it.

"What does the box tell you?" he asked suddenly.

I shrugged.

"You're a dope," he mumbled, chewing his cigar. "It's pretty plain that pussy-in-the-corner is a new arrival—in this box with the holes cut in it."

"So what?" I demanded.

Bretch chewed some more, thoughtfully. Then he said:

"Nothing, maybe. And then again it might be interesting to know where it came from. Murchison gave us to understand that his cats were all pretty well

behaved, and this feline in the closet acts like it might be the kind he wrote the unflattering horoscope about."

He moved over to the desk. It was neat and orderly, with a few recent copies of breeders' magazines at one end and a few envelopes in a metal trough that looked like a toast rack. Squarely in the center of the blotting pad, were three half-sheets of paper, with a paragraph of typing on each. Bretch picked them up.

"The horoscope notes he told us about," he reported. "Had 'em laid out ready to show us."

I read them over Bretch's shoulder. They didn't make one bit of sense to me, and I was happy to note that they seemed to have Bretch stymied, too. He chewed harder on his cigar as he read them.

One of them went like this:

"Mars in Pisces tires easily. Watch carefully under opposition of the malefics. Be cautious."

Another said, "The moon in Scorpio is inquisitive. Make no commitments, avoid any competitive transactions or engagements when the moon returns to its own position. All will be clearer after April 6."

The third said only, "Mercury in Aries is quick-tempered and hasty."

Brech looked at this one a long time.

"Well," he said at last, "that's ominous enough, except that there doesn't seem to be any trigger work around here."

"Maybe they were supposed to be friendly warnings, instead of threats," I ventured.

"Warnings or threats—the only difference is who sends 'em," Bretch commented solemnly. He folded the notes into his pocket, adding, "However you look at 'em, it seems clear they were intended to dissuade Murchison from entering the cat show."

I nodded and thought this over for a moment. Then I offered:

"That crazy cat and these notes look kinda like Harmon's work, don't they?"

"They might, if we knew what killed Murchison."

"Any ideas?"

"Oh, maybe."

I made one more effort, knowing it was hopeless. "Anyway," I observed, "a wild cat doesn't scare a dead man."

Brech looked at me closely. "Now there," he said with emphasis, "is one of the keenest observations you ever made."

I can get along without Bretch's sarcasm. But I let it go.

"Shouldn't we get a doctor?" I asked instead.

Brech just shook his big red head. But he went to the phone and called our one friend on the police force, Jim Lukens, a chemist in the crime lab. Craig had done him a favor once, when the commissioner had the lab on the spot. He got Lukens at home, and asked him to give Murchison a gander before summoning homicide and the medical examiner.

He told Lukens about the cat, too.

Then Bretch and I went on a tour of the house.

It was the usual setup—living room, dining alcove, kitchen, three bedrooms and a couple of baths, in addition to the library, of course. One of the bedrooms obviously was Murchison's. Another belonged to a young woman—that would be Alice—who had some nice clothes, but not too many of them. She also had a boy friend in the navy. His picture, in a chief petty officer's uniform, stood on a chest of drawers. Across it was scrawled, "Remember, you promised to wait. Love, Jack."

We went back through the dining room. From the windows there, we could see a copper screen inclosure along one side of the back yard. Inside this inclosure was a long, low, hutchlike structure. Mr. Murchison's cattery.

I bumped a dining chair, and it slid noisily against the table. Almost immediately, there was a noise from the adjoining room, the library.

I looked at Bretch and Bretch looked at me.

"Don't tell me the corpse is moving around," I said, but Bretch already was racing across the room to the little hallway.

It was dusk now, and the house was fairly dark. We reached the hall in time to see a small, shadowy shape emerge from the library, scoot ahead of us down the hall to a bedroom. Bretch dived for it,

tackle-fashion, but the shadow practically flew across the remaining half of the bedroom and sailed out the way it had crept in, through the open window.

I helped Bretch to his feet. Neither of us had got a look at him. It would be easier to identify one of fifty blackbirds on a telephone wire.

We went back to the hall, closing the bedroom door behind us. Just before the door latched, something struck it from the other side, a soft blow. There was no following sound of anything dropping to the floor after hitting the door. We didn't open it to investigate.

"I'd rather know what he was looking for," Bretch explained, and we went back to the library.

Murchison's body was still on the floor. I kicked the closet door. A hiss told me pussy was still safely shut up.

The desk was a mess. Our visitor had plowed through every drawer, maybe looking for those horoscope notes. Bretch wasn't saying what he thought.

"What now?" I asked him after a while.

He shrugged. "The cat show," was all I got.

Our taxi was waiting. The driver hadn't seen anyone but us enter or leave the house, which confirmed the back bedroom route.

Brech was silent all the way to Pasadena's Municipal Auditorium. I didn't needle him. I'm not too smart, or I wouldn't have this stooging job. But I know when to keep my mouth shut.

II.

Sumner Rockwell was big and square, like an icebox, and just as warm. But I guess, in fairness, you had to put his manner down to worry. Except for a haggard droop around the eyes, he looked like the product of plenty of money. His skin was a smooth prosperity pink, not that boozy, high-blood pressure red, but the rosy hue you develop from beef-steak and good barbering.

He sat us down in a bare room, his temporary office as the show's distinguished judge. Normally, it was the auditorium custodian's office. A short hallway connected it with the building's vast main room.

Rockwell, rather reluctantly, I thought, handed out cigars.

"I haven't much time," Rockwell announced. "I'm judging here tonight, you know."

Bretch, scaling his temperature down to Rockwell's, turned a palm upward in a "so-what?" gesture.

"You invited us, Rockwell," he said coldly. "Fire away."

Rockwell tapped the desk softly a few times, frowning. When he looked up, he had thawed a little.

"I hate to do anything about this," he began, "but I've got to. I've been in Brazil for two months, gentlemen, and when I got back last week, I found my firm had been rifled—yes, virtually looted."

Bretch raised a shaggy eyebrow. "You indicated something of the sort on the phone, but I didn't

gather it was as serious as all that."

"Well, not everything, of course. But plenty. About one hundred eighty thousand dollars. Negotiable securities, all of it. What's worse, most of it belongs to my clients."

"You called me because you suspect someone, I suppose?" Bretch inquired. He wasn't putting out any sympathy.

Rockwell gave him a straight, hard look.

"Yes," he answered, "I do. My chief accountant."

Bretch nodded. "Books altered?" he asked.

"No. You see, I came home two days early—got a break on a plane seat. I suppose the books would have been changed, to hide the shortage, if he had had the time."

"You haven't told anyone you found the shortage?"

"I've told no one but you. However, it's pretty certain that the thief knows I've discovered it. I might not have found it for weeks, except that one of my clients, a personal friend, needed cash to close an apartment house deal. He told me about it at dinner the day after I came home, and asked me to sell quite a lot of stuff he had on deposit with us."

Rockwell paused to relight his cigar.

"I went to the office that night, to look over this friend's securities personally," he continued. "They were missing from the safe, along with a lot of others. I've

had to stall the friend, and it's been damned embarrassing."

"Who is this chief accountant, Mr. Rockwell?"

"One of my oldest employees. A man I've always trusted. Besides myself, he's the only one who knows the combination of the vault. His name is Rollo Murchison."

I jumped halfway out of my blue double-breasted, and shot Bretch a look. He didn't bat an eye.

"Unfortunately," Rockwell was saying, "Murchison also is a cat fancier, a very fine one, and I have the unpleasant task of judging his entry tonight."

The office door opened noiselessly at this point, and a brown face peered in. I half turned to look at the little man. He could have been an Indian.

Rockwell, staring at the wall, didn't seem to see him. Then he moved one hand almost imperceptibly on the desk top, and the head in the doorway disappeared.

Bretch rolled his cigar in his mouth, removed it, and slowly picked a bit of tobacco from his tongue with thumb and forefinger. Then he restored the stogy for more of the same kind of dental punishment.

He gave Rockwell that calm, cool look of his, and let him have it.

"I don't think you need worry about any embarrassment over Murchison tonight, Mr. Rockwell. Murchison, you see, is dead."

Rockwell half rose from his

chair, then slowly sank into it again. A little of the pink had left his cheeks.

"Then he did know," said Rockwell, his voice little more than a whisper. "He took his life."

Bretch said nothing.

"Was he— Did he shoot himself?" Rockwell asked.

Craig shook his head. "It looked like a heart attack."

Again the door opened, as silently as before, and the gnomish little Indian gazed in once more, trying to catch Rockwell's eye. This time Rockwell spoke to him.

"Not now, Lanzo. I'll be along in a minute."

When the face obediently vanished, Rockwell explained.

"My servant, and shadow," he said. "I picked him up in Brazil. He's an Indian from the jungle, but he knows English—learned it in a missionary school. I saved his life once. He's followed me like a dog ever since, though heaven knows I neither want nor need a bodyguard."

We nodded, but said nothing. Rockwell cleared his throat, looked puzzled and then asked:

"How does it happen you know—knew—Murchison, and where did you hear of his death, Craig?"

Bretch told him we had been retained to protect Murchison's Persian, and had found his body when we called to accompany him to the cat show.

"But that's amazing! I was going to retain you to shadow Murchison."

"That will hardly be necessary now," Bretch observed. "Tell me, do you know this Sam Harmon, the guy Murchison had trouble with once over some horoscopes?"

"Yes, of course. Sam Harmon used to work for me. He quit after his trouble with Murchison. Said he couldn't stay on in the same office."

Suddenly, Rockwell stopped talking and stared at Bretch, his eyes widening.

"By Jove, Craig," he said excitedly, "you don't think—"

Brech halted him with a wave of his cigar. "I don't know. It's possible, of course, that Harmon killed him in some way. Incidentally, do you go in for horoscopes, too?"

Rockwell laughed shortly. "Me? Astrology? I'll admit it takes a mind reader to make any money on the market these days, but about horoscopes I know nothing, you may be sure."

Brech nodded. "Well, we'll try to find your money for you, Mr. Rockwell. If Murchison made off with it, we may find it hard to trace, since he's dead. Meanwhile, we'll let you get along with your judging."

"And now?" I asked Bretch, when we were alone in the corridor.

"We still have a job to do," he said quietly. "A job we were paid for, in advance."

Since this was my first feline fling, I expected a caterwauling, yowling din. But the big audi-

torium was surprisingly quiet. Its folding seats had been replaced by rows of cages, set on trestles, with aisles between, in which a lot of people moved slowly, gazing critically at about five hundred furred aristocrats. Once in a while, an old lady would exclaim lovingly over the reclining magnificence of some coddled and meticulously groomed pussy, but mostly, there was just the low hum of a lot of voices.

Most of the cats were curled in Oriental splendor on satin cushions of impossible colors, and practically all of them looked bored. They had high-sounding, outlandish names, printed on cards attached to the grilled cage fronts. A lot of them were asleep, with chins turned up and big cottony tufts of fur on their fat sides popping out through the wire netting. Some sat with front paws close together, gazing balefully and a little superciliously at the chumps who stared at them, and a few of the more élite were out of sight behind miniature folding screens covered with bright wallpaper.

Once in a while, a feminine voice on the public address system called out something like, "Novice blues next. Please have your entries ready," or, "Final judging of tortoise shells will be made at nine o'clock—repeat, nine o'clock." There was usually a little stir after each announcement, and a few ladies ran around with combs and soft baby's brushes to apply the final grooming.

The announcer's voice came

from a stage at the far end of the room, where there seemed to be some sort of activity. We walked over there, and stood in a little crowd of people, mostly middle-aged women who looked as sleek and self-satisfied as the cats.

In front of us, immediately below the platform, was a little dress circle of folding chairs whose occupants frowned at catalogues and entry lists, squinted critically at the stage and exchanged cryptic remarks about coats, heads and stance.

In the middle of the platform was a table, behind which stood Rockwell, looking important, and two heavy-set women with grim faces. On the sidelines, a few worried women and a cadaverous gray-haired man watched anxiously. There were two Persian cats on the table in front of the judges, and at the back of the platform were several cages containing kitties waiting to get the double-O.

Rockwell smoothed the coat of the cat before him, stroking it impersonally and exactly twice. Then, at a signal, both cats on the table were taken back to their cages by handlers, and the judges conferred in whispers.

"What's going on?" Bretch asked a man standing next to us.

"They're judging smokes," he answered in a half-whisper, as though he resented the interruption. Then he added reluctantly, "That's Rockwell, probably the finest judge in the country."

Brech nodded. "Thanks," he said.

The handlers brought two more smokes to the table. They looked like the same cats to me, but the man beside us said they weren't.

"That's Tinker Susanbelle, on the right," he offered, "and the other is Bracketan's Prize. They're fighting it out for the ribbon."

It didn't appear to me that there was much fight in either of them. I will say they were pretty, although I'm not much of a cat fancier. Their coats were a soft, shadowy shade, not black and not gray, but smoky, like heavy storm clouds.

"Would this Bracketan belong to a guy named Harmon?" Bretch asked the man.

Our informant looked surprised. "Yes, that's right. He's that tall, gray-haired fellow on the stage, behind Mr. Rockwell."

Rockwell, looking sterner than ever, was holding the two cats together, comparing their coats, legs and height. The dark, sensual fur on their sides welded, and they looked like Siamese twins.

Brech, I noticed suddenly, was watching the platform with great attention, his jaws set like a vise. I know that look, and it puzzled me because I couldn't see anything very fascinating about this judging rigamarole. I felt his hand on my arm, and barely heard him mutter, through his clenched teeth, "Watch!"

Rockwell's fingers were fondling a front paw of Harmon's cat, Bracketan. He seemed to be pushing on the pads of the cat's foot.

Then he started to put the foot down.

Bretch leaped forward, like a catapult plane leaving a cruiser's deck. It was maybe a couple of seconds before I recovered from my surprise, and then I was right behind him. He dashed across the platform. Startled, Tinker shrank away and Bracketan wriggled in Rockwell's grasp.

Someone called, "Here, you're not allowed!" but Bretch pushed the attendant aside. Rockwell turned on us angrily. The judges stared and the crowd murmured.

"What do you think you're doing?" Rockwell shouted. But Bretch went straight for Tinker Susanbelle, picked him up and stepped away from the table.

Before he could explain or anyone else could protest, we heard a cry from the platform steps. An incredibly pretty girl ran up to Bretch, her blonde tresses bobbing and her spindly heels pounding against the planks. She snatched Tinker from him, and buried her face in the cat's fur for a moment. When she looked up, there were tears in her startling violet eyes.

"What have you done to him?" she cried.

"Don't worry, Miss Murchison," I heard Bretch say quietly. "He's all right now."

And then the police walked in.

III.

Rockwell sat at his desk in the auditorium office and glowered at us. Bretch had herded us in there

—myself, Harmon, Jim Lukens, the police chemist, and that shifty-eyed little Indian, Lanzo, who was crouched in a corner, watching everybody.

Rockwell was burning, but good. Lukens had showed up with Inspector Dick Carleton and his boys from homicide, whom he had summoned to the Murchison home on Craig's instructions after examining the body. They had all proceeded to the cat show.

Brech had talked Carleton and his cops into clearing the auditorium, and Rockwell naturally was furious. He had said so several times since Bretch moved us into the office, away from Alice Murchison.

"She'd want me to explain," Bretch told me, "and I'd have to tell her about her father. I don't want to do that until I can give her the whole story."

Harmon, worried and puzzled, sat uncomfortably on a straight chair, his legs crossed. One hand nervously patted his knee.

"This is an outrage, Craig," blustered Rockwell. "What right have you to break up this show?"

"Take it easy, Rockwell." Bretch's smile was cold as ice. "I was hired to take care of Tinker Susanbelle because Murchison accurately foresaw an attempt upon his cat's life. Perhaps you'll agree it was better to stop the show than to let Bracketan kill Tinker."

Everybody stared at him. I, too.

"You must be crazy!" Rockwell

spluttered. "They were calm as caterpillars, both of them."

"Bracketan's claws," Bretch announced quietly, "were poisoned. Just like the claws of the cat that killed Murchison."

Nobody said anything for seconds. Finally, Rockwell turned to Harmon. His tongue passed slowly across hard, dry lips.

"Sam," he said, his voice quavering, "what in God's name have you done?"

Harmon started, and looked around helplessly.

"Murchison, dead?" His face was pale with shock. "And I . . . I tried to kill his cat?"

"You had trouble with Murchison, didn't you?" snapped Rockwell.

Harmon swallowed. "If you mean years ago, that horoscope—Yes, we quarreled. He practically ruined me."

The words came jerkily, as from a man in a daze. Then, recovering himself somewhat, Harmon added earnestly, "But, gentlemen, I had nothing to do with Rollo Murchison's death. You've got to believe me."

This Harmon was one frightened cookie now. He got out his handkerchief and swiped at his bony forehead and oversize nose.

"Well, what about the cat, Harmon?" Rockwell demanded. "Everybody saw Tinker there on the table with Bracketan. And Bracketan belongs to you. You were determined to win, by any means, weren't you? You wanted

revenge for what Murchison did to you, years ago."

Harmon leaped at Rockwell. Bretch had been watching them, letting them go. Now he stepped in.

"Hold it," he ordered, a restraining hand on Harmon's arm. "It's my turn."

Harmon hesitated, then sat down slowly. Everybody looked at Craig. But Bretch turned to Lukens.

"Jim, did you examine that cat in Murchison's closet?"

Lukens nodded. "I put it in with a white rat, down at the lab, and the rat died before the cat's teeth got anywhere near it. One swipe of the paw was all it took."

"And Murchison?"

"I think he got it the same way."

Bretch removed his cigar and studied it. "Curare would work that way, wouldn't it, Jim?"

Lukens frowned and said, "Yes, curare or another of the alkaloids. They paralyze the nervous system and the respiration. The effect is much the same in appearance as a fatal heart attack."

"But this is all sheer nonsense!" cried Rockwell. "Any cat with poisoned claws would commit suicide the first time it licked its paw."

Bretch smiled. "Curare, Mr. Rockwell, is a peculiar poison. It has little if any effect when taken internally in small doses, yet a minute quantity introduced into the bloodstream, by a scratch, for instance, acts plenty fast. Right, Jim?"

Lukens nodded.

"Murchison," Bretch went on, "had the failing of many cat breeders. I'm sure Harmon will agree. He liked to play with kittens—he loved 'em. As a result, the backs of his hands usually bore rather unsightly scratches. That's why he wore gloves almost always when he went out. I saw those scratches on his hands when we found the body, but I also saw a couple of fresh ones, too. He got those when the poisoned cat was delivered."

"I suppose Murchison would play with a cat as wild as you say that one was," sneered Rockwell.

"Well," Harmon offered thoughtfully, "I don't see anything illogical in that. The cat may have been calm enough when it arrived. Or perhaps a little frightened, but not wild. Murchison got to playing with it, or trying to pet it, and it scratched him. It probably didn't get excited until after the poison acted fatally upon Murchison. Cats frequently get excited in the presence of death, you know."

Brech nodded agreement, and pointed to a cage across the room where Bracketan, Harmon's cat, lay curled up, its yellow-green eyes upon us. "Jim," he said to Lukens, "suppose you take Bracketan down to the lab and test his claws."

Lukens seized Bracketan by the nape of the neck and, holding him safely at arm's length, put him into a carrying basket with a cover. Everybody watched dumbly. I

guess I looked sort of stupid, too. I felt that way.

"Harmon," said Bretch, when Lukens had gone, "you say that you had nothing to do with Murchison's death. Well, there's one thing in your favor, anyway. That's the horoscope messages Murchison received. Murchison said you practically grew up together, so you probably know when he was born, don't you?"

Harmon's brows went up. "Why, yes, in November, 1884. I was born in December of the following year."

Brech nodded. "But whoever sent those activity guide messages obviously didn't know the month of Murchison's birth. In fact, he didn't know much about astrology. When Murchison noted that the readings did not apply, he knew they were phonies. They puzzled him, but they didn't scare him. He was afraid only for his cat, and that's why he hired us."

"What are you trying to do, Craig?" Rockwell rasped. "White-wash this man?"

Brech sat up straight, his eyes blazing. "I don't like to lose my temper, Rockwell. And you wouldn't like it, either. So supposing you just listen instead of working your mouth."

He slammed his chewed cigar viciously into the wastebasket and leaned forward, hands on his thighs.

"It's true that Harmon could have sent a poisonous cat to Murchison; they were old enemies," Bretch continued. "But

while my partner and I were in Murchison's house earlier tonight, someone else slipped in. Someone who expected the coast to be clear because the cat had had plenty of time, a couple of hours, probably, to do its work. Our visitor was looking for something which he had to kill Murchison to get. He didn't expect to be disturbed. He beat it fast when he heard us. We saw him running down the hall."

Bretch naturally didn't tell them that we didn't know this guy from Adam. He just relaxed a little, and nodded at Harmon.

"Harmon," he went on, "was right here in the auditorium when we were in Murchison's house. Any number of people know that, even Alice Murchison. Your own show officials told me so."

Rockwell hadn't overlooked the fact that Bretch failed to identify this mysterious man in Murchison's house.

"Who do you suppose, Mr. Craig, this uninvited visitor could have been?" His smile was crafty.

Bretch rode it out. He gave Rockwell a long, steady look, and said softly, "Curare, Mr. Rockwell, is a South American poison."

He let this soak in for a second, and then added bluntly:

"Since you want me to put it more plainly, I'm suggesting that it was your devoted servant, Lanzo, who delivered the poisonous kitten to Murchison, on your orders, and that it was the same Lanzo whom

we surprised in Murchison's library a few hours later. I'll even go a little further, and suggest that it was Lanzo, again on your orders, who put curare on Bracketan's claws, to cast suspicion on Harmon through the death of Tinker Susanbelle. Only, that part of the plan didn't work out so well."

I'll say Bretch timed it perfectly. Before Rockwell had time to demand that Craig state a motive, I heard a hiss, like someone whispering in my ear. I turned just in time to see something flash across the room, a split centimeter to the left of Craig's neck. It plunked into the wall and quivered there. A dart. I guess I quivered, too.

Then I heard Bretch yell at me, "Get him, Joe! In the hall!"

As I wheeled toward the door, my eyes swept the room. The Indian no longer was among us. How he got out unnoticed, I couldn't imagine.

Harmon was at my heels. But the hallway was empty.

I raced into the auditorium. Inspector Carleton was near the main entrance, scooting out the last of the spectators to whom rain checks had been issued.

"That little Indian!" I yelled at him. "Where did he go? He just ran out here."

The inspector looked stupid for a minute, then came over to me.

"Lanzo, the Indian, has been practicing with his blowgun," I explained hastily. "He just shot

a dart at Craig. I'll bet it was poisoned."

"Did it hit him?" asked Carleton.

"No. I hate to disappoint you, but it missed. So you might as well help catch him."

We went up and down aisles, looking under cages and around the platform. When we got to the back of the big room, we met one of Carleton's men. He had Lanzo, squirming, in his arms.

"Caught him trying to get out the back way," the copper said. "He tossed this behind one of the cages."

The cop held up a slim reed. Lanzo's blowgun.

Then I thought about Bretch, alone in the office with Rockwell. Somehow, I was uneasy.

"Come on," I called to Harmon and the inspector, and broke into a trot.

We got to the little dead-end hallway. There was a crash, and the office door bulged alarmingly, as if something had exploded inside. Then another bang, like someone tossing a safe through a brick wall. Bretch and Rockwell were really at it.

Carleton and I threw ourselves against the door. It was locked on the inside. We were ready to give it the old heave-ho, when all hell broke loose in the hall.

I don't suppose there's much doubt where I'll wind up when some hood finally puts his lead into me, but at least I'll know how shades sounds. All the sirens in Los Angeles couldn't have made a

racket like that. Screeches, hisses and yowls reverberated hideously in the cramped passageway.

It took me a second or two to figure that Lanzo must have pulled the hasps on a lot of cages before the copper caught him. Now we had a good portion of the cat show right on our necks.

Terrified by all the running around and the noise in the office, about twenty-five panicky pussies were streaming into the narrow corridor like rice through a funnel.

Scratching, clawing and yelling, they were all over us before we could say "Rocket Bomb of Nibelungenlied."

I got a glimpse of the inspector, and he was a busy guy. With one hand he was trying to pull a milk-white Persian off his head, and with the other, he was clutching at a tiger-striped Tom that clung frantically to his trouser leg. Then I began having my own troubles, and I've got the scars to prove it.

Trying to draw my head inside my coat, I wondered suddenly if Lanzo had found time to smear any more claws with his curare and the idea didn't make me feel any better. Then, too, I was worried about what might be going on inside the office. But I decided that I had my own skin to save, as much of it as possible, and that Bretch, after all, was probably big enough to take care of himself.

Harmon finally had reached the door through a welter of cats, and was throwing his weight against it.

All at once it gave, after another lusty smack from the inside.

We poured in, cats and all. All except Lanzo. He'd broken away from the cop during the melee.

The office was a mess. The desk was on its side, the chairs were smashed. A lamp had gone through a window.

Rockwell, his clothes torn and his face bleeding, was rushing Bretch, who didn't look so good, either. In his right hand Rockwell was clutching some object I couldn't identify.

The cats went on a new rampage in an effort to get out. They swarmed all over us again.

Through a haze of fur and flashing claws, I saw Rockwell's hand descend. In it was the poisoned dart, wrenched from the wall.

A big black cat, one of the better leapers, was flying that route just then. He collided with Rockwell's arm, spoiling the aim. Craig ducked, swinging aside to avoid a new thrust for which Rockwell was now poised.

Straightening in a flash, Bretch grabbed Rockwell's wrist and twisted his hand free from the dart. He got in a couple of short but sturdy jabs, took a heavy blow on the ear, shook himself and plunged in again, head first.

Rockwell grunted, doubling up. Bretch filled in with an uppercut and a sharp right cross, and it was all over. Rockwell went down so hard, he bounced, then lay still.

Somehow, Harmon got most of the cats out, and the rest of us

stood there panting, looking at Rockwell, sprawled on a pile of chair kindling. Covered with scratches, we looked like we'd been caught in a girl's dormitory.

"Hey," I said suddenly, surveying Bretch's wrecked sports jacket, "didn't you remember you were wearing a gun?"

"Yeah"—he grinned—"but no poisoned bullets."

He stopped to dig under the desk for a brief case—Rockwell's. Rummaging through assorted judging forms and entry blanks, he finally came up with a paper which he examined briefly and handed to Carleton.

"That," said Bretch, "is what Lanzo was looking for in Murchison's library. He just had time to find it before we scared him off, and managed to turn it over to Rockwell before we reached the cat show. I was sure it was here somewhere."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Murchison's proof that Rockwell stole from his clients. Not only years ago, before he owned the firm, but just recently. The embezzlement Rockwell told us Murchison committed was, in fact, Rockwell's own theft."

"Funny Murchison didn't tell us anything about that," I observed.

"I think he would have, if he'd been alive when we called for him. Murchison was a funny little guy, but I was pretty sure he had something on his mind besides Tinker Susanbelle."

"But," I persisted, "how did you

know that Lanzo wasn't looking for those horoscope notes we found?"

"It was pretty obvious," said Bretch, "that whoever searched Murchison's desk was looking for something else. After all, those horoscopic threats could have been written only to cast suspicion on Harmon, in case Murchison's death wasn't accepted as a fatal heart attack. The writer of the horoscope notes, as we have seen, didn't know when Murchison was born. Harmon did know. If he had prepared the notes, he would certainly have incorporated the proper symbols and terms indicating date of birth, in order to make the notes convincing to one who knew something about astrology."

"But we still don't know for sure that it was Lanzo we saw in Murchison's house," I protested.

Bretch smiled. "Ever see anything like this dart, inspector?"

"It's a duplicate of one we found in a bedroom door at Murchison's," Carleton replied.

"Lanzo lost his head and fired it at us when he thought we had got a look at him," Bretch added.

I mopped my scratched brow with a handkerchief and tried again:

"What made Rockwell think he could get away with accusing Harmon when we know Harmon was here all the time we were at Murchison's?"

"You forget," said Craig, "that Rockwell didn't have to claim Harmon was at Murchison's. No one was supposed to know that Lanzo went there. Alice wasn't at home.

We weren't expected to be there. But we were there, and we did see somebody, and we know it wasn't Harmon. Alice was here at the show. That's why I was sure that Rockwell, his Indian and his curare were responsible for Murchison's death."

"But what made you leap up on that platform like a startled bull?" I demanded.

"I'll overlook your unfortunate figure of speech, under the circumstances," said Bretch, grinning. "It was fairly simple. If a cat's poisoned claws killed Murchison, a cat's poisoned claws could kill another cat. I saw Rockwell fiddling with Bracketan's paw. That may or may not be a legitimate part of judging a Persian—I don't know. But I do know that you can pop out a kitty's claws by pushing the pads of its foot. You can do it without coming into direct contact with the claws, too. It's easy. And," he added grimly, "you can put one cat's foot down on another cat's paw, as though quite by accident if they are side by side and as close together as Tinker and Bracketan were there on that judging table. When Rockwell started to put Bracketan's foot down, I moved in."

Harmon's eyes widened with excitement. "Bracketan's claws would have broken the skin on Tinker's paw, introducing the poison," he concluded in an awed voice.

"Yes," said Bretch. "It was easy for Lanzo to smear curare on Bracketan's claws, back there at

the platform cages. He was just a handler to anyone who saw him."

"I suppose," Harmon put in suddenly, "that Rockwell's trip to Brazil had something to do with the stolen money."

Bretch ran his hands through his carrot hair and sat down.

"The money," he said after a moment, "is probably on deposit in Rio. When Rockwell told us that Murchison was an embezzler, he knew that Murchison wouldn't be alive to defend himself. That, in itself, looked phony."

"Rockwell worked it both ways from the middle," I murmured.

Bretch nodded. "Exactly. And an ingenious plan it was. Rockwell, after stealing the firm's funds, casts suspicion on Murchison, and then engineers Murchison's death to look like a heart attack or suicide. And, as a final precaution, in case someone delves too deeply into the exact cause of Murchison's sudden death, Rockwell works up a murder case against Harmon, based on an old enmity. He clinches this enmity by plotting the death of Murchison's cat, presumably at the hands—pardon me, the paws—of Bracketan, at an important show where big feline honors were at stake. All very neat.

"The only really serious slip-up," Craig concluded, "was our presence in Murchison's house, a presence which Rockwell couldn't anticipate because he had no idea Murchison would consult us."

I had forgotten, until he

spoke, that Rockwell might regain consciousness there on the floor. He had, and he'd heard most of what Bretch had said.

"Very clever indeed, Craig," he conceded. His voice was muffled by swollen lips, but it carried a trace of his old manner. "And yet, until you found that incriminating paper in my brief case, what caused you to suspect me, even though you had eliminated Harmon?"

Bretch gave him a distasteful glance. "Perhaps you'll recall, Rockwell, that when I first told you Murchison was dead, you immediately said, 'He took his own life.' Since I hadn't told you how he died, that made me wonder if you didn't know a little more about his death than you should. It also sounded rather like wishful thinking."

Just about then, the same dick who had caught Lanzo the first time, came in with him again. But it wasn't the same Lanzo. His beady black eyes stared senselessly and his breathing was harsh and rapid. The officer was holding him up and half dragging him.

In the middle of the room, the Indian went limp all over. He was dead before we could bend over him.

"He jabbed himself with something, inspector," said the cop.

"Another dart," murmured Bretch. "A dart and a dose of his own medicine."

The telephone rang just after the coroner came for Lanzo's body.

Chief Carleton answered it, and talked briefly.

"That was Lukens," he reported, after cradling the instrument. "You were right, Bretch. Harmon's cat had enough poison on its claws to kill a dozen pussies. He says he's got it pretty well cleaned off, and Harmon can come and get Bracketan whenever he wants to."

"What about Murchison's daughter?" I asked suddenly.

"I broke the news about her father," Carleton said. "If you like, I'll give her the rest of the story, Bretch. We sent her to a neighbor's house."

Brech got out his wallet and handed the inspector three hundred dollars.

"Take her that," he instructed. "It's the dough her father gave us to protect Tinker. We saved the cat, but we didn't save Murchison. I imagine she can use it, particularly when that boy friend of hers comes home and they go shopping for a marriage license."

I winced. Three hundred biscuits! And not even my salary out of it. Wonderful how free a guy can be with money he owes somebody else.

Anyway, telling Alice was one unpleasant job we didn't have to do. But I still think there must be an easier way to make a living.

And I definitely don't mean raising cats.

THE END.

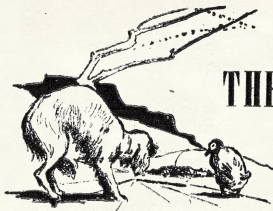
THE BELL TOLLS

With infirm steps the old man came
And leaned on the railing that night—
He could hear down below the sad river sounds,
Only one hardy star was in sight.

Then suddenly rose as he stood on the pier
The talk of the eddies below—
"We're hungry tonight, want a body tonight,
So come along, old man, and let go!"

The old man shuddered and turned away
From the thing in the dark that he feared;
Then a faint distant splash and a gurgle of joy—
And the last lonesome star disappeared.

ROBERT PARKER.



TELL THE CORONER

BY

GEORGE

CORY

FRANKLIN

• *A puppy's early training helps to smell
out a cold-blooded murderer.*

I'm working the graveyard trick at the railroad depot, from midnight to eight. It's about two forty when the emergency key, that is never touched except when there's an accident or danger of one, begins to rattle like the tail of a cornered porcupine. It was the trackwalker on Section 4 calling over a wire he'd shot over the company line. The words of the message sent a shiver up my back. "There's a body of a man lying on the grass near the duck lake. Better tell the coroner."

That was the beginnin' of a case that had the best brains in Yucca puzzled. My guess that it was the body of some tramp that had fallen off the rods, was a long way from the truth.

Rather than fool around huntin'

for the number of the coroner, I call Don Barnes, my hunting partner, who has had the office of sheriff wished on him, principally because the cattle ranch Don owns above the Narrows don't take all his time, and he has a hankerin' for investigating "who dunits." In fact, he's getting quite a local rep as an amateur detective. We're the best of friends, so I didn't hesitate to rout him out of bed.

"What is it?" he growls, as cordial as a hibernatin' grizzly.

"Nothin' much," I says, plumb sarcastic. "Just a dead corpse lyin' on the ground near our favorite duck pond. A cinder-bug called me and suggested that I call the coroner, but knowin' your favorite amusement, I call you."

Don was awake now, and asked

me some questions, then said, "All right, I'll go out there, and if there's anything of interest, I'll let you know."

When I left the telephone to go back to my desk, there's a young woman standing out in the waiting room, leaning through the half window that does for a customer's desk. She shoved a typewritten message at me, "Rush collect," she says, like she's used to giving orders.

The message was directed to James B. Carlson in Oakside, California, and read, "I must have personal conference at once," and signed by Mary Coffman. It doesn't take any great amount of skull practice to figure that out. This smart-lookin' gal, with the steady gray eyes and the reddish-brown hair, is a C.P.A. or a deputy bank examiner. Carlson is the president of the Bank of Yucca, and she don't belong to the regular bank crew.

She stood by the window watchin' my fingers tick off the call for the Oakside operator. While I waited for him to take his feet off the stove and come to the key, she moved one hand in the direction of my orange-and-white Llewellyn setter, who was stretched out beside the office stove. "What a beautiful dog," she says in a voice that makes me think of the little wrens that live in the tulles. "What strain is he?"

She couldn't have made a bigger hit if she'd sprung a quart of prewar on me. The fact that she knew enough to ask that question

gave her the right of way on the high iron with me. "He's one of Kentucky Dixie's pups," I told her, "sired by Charm King. I've taken four blue ribbons with him and two purple and white. He's not just a show dog, but one of the most dependable hunters I ever shot over. His registered name is Prince Charming, but I call him Charm for short."

"I know the strain," she told me. "I have a Llewellyn at home. He's a darling, but he wouldn't stand any show beside Charm. I love dogs, especially setters."

"Do you live in Los Angeles?"

"Glendale," she corrected. "I'm a deputy bank examiner. How soon should I expect an answer to my wire?"

Ordinarily, I'd have given her some stallin' josh about it dependin' on how long it took to find out which pinochle game old J.B. was buckin', but because she loved dogs, "especially setters," I talked sense. "Oakside is a small place. We may be able to get him without much delay. If you'll give me the number of your room at the hotel, I'll call you."

She glanced at an easy chair beside the stove. "I think I'd prefer to wait here, if you don't mind."

I got up and opened the door from the waiting room and she came in, thanked me, and tossed a fur coat that had made a dent in somebody's bank roll on a chair. She knelt down beside Charm, touching his long silky ears like they were something sacred. If

she were conscious of the picture she made, relaxed over the dog like a mother caressing a baby, she gave no evidence that she knew it, or that she cared who saw her. For the moment, she had shunted all thought of responsibility on to a side track, like a string of M.T.'s, and was just an attractive girl, loving a dog.

It was at this moment that I heard Don's quick step outside. He didn't stop for anything, but busted right through the waiting room. "Pete," he says, "that boy that was murdered out by the duck lake, is Sammy Brotherton, the teller at the bank."

The sound of Don's voice jerked the girl up like she'd been wired for sound. "Murdered? Sammy Brotherton? What do you mean?"

Off came Don's big hat, letting a mop of brown hair fall over his forehead. "I beg your pardon, miss. I didn't know there was anyone here but Pete."

"This is Mary Coffman, Sheriff Barnes," I introduced. "She's here to check up on the bank."

Mary nodded. "Tell me."

"That's about all I know up to now. I went out to investigate the call Pete got, saying that there was a dead man beside the track. I found it was Sammy and called the coroner. He made an examination and decided to bring the body in. It's over at the morgue now."

"What makes you think it was murder, Don?" I asked.

"Because it couldn't have been an accident. He was dressed in

hunting clothes. He had a twelve-gauge shotgun that had not been fired. His pockets had been searched, and whoever did the job was in a hurry, 'cause he didn't stop to put things back. There was some small change, three loaded shells and a duck call, and a small pocketknife lying beside the body. There is a bullet hole in the back of his head. It was shot from a distance from a small caliber rifle, not larger than a .25. You can't make anything out of that, except murder."

"How terrible!" Mary said. "I have known Sammy for years. He had no enemies. He was one of the most trusted men in the bank, and the customers all liked him."

The instrument began to stutter. "That's your answer," I told her, and O.K.'d the call. She came and stood close to me, reading the words as I set them down. "See if you can keep hold of Carlson," she suggested. "I must get this news to him at once." I clicked some personal instructions to the other operator and got his O.K. All Carlson had said was, "Keep information secret until you have checked all possible records."

I told her that the Oakside operator could get another message to Carlson, and she dictated it to me. "Sammy Brotherton was murdered near here today."

To which Carlson replied, "Will order a plane and bring Cliff Gilmore, at once."

There was no question about the disgust on Mary's face. "Why

couldn't he bring a real detective?"

"Is that the Gilmore that was out here the time of the big bank holdup?" Don asked.

"The same man, and he's a complete washout, as a detective," Mary replied. "I haven't forgotten how he twisted the evidence around them so as to get all the credit for the work you did."

Don's face showed that he was surprised to know that Mary even knew about what he had done on that case, let alone remember him. He looked at me. "Pete here had more to do with breaking that one than I did. He translated some code messages that gave me a hunch where Chuck Real was hiding."

Mary picked up her coat. Don held it for her. His broad shoulders in his leather hunting coat made a nice background for her. It gave me ideas. "Why don't you take Mary to the hotel?" I asked. "It ain't right for her to run around alone at this time of night."

She lifted her face and gave Don a look that maybe said more than she meant it to. "Do you mind?"

"I should say not. I was about to ask you if I might, but Pete beat me to the draw."

As there wouldn't be any trains along for an hour, I got a piece of paper and began drawing a picture of the country around the spot where Brotherton's body had been found. First I indicated the

railroad tracks and figured out about the distance to the place where the body must have been in order for the trackwalker to have seen it as he walked along, watching for broken rails.

The south shore of the pond would be less than a hundred yards from the track, at this point, so I made a mark indicating the body, and then remembered that this spot was directly across the pond from a duck blind that I had used the fall before. It was hard to believe that any man could have sat in that blind, waiting for someone to walk along the south shore, unconscious that he was about to die. "It sure took a cold-blooded killer to do a thing like that," I thought. This deduction gave me the first hint of a clue that stuck, and I made up my mind that when this case was broke, we'd find that the crime had been committed by an old hand at the business.

In thinking that a bank clerk would not be able to get off to go duck hunting in the morning, I made a bum guess as to the time it had happened, and this in turn gave me a wrong idea about shooting a rifle across the lake. I know the way the light from the setting sun would reflect to a man sitting in that blind in the late afternoon, and I doubted if any man, no matter how good he was with a rifle, could have made such a perfect shot under such conditions.

I could hardly wait for the relief operator to come that morning, and as soon as I had a bite to eat, I went to the pond. Charm, of

course, was trailin' me so close, he stepped on my heels. I was surprised to find that, apparently, there had been no investigation of the ground except in the immediate vicinity of where the body had been lying. There the grass was packed down and any good trailer could read how the track-walker, with soot from the oil burners on his shoes, had come up near the body. Then I saw the print of a bare foot, and thought how foxy this killer had been to take his shoes off before he came up to the body.

A shoe track would last for days, but bare feet would not crush the grass and the evidence would disappear in a short time. One thing stuck with me, and that was that the murderer had been close to the body for several minutes. I tried to backtrail him, but couldn't find any sign except within a few yards of the place where the body had been found. I was hoping to get some further information at the duck blind and started around the south end of the lake. A flock of green-winged teal flushed from a sandbar where they had been sitting and flew up toward the north, going directly over the blind. Charm was beggin' for a run, and I let him go. He ran down to the sandbar, then scouted up the west side of the lake a hundred yards or more in the direction the flock had gone, then rushed back to the sandbar and checked on that before he ran up the east side about the same distance. He hurried back to the place where the ducks had

been. No matter where he went or what sort of hunch he had, he always came back to that same spot like he was drawn by a magnet. I didn't think much about his foolishness then, but I sure had it called to my attention later.

There wasn't a sign of a track about the blind and I noticed that even dry brush I had put there once during a rainstorm, had not been disturbed. I had to revamp my theory about where the murderer had been when he shot, and as I sat there thinking, Charm ran clear around the lake without flushing so much as a snipe, but bringing up as usual at the sandbar. Clearly, the only game that had been there recently had been the flock of teal that I had seen.

Don came to my room a few minutes after I got back from the duck pond. He was sore as a toe-pinched bear over the way this detective Cliff Gilmore was conducting the investigation. "Gilmore is a self-sufficient, conceited ass," Don snorts. "He's already decided that the other teller, Will Strater, did the killin'. He has absolutely no evidence except that Strater is sweet on a blonde stenographer that works at the bank, and she admits that Brotherton had asked her to go out with him a day or two before the murder."

"Did she go?"

"Yes, and she was fool enough to tell Gilmore that Strater was terribly jealous of Sammy, which Strater denies. It looks to me as though Amy is sore because she can't get Strater to come to the

point of asking her to marry him, and is trying to put pressure on him. Anyway there is absolutely no case against Strater, but if Gilmore keeps on pushing his silly theory, it may cost the boy his job. You know how careful bank clerks have to be of their reputation."

"How about it?" I asked. "Have you any theories?"

Don hesitated a minute, then gave me a clipping from a San Francisco paper, two days old. "It looks like drawing a long bow," he admitted, "but according to this item Chuck Real was paroled three days before Sammy was killed."

I read a rehash account of how Chuck had been convicted of having robbed the Yucca bank, and that there was strong evidence that he had accomplices, but they had never been caught, and only a small part of the missing twenty thousand dollars had been recovered. There was some more speculation in the paper about Chuck's pals having a hide-out back in the mountains, in an old ghost mining camp, "But," so the paper said, "according to the judgment of Cliff Gilmore, the famous detective who broke the first case, this was impossible, since he has personally investigated the place that was under suspicion, and says that theory is false."

I laid the paper down and looked at Don. "Do you suppose that Brotherton was an accomplice of Real's, and let Chuck take the rap after agreeing to keep the money until they could go some place and split it up?"

"Could be, in which case Real

would have come here to see how things are going now. If Brotherton failed to produce what Real thought was his share, he might have killed him."

While we were mullin' this over there came a sharp rap and before I could say, "Come in," Mary opened the door. Her face was colorless and her eyes blazed with excitement. "There has been another murder," she cried.

"Don't tell me that Amy Nace has a third lover," he says. "I couldn't stand that."

Mary shook her head. "No, this time it's an older man, Charles Manning. It was in his department that a package containing ten thousand dollars had been left by a rich oil man from Oklahoma. Manning himself told me about it."

"Do you mind telling us about that part?" Don asked.

"No. The whole transaction is very unusual. As soon as Mr. Manning learned that I had arrived in Yucca, he came to the hotel to see me. He was excited and terribly worried. Three days before, a man who gave the name of Albert Dines, came to the bank and introduced himself as a wild-catter. He told Manning that he was on his way to investigate some oil discoveries over west. He said that he had found he could get options from the natives more easily if he showed them cash instead of checks. He had an envelope containing ten thousand dollars in big bills, which he let Manning take so that he could count the contents. At Dines' re-

quest, Manning then sealed the envelope and put it in one of the small safes from which it could be taken after banking hours, when the time locks would be operating on the vault."

"You say that Manning appeared worried?" Don asked.

"Very much so. He explained to me that he had been called to Los Angeles on personal business, and had just returned that evening to find that the envelope was gone and he was unable to find the receipt for it. He thinks he told Brotherton to leave the receipt in the safe in case Dines called for the money. He had been out to where Sammy roomed and Mrs. Wilson told him that Sammy had gone hunting early in the morning and had not returned. Manning was naturally in a stew, and insisted on my reporting the matter to Mr. Carlson at once. That was why I sent the telegram."

I glanced at Don and saw that he was thinking way ahead of Mary's story and, in order not to let our talk bother him, I carried the ball myself. "Then the receipt has not been found?"

"No. That's why I came here at once when I heard that Manning, too, had been murdered. It seems to me that Sammy must have had the receipt in his possession at the time and someone knew it. I just can't bring myself to think that Sammy Brotherton would do anything that was not honest."

Don wasn't saying anything, but I could see that he was following the talk and understood that we had

uncovered a motive for the murder.

"What became of this man Dines?" I probed.

"He hasn't been seen since he delivered the money to Manning."

I picked up my hat. "Suppose we all go over and have a look at the room where Dines stayed?"

Don was not very hopeful of our finding anything in the oil man's room, but he went along, and so did Charm. We went in the back way so as to avoid the people in the lobby, and Don told the elevator pilot to send Pussy Stokes, the proprietor, up to the third floor. Stokes came right away and made no objection to our going in Dines' room. Like everybody, except Gilmore, he was copperin' Don to win.

Mary followed us in and stood with one hand resting on Charm's head, her fingers foolin' with the dog's ears. Don opened a suitcase and dumped out some shirts and dime-store toilet articles, not the sort of stuff you'd expect to find in the baggage of a rich man. The only thing of interest to Don was a road map, such as the attendants at the filling stations give out. There were some pencil marks on it, and Don sat down to study them.

All the time Mary was watching Charm. The dog now was near the center of the room and held his head high, his tail half raised and his nose workin' like he was tempted to point. There was no doubt but that he was interested in the corner of the room back under the bed. It was interestin' to see Mary's face. You could almost read what the dog was thinking by

watching her. Pretty soon she spoke one word, "Fetch," and Charm, who was about spoiling to go, dived under the bed and came out with the wing feather of a teal duck, which he gave to Mary. She held it up for Don to see.

Don started violently. "Where did you get that?" he snapped.

The fact that Don would speak like that to a woman showed the strain he was under. I suggested that we move the bed away from the wall. It was on rollers and moved easily. The floor was bare with a coating of dust, showing that the bed had not been moved recently. Any good game hunter could read the sign left in the dust. I could see the outline left by the body of the duck where it had been thrown under the bed, so hard that the long feather in its left wing had stuck under one of the rollers. There were the prints of a man's fingers, showing how he had later grabbed hold of the bird, and when it didn't come as easy as he thought it should, he had jerked it hard enough to leave the wing feather behind.

I had a hunch that in his study of the road map, Don had found something that the finding of the feather had made stronger, perhaps clinched. "Suppose we go back to my room and talk this through?" I proposed. Don agreed and, on the way, he asked Mary how she thought of sending the dog under the bed.

"I saw he smelled something that interested him," Mary explained. "Perhaps a bird, but I knew he would not retrieve a cold bird. I

was astonished at his bringing the feather."

Her reply brought a chuckle from me, "You had it figured out right, Mary. If the bird had been there, he wouldn't have touched it. When I was breaking him, I used a feather for him to retrieve. A well-broke setter won't retrieve a cold bird, but Charm will bring a feather every time."

"I still don't see how finding that Dines had a duck in his room helps us much," Don said.

"It only helps this much," I answered. "It proves that somebody who had killed a teal duck had been in that room. When I was up at the duck lake this morning, I saw a flock of green-winged teal there, not a hundred yards from where they found Brotherton's body. You know that there is no flight on yet. It is likely that this is the only flock of green wing teal in this vicinity.

"We all believe that the motive for killing Sammy was in order to recover either the receipt that had been given him, or the money Dines left at the bank. Sammy was shot from a distance with a rifle. If the man who was going to do the killing hadn't done any rifle shooting for some time, or if he was not familiar with the gun he was using, wouldn't he want to try it out so as to see how it shot? What better target could he find than a small duck sitting on the water?"

Don's eyes began to snap. "I see what you mean. Chuck Real hasn't had a chance to practice rifle shooting for a long time." He turned

to Mary. "You're a better detective than any of us. You and Pete carry on, try and delay the case against Strater until I get back." He gave me a meaning look, nodded and went out.

Will Strater was arrested that same day. Gilmore was so anxious to hog the credit for breaking the case, that he talked the judge into issuing a warrant which he served himself. Mary told me about it when I met her in the restaurant at dinner time. We talked a minute, and Mary suggested a plan she had to get more evidence. I didn't like the idea of her prowling around alone and said so. Her eyes flashed bright. "Do you mind if I take Charm? He is all the protection I need."

"Sure, take him along, but he'd be about as much protection as a Teddy bear," I told her.

Ordinarily, I'd have taken a nap in the evening, but I was too nervous and high-strung to think of sleep. I went over to the station a half-hour ahead of time. There was a reporter for a Los Angeles paper there, and he was sending a long story about what a Sherlock Holmes this Cliff Gilmore was, in breaking the case inside of twenty-four hours. I took over sending the stuff, and had just finished it when Mary came. I knew at a glance that she had turned the trick. She had something wrapped up in a newspaper, her clothes were soiled, and Charm's white coat looked like he had been rollin' in an ash heap.

"I found it," she whispered. "It

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was right where we thought it might be, on the dump where the hotel people take the papers and waste from the rooms. Charm really showed it to me, but he wouldn't pick it up." She unwrapped the paper and laid a teal duck on the shelf. "See? The large feather of the left wing is missing."

"It's the same duck all right," I agreed, "but that still don't pin the crime onto anybody."

"How about this?" Mary lifted the head of the duck, which had been almost cut from the body by a small rifle bullet through the neck. This was another link, but still not enough to save Strater from the vicious attack that Gilmore would make at the preliminary hearing.

"Do you know whether Gilmore has searched Sammy's room?" I asked.

Mary's lips curled, "Not a chance. His is a one-track mind."

"Then see if you can get the key and meet me there. I get off at eight o'clock."

The room where Brotherton had lived for over a year, was half a mile from the business district. Mary had no trouble in getting the key, when Mrs. Wilson found that she was a friend of Sammy Brotherton's. We began a careful search for the receipt, but I hadn't much hope of finding it. I couldn't figure out why Sammy would have taken it from the bank. On the other hand, someone must have thought he had it on him or they wouldn't have killed him.

"I wish there was something about that piece of paper that

smelled of game," I told Mary. "I'd rather trust Charm's nose than my own reasoning." Mary was down on her knees, searching through some soiled clothing in a closet when I said that. She raised up, gave me a quick glance and said, "Go get Charm."

I wondered what sort of idea had struck her now, but she had done so well, that I was willing to string along awhile longer. When I got back with the dog, there was a little pile of underclothing on the floor out in the hall. Mary was sitting on the floor in the center of Sammy's room with a man's glove that showed it had been worn recently. She called Charm to her, held his head close to her and laid the glove on his nose. The dog was so tickled to have Mary pay attention to him that he licked her face. She kept talking to him and holding the glove up for him to smell. After a few minutes of this, she wadded the glove into a small space and gave it to me. "Take it outside," she directed, "so Charm can't get the scent of it."

Mary stood in the middle of the room telling Charm to fetch. He ran around the room, clowning playfully. "Cut out the fooling!" Her voice was firm, severe. "I said, 'Fetch!' Now do it." He stopped and stood quiet for a minute, like he was trying to talk her out of it, but when she again told him to fetch, he began to work carefully along the side of the room. He went clear around twice, then stopped in the corner behind the bed and whined. Mary took hold of the bed

and pulled it out. I saw that Charm was holding his nose low against what looked like a crack between the boards in the partition. Mary gave a little cry and pushed past me to where Charm stood. Down she went beside the dog and began pushing open a sliding door to a small closet. A minute later, she was back beside me, holding in her hand a well-worn pocketbook.

"What in the world made you think of that?" I asked her.

She gave me the smile that I had come to associate with her love of dogs. "Setters don't often pay much attention to what they see, but give one a scent he recognizes and he will stick with it. I knew that if I could get Charm to understand I wanted him to follow the body scent he got from Sammy's clothing, he would go to the spot in the room where the scent was strongest. I reasoned that if Sammy had hidden his pocketbook, he did it just before he left the room and that the scent would be strongest there." She opened the pocketbook and held up the receipt for the money.

"As I see it," she went on, "Sammy was all ready to start hunting when he happened to remember that he had the receipt with him. Rather than take a chance on losing it, he decided to hide it in the room, so he put his wallet there. The scent on the leather book was like that on the glove, and strong enough so that Charm got it. A Setter's dog scent is so delicate," she concluded, "that he associated the smell of the pocket-

book with the glove I had held near his nose."

When court opened that day for the preliminary hearing of Will Strater, Gilmore presented charges based on circumstantial evidence that wouldn't have convinced anybody, and yet he was so aggressive in his manner that I saw that Judge Clawson was impressed and would likely commit Strater to jail without bond.

Mary leaned over and said, "To think that I ever could have agreed to marry that man."

"You mean that you are engaged to him?"

"Use the past tense, please. I wouldn't marry him now if he were really as smart as he thinks he is."

I noticed that Gilmore kept turning to look at Mary, like he was saying, "See me? Aren't you proud?" But Mary kept her head turned away, and never gave a glance in his direction.

Gilmore had finished oratin' and had rested his case when Don came in. He looked like any man does who has been fightin' desert for a day and a night—dead tired. His brown face was coated with dust, but his eyes were bright, and he talked quietly, like he knew just what he was doin'. He handed the judge a folded paper. "This is the witnessed confession of Chuck Real, admitting that he shot Sammy Brotherton last Thursday morning with a .25 rifle. I have him in jail, along with his old-time partner, who came here under the name of Albert Dines, to settle with Real

when he got his parole. He was afraid to have the money on him when he met Real at their old hide-out, so he arranged to leave the money at the bank, until they had talked the matter over.

"After Brotherton gave Dines the package, Dines noticed that he put the receipt for the envelope in his wallet instead of back in the safe. It was on the chance that he might get possession of the receipt and hold the bank for the money that they thought of killing Brotherton. Dines told Real that he had heard Brotherton say that he was going up to the duck lake next morning, so Real went there shortly after daylight and waited until his victim appeared. The coroner just told me that there is no doubt at all but that Manning died from an overdose of sleeping powders."

Gilmore was on his feet almost before Don had finished. "Of

course, the court will not be fooled into releasing the prisoner I have arrested until the missing receipt is produced. I still demand that Strater be bound over for trial."

Judge Clawson turned to Mary, who was standing near the rail, "Did you want to say something, miss?"

"Yes, your honor. Here is the receipt. I got it from the safe place where Sammy Brotherton had placed it." She turned toward Don, and the look she gave him, right there in the courtroom, had a scent of orange blossoms about it. As for Don, there was a reward out for the recovery of that ten thousand, but it wasn't the reward he was thinking about.

The day they left on their honeymoon, Charm and I stood on the platform beside the house track. Mary leaned over and whispered, "I love dogs, especially setters."

THE END.

THE ANSWER

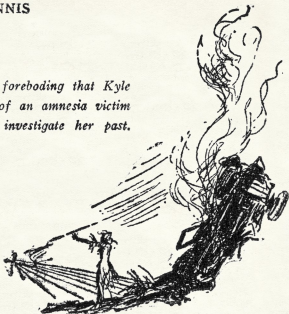
Now suddenly I have a new,
Specific answer for them asking,
"Why does a cat appeal to you?"
Beyond the joy to see it basking
Warm in the sun, beyond its purr
Mysteriously ebbing, flowing,
Beyond the living silk of fur,
Or play within its heart, is knowing
That always, in my voice and touch,
A cat loves gentleness so much.

ELAINE V. EMANS.

BY ROBERT C. DENNIS

● *It was with strange foreboding that Kyle Young took the case of an amnesia victim who retained him to investigate her past.*

THE SHADOW FALLS BOTH WAYS



The girl was in trouble, but that was the natural assumption regarding anyone needing a lawyer's services. It was more than that, however. She was trouble, herself. Kyle Young did not know why this was so. She was just another young woman, twenty-eight perhaps—it was hard to tell—poised and not affected, as one who had learned the poor value of affectations. But simply looking at her chafed an ancient hurt inside Kyle Young's chest and made him want to run.

"I . . . I must have some assur-

ance," she said, feeling her way, "that anything I tell you is inviolate. You understand what I mean."

"Privileged communication." Kyle kept his gaze fixed on the framed picture which reigned alone on top of his dully gleaming desk. "I can't be forced to divulge a confidence by any process of law. My own integrity is also more important to me than anything you can possibly tell me!" He hadn't really meant it to sound so abrupt.

She moved uneasily in her chair, laid her purse on the desk, then

thought better of it and quickly retrieved it. "Yes, that's what I wanted to know. I chose a lawyer rather than a private detective agency because I had to be certain of protection."

She ran long, slender hands over the alligator purse and Kyle took that moment to glance at her again. Her clothes were very new and smart—a gray pin-striped suit with square, broad shoulders, a white blouse with a round, rather high neckline, and a small square hat slanted conservatively over one eye. Her hair was dark-blonde, smooth and with a sheen on it. There was nothing in her appearance to account for Kyle's depressed sensation.

"Mr. Young, I . . . I don't know who I am." Except for one faint break, she said it as if it were not an unusual circumstance.

Kyle glanced at the name his secretary had written on the desk pad, "Miss Marcia Strange."

"Yes, I know, but I made up the name." She unbuttoned the gray jacket of her suit and showed him the label sewed to the lining. It read, "Styled by Marcia." "That's where I borrowed the first name. The 'Strange' part just seemed appropriate."

"Amnesia?" Kyle asked.

She nodded. "And please don't tell me to go to the police. I want you to find out who I am."

"It's rather unusual, but I suppose I can," Kyle said doubtfully. "You'll have to tell me why."

"Because"—she leaned forward tensely—"when you find out about me, I want you to use your most

considered judgment whether I should know. I mean, if you should feel that I would be better off not knowing, I want you to tell me so."

Kyle frowned thoughtfully, and his whole mobile face took part in the expression. It was a handsome, sensitive face. "You mean, you'll remain Marcia Strange if your own identity leaves something to be desired? Why?"

"Can't you see?" Irritation cracked the smooth veneer of her poise. "As I understand it, when your memory leaves you, it is usually because your mind can no longer face some situation in your life. If my mind used amnesia as an escape mechanism from some possibly horrible experience, wouldn't I be an utter fool to deliberately go back? Wouldn't I, Mr. Young?"

Kyle smiled wryly, his eyes on the picture again. His reflection on her personal courage embarrassed him. "You have a good argument," he conceded. "I confess I never gave any thought as to my own reaction if amnesia should happen to me. I suppose I'd seriously consider doing the very thing you have in mind."

"Then you'll handle it? And if?"—she smiled, showing perfect teeth—"you find I've been a criminal, a modern Borgia, perhaps, you'll keep it a secret from me, and everyone else?"

"Yes, of course." He had a distinct sensation, then, of something false about her. "Now, give me all the details."

"There aren't many. I seemed to recall a period of confusion, a sort of transition period perhaps, but it's

so jumbled up, I can't sort anything. A psychiatrist might, I suppose. The first concrete recollection I have was being in a tourist cabin. How I got there, or even where it is now, I don't know. I remember it was a small, rather shabby place."

"You had no recollections or impressions of the past?"

"With one minor exception, no. It was like coming to life, being born an adult and with no more memory than a baby."

"What was the one exception?"

"A number—a phone number, I imagine. It had a prefix and four digits. I have it here." She opened her purse.

"Didn't you have any identification in your purse or pockets?"

Her hesitation was almost imperceptible, but it heightened Kyle's vague distrust of her.

"None. My pockets were empty. My purse contained a compact, lipstick, comb, and nearly eight thousand dollars. Nothing else."

"Eight thousand dollars," Kyle repeated.

"In large bills," she said. "I bought some clothes and other necessary articles and then moved to the Consort Hotel. I tried to remember something, anything, but when I couldn't, I began to wonder if I should remember. So I came to you."

"Then absolutely the only link is the phone number?"

"Yes." It was not quite the truth. He knew that without knowing how he could be so positive. It was more than his lawyer-trained instinct for knowing when a person

lied. Strangely, he possessed a knowledge of this girl as with an old friend whose thought patterns were too familiar for deception. The feeling panicked Kyle.

She produced a small piece of paper, folded twice, and handed it across the table. "I wrote down the number that first day in the tourist cabin, trying to draw something from it. I haven't looked at it since. Now I've actually forgotten the number. I don't want to remember it."

Kyle glanced at it briefly. "It isn't much to go on," he said, "but I'll do what I can. I'll get in touch with you as soon as I have anything definite."

"You understand," she said, leaning forward, her brown eyes anxious, "I have to depend entirely on your judgment as to the desirability, or otherwise, of my old life. You see, with the money I found in my purse, I can start a complete new life."

"I understand all that," Kyle told her crisply.

He did not want the responsibility of making that decision. Anything within the confines of his legal experience could be handled dispassionately and objectively. This way, somehow, put it almost on a personal basis. If his curiosity had not been intrigued by her story, he would have refused the case.

She rose, her gaze finding the framed picture on his desk. "She's very lovely. Your wife?"

"No," Kyle said, his breathing suddenly shallow and painful. "A . . . a friend. I keep it there as a

prop. Please leave your address with my secretary."

She seemed to sense that her reference to the picture had been a mistake, but also realized her inadequacy to do anything about it. She said, "I will, and thank you, Mr. Young."

Ten minutes later, when his secretary came in, he was sitting there, staring at Patricia Wilder's picture. His eyes were holes burned in his handsome face, which at thirty-six was still unmarked by age. He might have passed for thirty, except for the occasional shining line in his dark hair.

"You didn't tell Miss Strange what the fee was to be," the secretary said briskly.

"Didn't I?" Kyle pulled himself out of his mental slough. "It's all right. Will you see if you can get Tom Steiner on the phone, please?"

While she was phoning, Kyle spread out the piece of paper Marcia Strange had left. The number was in the downtown area. He dialed it and a feminine voice answered, "Good afternoon. Childers, English & Bielman."

"Sorry, wrong number," Kyle said. He was writing the name on the desk pad when his phone buzzed. It was Steiner.

"I've got a little job for you, Tom. I'm not quite sure what it is, though. Let me think a moment."

"If I'm on the pay roll as of this moment," Tom Steiner assured him, "you can think as long as you like."

Kyle laid the phone down and massaged his temples. The name of

Childers, English & Bielman had some hazy familiarity. He had heard the name, or possibly read it, recently. He picked up the phone again. "Here it is, Tom. The firm of Childers, English & Bielman. I have a hunch it was in the news not too long ago. Get me all the dope on the item, and some background on the firm itself. Can do?"

"The Steiner Agency can do anything," Tom assured him. "If it's no tougher than that. How soon?"

"As quickly as possible. Phone me when you have it. If I'm not here, find me." He paused, thinking of the girl who had become Marcia Strange, remembering his conviction that she had lied to him, and feeling again the strange foreboding that she could reach him in a vulnerable spot. Before he could go on, he had to know what she had concealed from him. He needed all the protection he could get. He said slowly, "One other thing, Tom. I want to get into a room in the Consort Hotel while the occupant is out."

"Hell's fire!" Tom protested. "That's a fine thing to ask. And you a lawyer! What do you think I am, the mayor? I can't fix just anything!"

"I don't like it any better than you do," Kyle told him. "But I can't think of any other way."

"All right." Tom gave in unwillingly. "Ask for Mike Cox, the house dick."

Kyle hung up, took a last, long glance at Patricia Wilder's beautiful likeness, and went out.

Kyle stood in the middle of the room, his dark, restless eyes searching without understanding. But it must be here, that something which Marcia Strange had held back. It couldn't, he reasoned, have been something which she remembered but hadn't told him. Any vagrant recollection of her vanished memory could hold no significance for him that wouldn't be similarly obvious to herself. It must, therefore, be something material brought over from her previous identity. Something, perhaps her clothing, which held a sinister but hidden meaning.

The closet first. He ignored the clothing that was too obviously new. It was no more a part of the girl than was the name she used. A pair of scuffed shoes on the floor caught his eyes. He examined them carefully. A middle-priced, standard make of woman's shoe. No lead there. There was nothing else in the closet.

He tried the dresser next. The usual feminine articles, very new. Nothing else. Dissatisfied, he stared about the room again, his mind listing the things that should be there—a suitcase! She must have bought something to carry her clothing from the tourist cabin to the hotel. He dropped to his knees, peering under the bed. It was brand-new, and locked. Stolidly, he forced the snaps. Inside were some silk underclothes, not new. Her old purse and a hat. And something hard, wrapped up in her slip.

His face bleak, Kyle shook the gun free. It was a .38 revolver and it had been fired twice. The empty

cases were still in the chambers. Marcia Strange had good reason to consider the past doubtfully. Kyle snapped the suitcase shut and pushed it back under the bed. He put the gun in his pocket.

Tom Steiner found Kyle in the restaurant across the street from his office. The walls of the booth were high and thickly padded, affording a measure of privacy. Kyle asked, "Had dinner?"

"I can't run errands for you and live a normal life, too," Tom grunted. His heavy body showed no appreciable suffering from not eating. He leaned his red, homely face close to Kyle's plate and sniffed. "Smells good. I'll have some of that."

Then, without changing his tone, he said, "Investment firm. Old and reliable, I guess. I've got some more data on that end of it, but it doesn't seem to mean much of anything."

Kyle answered, "I'm dropping the case."

"That's your business," Steiner said imperturbably. "But I'm handing in a bill, so you might as well hear what I've got. Your hunch about Childers, English & Bielman being in the news was a winner. Bielman was found at the wheel of his car in a ditch out on the Post Road, the night of the seventh—nine days ago. He was dead when a passing car found him."

Kyle said, "Shot twice with a .38 automatic."

Tom blinked his round bright-blue eyes. "Where," he demanded, "did you dream that up? Or are you try-

ing to be psychic? As a matter of fact, he died from the effects of the accident. The car hit a concrete pier and drove the wheel against him so hard it crushed his chest."

"Any evidence of foul play?"

"Nope," Tom said. "Nothing to show it was not an accident. There's one angle that cops have been shaking their heads over, though. Bielman couldn't drive a car!"

Kyle stared at him. "What?"

"He never learned to drive. Seems he had arthritis in both legs and has trouble walking some days. Using his legs on the clutch and brake was too much. So he didn't even know how to start a car."

"Chauffeur?"

Tom shook his head. "His wife drove him to the office. There are a lot of commuters from his neighborhood who usually take the train, so he generally had one of them drive him back at night. But as far as the cops have learned, no one did the night of the seventh."

"If he had never driven before," Kyle objected, "how would he ever get through the downtown traffic and out to the Post Road without an accident?"

"You didn't ask me to find that out," Tom said blandly.

Kyle brooded for a while. That the girl had driven Bielman's car was certainly a possibility. But where did the gun fit in? Was there actually any connection between Marcia Strange and Bielman's accident, or was it coincidence? He said abruptly, "Another job, Tom. Find out if there was somebody

shot, probably twice, with a .38 revolver the night of the seventh."

"That's a hell of an assignment," Tom complained. "People get murdered every night. Anyhow, I thought you'd dropped the case, whatever it is."

"It's possible," Kyle mused, "that the body wasn't found right away. You'll have to check from the seventh until today. Bring me a report on every death by shooting. If one seems to have any connection with Bielman, rush it to me." He produced the gun taken from Marcia Strange's hotel room. "See if this leads to anything. There's probably fingerprints—"

"You telling me how to do my job?" Tom demanded. "I talked to your secretary before I found you here and she says it's a dame. What's her name?"

"I wish I knew," Kyle said absently. "I sure wish I knew."

But tomorrow he would know. He would offer it to Marcia Strange and that would be the end.

The office manager at Childer's, English & Bielman couldn't place her by the description Kyle gave. But she produced group pictures of the entire staff taken at the annual office party for the past five Christmases. Marcia Strange was in the last two. Her name was June Cornish and she had been secretary to Ernest J. Bielman until six months ago. She had been discharged for stealing.

Kyle took down her last known address and went on to his office. She was there waiting for him.

THE SHADOW FALLS BOTH WAYS



"I've decided to leave town," she said abruptly. She wore a light coat over the gray suit; the square little hat was missing. "I've come to the conclusion I'm better off this way. I don't want to know anything."

Something had frightened her. Something she was beginning to remember? Kyle said, his words mocking to his own ears, "You're running away?"

"You can call it that," she retorted. "If you'll tell me what your fee is—"

Kyle's dark eyes narrowed suddenly. "Why are you going, Miss Strange? What is it? Because your room was searched?"

"You know that?" She seemed to shrink away from him. "You did it." Quick anger flooded her first sense of panic. "What a contemptible thing to do!"

"You lied to me." Kyle's voice was ragged. "You came to me for help and I promised it to you because I wanted to help you. But you didn't even have the grace to play square with me. You ask me to find out something, to make a decision for you, perhaps to always have it on my conscience, and because I protected myself, I'm contemptible!" The magnitude of his fury drove her back a step. She could have no way of knowing the depth of the bitterness from which his anger sprung. "All right, Miss Strange, your secret is safe with me. And there is no fee!"

"My secret?" she repeated, coming close and putting a hand on his arm. "Do you mean you've found out?"

"I found out who you are," he said, more quietly. "I'll soon know what, if anything, you did. I'll get a report today, I think."

"You said, if anything. Do you think it's possible I didn't do anything? I mean, despite the gun?"

"Of course. I can think of any number of explanations for the gun, all innocent." The clash of tempers had cleared the air and lifted much of the weight of Kyle's depression. It was easy to be optimistic now. Kyle sought for and failed to discover any premonition of evil to come from Tom Steiner's report.

"I'll wait then," she said, smiling faintly, "if you'll still make my decision for me. I don't have anything else hidden from you."

Tom Steiner gave his report over the phone. His voice was careful, guarded. "Kyle, here it is, and you do the adding and subtracting. A body with two .38 bullets in the back was found three days ago in a lime pit beyond Cranston. It's the only one since the seventh, so I guess it's your body, all right."

Kyle's lips were frozen. He didn't look at June Cornish. "Been identified?"

"Nope, and not likely to. The lime did a job on the face. Nothing in the pockets. A young guy about thirty."

"All right, Tom," Kyle said quietly. "Anything on the prints?"

"Do you want it straight, Kyle?"

"Of course."

"O.K. The prints on the gun match up with those on the arm of the chair in your office. I was in

this morning before you showed up. Your secretary gave me the facts." Tom's hesitation was very slight. Then he said evenly, "The same prints were found on the steering wheel of Bielman's car."

"Oh, my God!" Kyle said. Across the desk from him, the girl stiffened.

"Mrs. Bielman turned over some evidence—I couldn't find out just what—that pointed to a dame being involved. So the cops went over the wreck a lot more carefully. They think it's murder now. Any tie-up between that and the stiff in the lime pit?"

"I'm afraid so, Tom. I'm afraid so."

"Don't do anything silly," Tom said carefully. "You know what I mean?"

"I know, Tom. Thanks. Send in your bill." He broke the connection heavily.

"It's bad, isn't it?" Her eyes were watchful and strange, as if animated by some forgotten instinct so that she wasn't quite either Marcia Strange or June Cornish. He knew, then, that her poise had been a barrier to hide the emptiness of her personality. He didn't know what she had been like before her amnesia. He didn't know what she was like now. Suddenly, he was as frightened of her past as she was herself.

"Yes," he admitted, "I'm afraid it's bad. I haven't gone into it too deeply, but on the basis of what I know, I couldn't advise you to try to regain your memory."

She didn't answer, but waited for

him to go on, perhaps to offer some solution, some gleam of hope. "What would you do, in my place?" she asked at last.

Kyle stared at Patricia's picture and said harshly, "I'd run away. I'd go so far away that I'd meet myself coming back!"

The room was so quiet, the sound of a typewriter from the outer office drifted in. "That's about the way it is, isn't it, Kyle?" she said very quietly. "You run and keep on running until you meet yourself coming back. And then you wonder what good it did to run." She looked at Patricia's picture. "Maybe"—she smiled a little—"the shadow that follows you, goes the other way, once you turn around and face it. Who is she, Kyle?"

"Patricia Wilder," he told her, because all at once it didn't matter any more. "I was married to her once. I got sick, and she walked out on me. She got a divorce and married a man named Wilder." He got that far and then the pain swamped him and, from then on, each word was another heavy wave belaboring him. "That was three years ago. I didn't get over it easily. I knew I'd not get over another one, so I promised myself never to give any other woman a chance to do that to me."

The girl's eyes were soft, feeling for him in his misery.

"The picture is there to remind me. I didn't really need it, till you walked in." He lifted his hands, then dropped them. "There's no accounting for it. You got past my

guard, and that's why I'm advising you to run away."

"I know," she said. "I could tell from the way you winced from the bad news on the phone. I—" She changed her mind and didn't say it. "The shadow falls both ways, Kyle. I'm not going to run away."

Kyle told her evenly, "It's murder, June."

"Yes—June! I'm June Cornish." Her face drained of color. "Tell me some more, Kyle. It's coming back. I'll remember if you tell me a little more."

"No," he said. "No, you don't want to hear it."

She went around the desk and put her hands on his face. "Suppose I do run, and some day, maybe years from now, I remember everything. Isn't it better to face it now, when I have you?" He stared at her a long moment, his eyes tortured, and then his arms went around her tightly. "I'm a lawyer," he said humbly, "not the best, not the worst. But if you're going to face it, I'll defend you in every court in the country. It won't be so bad, I promise you."

Kyle's office was crowded now. The district attorney was there, looking faintly puzzled. Tom Steiner, his round, red face expressionless, sat beside him. In the background, Kyle's secretary prepared to take notes. June waited, in Kyle's big desk chair, white-faced but composed.

"Miss Cornish," Kyle said to the district attorney, "is an amnesia victim. I'm not a psychiatrist, but I

think I have sufficient information about her past to probably bring back her memory."

"All very interesting, Mr. Young. But why call me in?"

"Because I have reason to believe that Miss Cornish's past ties up with the body found in the Cranston lime pit, and also Ernest Bielman's car accident."

June had gone rigid in her chair, as if an electric current had shot through her. Her eyes were shut, as if to hide from the onrush of her returning memory. The district attorney was no longer disinterested.

"Continue," he said.

"Miss Cornish was formerly Bielman's secretary," Kyle said steadily. "He fired her. The night of the accident, she was driving his car." He watched her rock under the impact of each new fact. "When she came to me for legal advice, she had in her possession the gun which, I believe, was used to kill the man who was found in the lime pit."

"Jimmy Selmo!" The words burst from her lips. She screamed, "He's dead! Jimmy's—"

Kyle said tightly, "Who was Jimmy Selmo?"

She opened her eyes and tears ran down her cheeks. Sobs shook her body so that she could hardly speak. "He was a boy I knew. He went to South America. He invested a lot of money with Childers, English & Bielman—that's where I met him. I was Bielman's secretary until I . . . I stole some money." She looked at Kyle and then she looked away. "I stole eight thousand dollars—" She paused.

"Go on," the district attorney prompted.

"Bielman was cheating Jimmy out of his money. That's why I stole all I could. I knew he wouldn't dare have me arrested. I wrote to Jimmy and he came back as soon as his contract expired. We went to see Bielman."

"Taking along the eight thousand?" Kyle asked.

She nodded, trying to smile at him. "Jimmy didn't believe Bielman was really stealing his money. He was making me take it back. I didn't want to and we had a quarrel, but I finally went."

Kyle and the district attorney exchanged glances.

"Bielman tricked us," June went on. "He insisted Jimmy's investments were in fine shape. He'd been handling them personally, he said, and all the papers were at home. We would go there to dinner. First, he said, he had to stop and look at some property. Jimmy drove out to Cranston in Bielman's car. Bielman shot him in the back. Twice. He searched Jimmy's body and then threw him into a pit. He was about to shoot me when he remembered he would have to leave me alive so I could drive him away from there. First he searched me for anything to identify me, and then made me put the gun in my purse. He let me keep Jimmy's money. I don't know why."

"He had some plan in mind," the district attorney said. "We'll never know. But go on."

"I drove back, but I knew he was going to kill me as he had Jimmy. I was going pretty fast. I wheeled the car across the road and into the ditch. The door sprung open and I fell out. I don't remember much more."

She shuddered, and Kyle quickly took it up. "The shock of what you'd gone through, along with falling out of the car, caused your mind to black out. Bielman probably tried to grab the wheel at that last second, but it was too late. He was killed. You walked away and registered at the tourist court."

"I knew I'd been in some sort of accident," June said. "I was all bruised and my dress was a mess. I sent it to the cleaner's." She looked at Kyle, her face wistful and appealing. "Then I came to you."

"I'll do some checking," the district attorney put in, "but, personally, I believe the story. The chances are, we'll leave things as they are. We'll leave it an accidental death. Also, I doubt if anything comes up about the money. I'd like to compliment you on your courage, Miss Cornish, in facing this out."

"It wasn't so bad"—she stared at Kyle—"when I faced it."

"Things never are," the district attorney assured her.

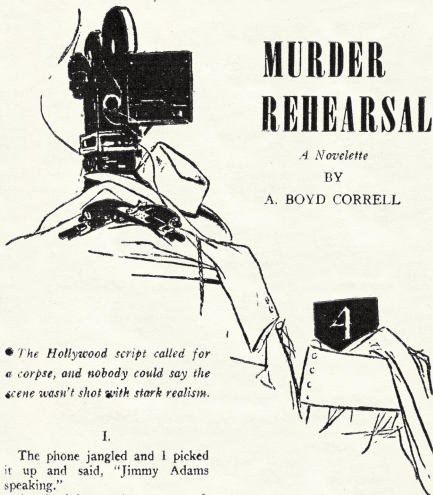
Kyle looked from Tom Steiner's grinning red face to Patricia's picture. He nodded to himself. As soon as the district attorney had gone, he'd throw the damn thing into the wastepaper basket. And then—

MURDER REHEARSAL

A Novelette

BY

A. BOYD CORRELL



● *The Hollywood script called for a corpse, and nobody could say the scene wasn't shot with stark realism.*

I.

The phone jangled and I picked it up and said, "Jimmy Adams speaking."

A feminine voice answered, "Just a moment, please. Mr. Benson is calling." I heard a click and another line being buzzed. I stuck my feet on the desk and wondered who the hell Benson was.

The phone clicked some more and did a bit of cackling. A man's voice came through. He said,

"This is Orlando Benson at Panamint Studios. Can you come out and see me right away?"

I hoisted my eyebrows and wondered what cooked. Panamint was a major studio with its own police force, and, politically speaking, a big interest in some of the nearby

civic ones. I couldn't see where a fairly obscure private eye fitted into their way of life. I asked:

"Before we go into this, are you sure you've got the right J. Adams? In the yellow section of the directory I'm listed under 'Private Detectives.'"

Benson's voice crackled impatiently. He said, "Of course! Can I expect you in a half-hour?"

As soon as I said, "Sure," he cradled his phone with a bang. Busy people, these Hollywood geniuses. I picked up my hat and headed for the coupé. The name almost rang a bell—Benson, Benson. It stayed just out of reach.

Panamint was out Santa Monica way, so I cut down Vine and turned up Sunset, then across Beverly Hills to Wilshire Boulevard. At Westwood Village, there's a mile-long road that leads right to the studios, and I turned into it.

The second traffic light caught me and I stopped. I decided to enjoy the scenery while I waited, so I stared at a really super job in sweater and slacks who stood on the curb. She sort of bounced impatiently, craning her neck to look back the way I'd come, then

checking her wrist watch. She glanced up from the watch and saw me, and I grinned friendly like.

She stared a moment, then looked back up the road, then back to me. She acted like she was flipping a coin in her mind.

I reached over and opened the door. I said, "I'm going as far as the Panamint lot, if that'll help." -

She looked at the watch again and then at the coupé. There were no fox tails hanging from the radiator, so she took a chance. She hopped in and plopped down, well on her side of the seat. The light changed and I drove on.

I caught her sizing me up from the corner of her eye. I asked, "Late for something?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'm due at the studio in five minutes. These damned busses—"

I said, "I'll have you there on time," and gunned the car. She was a cute number—I mean, the gal. Nice figure inside the sweater, probably tipped her bathroom scales at a hundred and fifteen. Looked about two years over the legal age of consent, and her eyes were nice and wide-apart, which is a prime requisite for a dame in pictures if she's supposed to be glamorous.

I said, "With a face like that, you don't beat a typewriter, I'll bet."

She smiled and answered, "No. But it would probably be safer. I'm a dress extra."



I dropped my gaze to the slacks and the open-toe shoes and wondered who she thought she was kidding. I said, "Dress?" and grinned.

She nodded. "The call was for slacks and sweater, so I wear slacks and sweater. Do you work at Panamint?"

I said, "Huh-uh. Just a business call." The name of the man who had phoned me still had me grasping. I asked:

"You wouldn't know a guy out there by the name of Benson, would you?"

She looked at me sharply. "With a first name of Orlando?" There was a sudden glitter in her eye.

I nodded. "Yeah. You know him?"

She looked straight ahead. "Yes, I know Orlando, much better than he knows Tip Corwyn." She threw the accent heavily on the "much."

I put out my hand and she took it. I said, "Tip, I'm glad to know you. I'm Jimmy Adams. Now, about Orlando, let me guess. Avocation, a wolf—"

She cut in, "Right. And with a bald spot over a lot of sophomore ideas that he should have shed twenty years ago. He still thinks he's playing college football, the passes he makes."

"And his vocation?" I asked. Orlando Benson was dropping into the well-known Hollywood type.

She said, "Publicity. He's top man in the fairy tale department and has free run of the lot. Goes

around pinching anything feminine, then probably hides in his office and drools." She gathered her handbag from the seat beside her and pointed to the white stucco walls of the studio we were approaching. "Let me out at the gate, and thanks a million."

I pulled up to the sentrylike box where the guard stood, and let her out. She turned and thanked me again, then added, "When you see Orlando, give him a compass for me and tell him the Pacific is just west of here, and to go jump into it."

I observed, "I'm beginning to think you don't like him."

She said, "No. I don't like him. He should never have come back. Yesterday he tried to get cute with a zipper on my costume and I let him have one on the nose. He'll probably try to get me blackballed." She started for the gate, turned and waved, said, "See you, Jimmy," and disappeared behind the high white walls.

I slipped the car into gear and headed for the front office. What Tip had said gave me the tie-in I was grasping for. She'd said, "He should never have come back." I remembered him then. Orlando Benson. He'd dropped out of sight for a year and come back only a few months ago. He'd been a press agent, a big-time press agent, but he'd had a fight with some actor in a night spot on the Strip. A flight of stairs were behind him and he toppled down them and ended with a dislocated spine. They'd taken him off to a

sanitarium and immobilized him in a plaster cast. It took him a year to get back into shape. And in Hollywood, if your name stays out of the paper for a year, you might as well die. But Orlando didn't die, and now he was head publicity man for Panamint.

I couldn't think of the name of the actor who had tossed him down the stairs, but there was something peculiar about the fight. My mind searched, but I couldn't remember.

At the reception desk, I explained who I was and whom I had an appointment with. They gave me a page to lead me through the labyrinth of corridors, up a flight of stairs, and into a sleek, shiny office. The page left me standing on a deep carpet, staring at scores of autographed photos on the walls and a flock of filing cabinets.

There was also a desk and, behind it, an immensely fat man with jowls like a medieval prelate. His face had that sad, babyish expression that some fat men have, and he looked awkward, even with his fingers flying over the typewriter keys with the speed of a jet-propelled plane.

On every desk in Panamint, there's a little metal sign. The one on the fat man's desk said, "Simon Breese." Mr. Breese stopped typing, smiled at me in a frightened fashion, and said, "Mr. Adams? Mr. Benson had to step out a moment. Won't you sit down?"

I nodded and sat down. He smiled again, sighed, then returned

to his typing at breakneck speed. I watched his yellow head bobbing as his eyes jumped from the copy he was typing to the machine. Then I looked at the pictures on the walls. All were autographed to Orlando Benson. One showed a dark, husky actor with a belligerent lower lip and Gable ears. I couldn't read the almost illiterate scrawl under the photograph, but I recognized the face. It was Kelly Nord. I remembered then. It was Kelly Nord who had slapped Benson down the flight of steps and cracked his spine.

I got up, walked across the room and looked closely. The childish handwriting said, "For my pal, Orland. Kelly Nord."

A door banged and I looked around to see a tall, slim man march in. His sparse hair was suspiciously black and the red of his cheeks suggested a touch of make-up. As he entered, the fat man bounced up from his desk and almost ran to intercept him. He fluttered papers in his hands. He said, "Mr. Benson! Please! These letters have got to go out today!"

Benson looked down at him and brushed on past. He said, "Don't bother me!" His voice was high-pitched with irritation. He had grasped the knob to the inner door when he saw me and glared. He said:

"Who the— What do you want?"

I told him, "I'm Jimmy Adams

and I don't want a damn thing. You want me." I didn't like the guy from first glance. His collegiate clothes and white carnation reminded me of the grandmothers on Hollywood Boulevard who persist in wearing pink slacks. Trying to think their senility can be cured by a powerhouse jolt of Vitamin B.

Benson said, "Oh," and showed his china clippers in an apologetic smile. "Sorry I was so abrupt. Come on in, Adams. Not you, Breese!" He slammed the door in the fat man's face.

The publicity man's office was typical of major studios. Chrome, glass, imitation onyx, with a desk big enough to hide a horse.

Benson settled in the swivel chair, waved me to a leather one alongside, and pushed a box of cigarettes toward me. I reached over and took one. And as I leaned back, I noticed the picture lying on the desk.

Benson saw me spot it and shot out a hand. He swept the battered frame, broken glass and all, into a drawer he had pulled open. I raked a match across my shoe sole, lighted the cigarette and wondered.

Although he had been quick, I had recognized the picture. It was of John Bixby, actor. Bixby's rep was good in Cinema City. At present, the columnists were playing up his engagement to Lona MacIntyre, comedienne. They were both top-flight stars under long-term contracts with Panamint. But what had me wondering

was why the picture, in its silver frame, had been apparently smashed square in the middle with something hard and heavy.

Benson pursed his lips, bounced his fingertips together and rocked a little in his swivel chair. Then he said, "Got a little job for you, Adams. The pay is two hundred a week."

I stared at him and flipped ashes on his rug. I said, "I make my own terms. What's the job?"

He stopped his rocking and rested his elbows on his desk. He spread his hands. "Oh, protection, I'd call it. One of our stars has been getting threatening letters. Nothing serious."

I asked, "Whose life is being threatened, not seriously?"

Benson cocked a faded eyebrow at me, then looked down at his hands. He said, "Bixby's. We're in the middle of production on 'The Kill,' and he's starring in it. Some crank—"

I interrupted, "Before we go any further, the rate is five hundred. You want to keep talking?"

For a moment, his eyes squinted in anger. Then he shrugged. "O. K., five hundred," he said, and touched a buzzer on his desk.

I settled back and lighted a fresh cigarette from the butt of the old one. The smell of fish was so thick, you could cut it with a knife. But for five hundred dollars I would play along with his phony game. And it was phony. The studio had its own police, and a job like this wouldn't be handled by a publicity man.

Benson stood up and tossed an envelope at me just as Breese came in in answer to the buzzer. Benson said:

"I've got to run. See you a bit later. Breese will tell you about the setup. Any questions—he'll give you the angles." He was gone, leaving a faint odor of lavender.

I opened the envelope, counted five one hundred-dollar bills, and grinned. The publicity man must have checked on my rates, because it was just right though he had offered two hundred. I looked up at the fat man who stood rocking, staring at me with his troubled baby stare. I said:

"Now that he's gone, maybe you'll tell me just what I do to earn this lettuce."

Breese pulled at his lower lip. "Didn't Benson tell you?"

"Vaguely," I replied. "First, how about showing me the threatening letters?"

The fat man patted his lip back into place. "Oh, Lord!" he said, casting an exhausted glance after his boss. "I suppose, in my files. Unless he took them out. Let's see." I followed him out and watched him dig into the file cabinets. He was muttering sadly. Presently, he turned.

"I can't find them, Mr. Adams. Mr. Benson will know where they are. I— It's a mess," he confessed. "I've been working in the story department till a month or two ago. It'll be another month before I get the files straightened out. He keeps going through them

like a cyclone. If he'd only ask me for what he wants—"

To stop the poor man from bursting into tears, I said, "Well, what did they say? Anonymous, I suppose?"

He explained that they were anonymous. Typewritten. Sent through the mails, without fingerprints, posted at different stations around L. A. They threatened to "get even" with John Bixby. He had done somebody wrong once, it seemed. Just how, was not made clear. Bixby had laughed, preferring to believe that the letters were from some crank. He was busy co-starring with Lona MacIntyre in "The Kill" and being seen at the night spots with her between takes.

"I don't know much about it, really," Simon Breese concluded. "Mr. Benson doesn't tell me a lot. But I think you've got to keep an eye on Bixby without his knowing it."

A siren screamed outside the window. I walked over and looked out. People were running toward a huge sound stage, the entrance of which was just below.

"Picture making?" I asked.

Breese's jowls quivered. "Stage 4. That's where they're shooting 'The Kill.' But . . . but—"

"Yipe!" I said to myself, and headed for the door. I don't know whether Breese followed me or not. I was in a hurry. I was on the lot in less than half a minute, but I found quite a crowd already collected.

A woman was screaming. It was Lona MacIntyre. John Bixby was trying to keep her quiet. He wasn't having much success. I looked around to see what caused the excitement.

"Hello," a voice said at my elbow. "Did you miss the fun?"

Dark, curly hair was shoulder-high beside me. It was Tip Corwyn. She was in heavy make-up, but she still wore the slacks and sweater. I asked, "Who's killed?"

She said, "Nobody," and pointed to a flat of scenery. I looked and saw three bullet holes in it.

I told her, "Quit being mysterious; it doesn't go with your costume. What happened?"

She said, "Kelly Nord was firing blanks at Bixby. Only they weren't blanks. Fortunately, Kelly's a lousy shot."

I said, "Oh-oh," and whistled. Tip looked at me curiously. She asked, "What are you thinking?"

"That somebody's awfully careless," I said.

Tip shoved a lock of hair from in front of an eye. She said, "The prop man slipped, that's all. He'll get his walking papers."

I muttered, "Yeah," thinking that Kelly Nord was the guy who had broken Benson's back. I hadn't known Nord was in the picture. I saw him then, not much like the photo in Benson's anteroom, because his dark hair had been bleached and he had on a lot of make-up. He was sitting quietly in the director's chair, smoking a cigarette, in defiance of a sign directly above his head.

Lona MacIntyre was still whooping away. John Bixby stepped back and said, "For God's sake, Lona! Nobody's hurt!" But she went on wailing like a banshee.

Bixby lost his temper. He brought his hand around in a quick, angry gesture. The flat of his palm splatted against Lona's cheek. He hit harder than he'd intended to, for she went over, chair and all, and was so surprised, she shut up.

Bixby leaned over to help her, but she jerked her arm away and stood up, glaring. Bixby glared back and strode away.

Kelly Nord applauded.

I followed the retreating actor. It was time to start earning my five hundred berries. He disappeared through a door and I was about to reach it when someone grabbed my arm. I turned around and faced a studio cop. He looked me over, then said, "Where's your pass, chum?"

I asked, "Pass for what?" and pulled my arm free. "I'm working for Orlando Benson in publicity."

The cop nodded. "You still gotta have a pass to be on a set. Benson shoulda give you one. I got my orders."

I said a four-letter word and headed back for Benson's office. I went into the anteroom without knocking and found Breese telephoning. He didn't hear me come in. He was saying, "Mr. Benson wants that story about the private detective killed! I can't help it if

it is set up in type; it's got to be killed." He hung up and discovered me.

I said, "My pass," and held out my hand.

The fat man put his hand to the side of his head and looked distressed. He moaned, "Oh, dear, what a mess!" He rummaged around his desk, picked up a piece of pasteboard and handed it to me. "Here it is. I'm sorry I forgot to give it to you."

I was turning to leave when Breese called me back. "Oh, I forgot," he said. "Mr. Benson said to wait for him in his office if you came in. He seems upset about everything. Will you go in there, please?"

I answered, "Sure," went into the publicity man's office and closed the door. I took one of his cigarettes, lighted it and started looking at the pictures on the walls. All of these, too, like the ones in the anteroom, were autographed to Orlando Benson. I started wondering about the smashed picture in the desk.

II.

I listened a moment and heard the steady typing of Breese in the other room, then walked to the desk and opened the drawer. The picture stared up at me. The frame was bent and the glass shattered. There was a torn spot in the middle of Bixby's handsome face where something heavy had smashed down on it. And under the face, written in heavy, savage script, was, "To Orlando Benson,

a dirty, yellow dog. John R. Bixby."

I heard a door open in the outer room and the typing stopped. Then I could hear Benson's voice through the partition. He asked, "Did you get that story killed?"

I couldn't get Breese's answer. I moved over to a window and was standing there, looking down on the lot, when the publicity man came in. I turned around and saw the fright on his face.

Benson's forty-odd years showed plainly in his white face. He went straight for a cabinet, pulled out a bottle of bourbon, poured about four fingers into a glass and tossed it down. He put the bottle back. I really don't believe he was fully conscious of my being there, because he went to his desk and dropped his face in his hands for a full fifteen seconds. Then he looked up. He said, "I'm glad to find you, Adams. The job's off." He waved a dismissing hand. "I won't need you, after all."

I watched him drum nervously on the desk top. I said, "Maybe you don't, but Bixby will need somebody if they're going to shoot at him with live bullets."

Benson jerked to his feet and glared at me. He snapped, "I tell you you're fired! Take out whatever you think is due you and give me back the rest of the five hundred."

I said, "A hundred dollars and a shot of your bourbon is fair enough for wasting my time. I don't like to play ring-around-the-rosy with dressed-up monkeys." I

took out the envelope, transferred one of the bills to my wallet, and tossed the remaining four onto the desk. Then I went to the cabinet, pulled out his bourbon and splashed a glass half full. I murmured, "You don't mind?" and tossed it down.

Benson marched to the door and opened it. He said, "Drink the whole damned bottle!" and slammed out. I heard the outer door bang.

I took another drink and walked through the anteroom. I flipped a "so long" to Breese and went on into the corridor. He hadn't asked for the pass, so I kept it. The day was shot, and I was well paid for it, so I decided to use the pass and watch them make movies.

I wandered out onto the lot near the front of Sound Stage 4 where the excitement had been. There was a group of people there and a man with a still camera. I recognized Kelly Nord and John Bixby. Lona MacIntyre was nowhere around.

Then I saw Benson talking with the still cameraman. I dodged around a stack of scenery and sat down on an Egyptian mummy case some property man had left there. From that spot, I could watch the fun without being noticed.

I was lighting a cigarette when a shadow flicked across my face and I looked up to see Tip grinning at me. She said, "Move over," and sat down alongside.

I made room for her and offered a cigarette. "What gives with the camera over there?" I

knew what it was, but the question started the conversation rolling.

"Publicity stills," she answered. "Benson picks action scenes from pictures in production and uses them in his blurbs for the fan magazines. He's having John Bixby and Kelly Nord do that shooting scene over for the still photographer. Those live bullets made it a good gag and it'll probably rate a front-page spread—'Famous Actor Misses Death By Inches.'" She laughed. "What the movies won't do to get their stars' names in print!"

I said, "You think it was a gag—I mean, about those bullets?"

She shrugged. "A dress extra isn't supposed to think." She pointed. "They're getting ready to shoot."

I looked over to see Benson leave the cameraman and walk over to Kelly Nord. He said, "Let's see that gun, Kelly."

Nord handed him a .38 and Benson took it and flipped it open. I saw him dump the cartridges into his palm, examine each one carefully, then refill the gun. He handed it back and said:

"O. K. They're all blanks. Talmadge says he can catch the gun flash if we time it right. I'll count, and on 'three' you fire."

Benson started to speak to Bixby, then apparently changed his mind. Bixby had been staring at him coldly while he was talking with Nord. Now he watched him go back to Talmadge, the cameraman.

Talmadge checked his focus and nodded. Nord and Bixby struck a pose in front of an outdoor backdrop that hung behind them. I could hear the click as Nord cocked the single-action revolver and raised it.

Benson asked, "Ready?" His voice seemed tense, oddly shrill.

Talmadge nodded. Kelly said, "O. K." John Bixby merely held his pose.

"Right!" said Benson. "One, two—" His hand was raising. "Three!" He dropped his hand.

There was a crack like the slapping of a flat board against still water. Nord's gun flashed. Talmadge said, "Got it!" and Benson pitched forward on his face. A squirming, twisting worm of blood poured out of his temple and was quickly absorbed by the hot sand of the lot. The publicity man's shoulders hunched, his whole body shuddered, then he lay still. From somewhere in the sound stage, a woman's voice raised in a high, shrill scream.

By the time Detective-Lieutenant Al Cahill showed up with his boys, I had already snooped around a bit and was in the property department with Tip, snooping some more. Cahill didn't see me, so I didn't say "hello" immediately. I knew his crew would take care of the routine work efficiently, and I wanted to have a free hand for a little while more, without having to tag along as the tail to Cahill's kite. He was easy to work with, a co-operative dick, but I already

had an idea or two and I wanted to follow them up without wading through too much red tape. The case interested me professionally.

One thing I had noticed already. Nobody was crying over Orlando Benson's death, not even Lona MacIntyre, who had already got her teeth slapped by Bixby for hogging the spotlight. Nobody cried, not even glycerin tears.

Sometimes you can sense emotions in the air. I thought I did. Two emotions. Uneasiness and a curious sort of faint relief. The uneasiness I could understand. After all, a man had been murdered right on the lot, and murder's never a relaxing business. Also, there's the common dread of bad publicity that everybody connected with pictures has. Too many Hollywood careers have gone to hell because of the wrong sort of headlines. I couldn't blame Lona or Bixby or Nord for feeling uneasy and showing it.

Yet there was relief in the wind, too. Orlando had been a grade A heel. I'd formed my own judgment on that score soon after I'd met the guy. But you can't shoot a man in the head and expect applause. Nobody was sorry that Benson was dead, I rather thought, but it was homicide.

There's only one answer to homicide.

So there I was in the property department with Tip, talking to a skinny little man with a bald skull and a seedy gray mustache and a trick of talking too much when he didn't know anything. He an-

swered to the nickname of Props.

He was worried about his job, I knew. He said that, after all, a man could do only so much without eyes in the back of his head.

"I make sure the props are right, that's all," he complained. "That's my job. What the hell can I do with a hundred people, maybe, on the set, running around like jackrabbits?" He chewed his mustache. That gave me a chance to get a word in.

"All I want to know," I said, "is about those blank cartridges."

"Benson checked 'em himself. You saw that, didn't you?"

I said, "I mean the first time, not the second."

"Oh, then," he answered, "I checked 'em. They were blanks. I'll swear they were blanks. Honest, they were—"

I said, "O. K., they were blanks. But blanks didn't make bullet holes in that piece of scenery."

"Flat," he corrected me. "It's a flat. No, but I'd made sure—"

"Then somebody took out the blanks and put in bullets. Who had an opportunity to do that?"

"Anybody at all," he said, and pointed to Tip. "She could have. Or Bixby or Benson or anybody. Anybody who had a studio pass. I loaded the gun with blanks and put it in a drawer of the desk on that set, all ready. I left the drawer halfway open, like the script girl said."

Tip said, "Well, I didn't do it."

"I didn't say you did. I said you could have," Props whined. "Anybody could have. People

were boiling around the set, getting ready. A grip, a juicer—all you'd have to do would be to lift the gun out of the drawer, change the cartridges and put it back."

"Yeah," I said. "Do you remember if the script mentioned a specific gun to be used?"

Props answered, "It just said revolver. I remember. I asked the assistant director—he was talking to Benson—if a .38 single-action would do. He said sure it would."

"When did you ask him?"

"Yesterday. When we shot the scene first. This was a retake."

I said, "Hell," and then, "Thanks. If you remember anything else, let me know."

Props answered, "I sure will, Mr. Adams. It wasn't my fault, honest."

"No," I said. "Anybody might have switched guns."

He looked surprised. "The gun wasn't switched. Just the cartridges. Someone took out the blanks and—"

"O. K.," I cut in. "Come on, Tip." We went outside and I looked around, wondering what to do next.

Tip observed, "You don't look too satisfied. What were you trying to find out?"

I said, "This was a pre-meditated murder. You can't use a .45 bullet in a .38 gun. You've got to have .38 bullets ready in your pocket if you want to substitute them for blanks."

"So, naturally, you've got to

know in advance that a .38 will be used. I thought I had something for a minute, but it doesn't look like it. Anybody who was on the set yesterday would have known enough to supply himself with the right caliber bullets, if he wanted to make the switch."

"He or she," Tip put in.

I looked at her and grinned. "I don't think you did it, chum," I said.

But her brown eyes were serious. "I might have," she answered. "Or what about Lona MacIntyre?"

"What would she have against Bixby or Benson?"

She said, "What makes you think anybody was trying to kill Bixby?"

I stared at her, and she bobbed her head decisively. "You've eliminated Bixby as a suspect, haven't you?"

"Well, he'd scarcely stand up and be a target for a gun he knew was loaded with hot lead."

"Unless he'd worked himself into that spot and couldn't get out of it! These retakes today—"

I said, "That's right. They shot the same scene yesterday, didn't they? But Bixby was the guy Kelly Nord was supposed to aim at. Right?"

Tip nibbled her underlip. "Sure. Well, look. Suppose somebody was trying to kill Bixby, not Benson at all? First he substituted bullets for the blanks, and when that didn't work, he tried again, only this time pulling the trigger

himself. But he shot the wrong guy!"

"Orlando doesn't look like Bixby, my sweet. Not much chance of a mistake in identity."

"But the killer," she persisted, "might have aimed at Bixby and hit Benson."

I asked, "Right in the temple? I don't believe it. Anyhow, who's got a grudge against Bixby?" But as I said it, I remembered his slapping Lona in the teeth.

Tip said, "Benson was a rat. He did a lot of apple-polishing, but when he thought he could get away with anything, he'd do it. Even to his clients, when he was a free-lance flack. I know. John Bixby's pretty square, I've always heard. Only—"

I said, "Were you ever one of Benson's clients before he came to work for Panamint?"

She hesitated. "Well, yes. Sure, I was. It's no secret. A couple of years ago—"

I heard Kelly Nord's deep voice and looked up to see him walking toward us. He said, "It looks like we're all dodging the cops. That headquarters detective has been seeing too many movies."

I told him, "Lieutenant Cahill's a good man."

Nord eyed me. He said, "Oh, you know him?"

I showed him my card. I had a few questions to ask, and I figured it would be easier this way. I said to Tip:

"Look, honey. Be a nice girl and run back and ask Props to

check all of his guns and see if one is missing."

Tip said, "A .38?"

"Not necessarily," I answered. "Any kind."

She said, "O. K., chum, but I think this is a brush-off. But don't forget to look me up. I've a few things to ask you. For example, how come you know so much about the studio when, a while back, you were asking me what a publicity still was." With that, she gave me a malicious grin and took off. I grunted, took out cigarettes, and offered Kelly Nord one.

He shook his head, staring at me. "No, thanks. So you're a private dick. Maybe I should try to hire you."

"What for?" I asked.

Nord said, "Self-protection. I didn't kill Orlando. But I can't prove it."

"You've got the only alibi on the lot," I told him. "When Benson was murdered, you were firing a gun with blanks in it."

He looked at me queerly. He asked, "Were they?"

"Don't you know?"

"Sure, I know," he said. "They were blanks, all right."

"And you were aiming at Bixby, not at Benson."

Kelly ran his fingers through his bleached hair. His make-up had run a little in the hot sun.

"No," he said quietly. "No, I wasn't aiming at Bixby. Everybody took that for granted. Lieutenant Cahill did, when he

questioned me. But I wasn't aiming at Bixby. I couldn't."

I waited, not lighting my cigarette. Nord went on, "When I was a kid, my brother and I got hold of my father's revolver. We were playing around with it, and it went off. I was holding it. It missed my brother's heart by a fraction. Not a serious wound, thank God, but I was sicker than he was. Ever since then, I've been scared to death of firearms."

I said, "I never noticed that in your pictures."

"No," he answered, "you wouldn't. I'm typed as a sympathetic gangster, if that makes sense. I had a lot of trouble for a while. Had to go to a psychiatrist. But he straightened me out. He made me see that my trouble wasn't the gun itself; it was the idea that I might shoot somebody. And I wouldn't be afraid of that as long as I never aimed a gun at anyone. Now, I'm a good marksman. And I know camera angles. I've never pointed a gun at anybody since I shot my brother by mistake. I always aim just a little to one side. It doesn't show on film, but it's the only way I can do it."

I finally got my cigarette lighted. I said, "Oh. Then it wasn't just luck that you missed Bixby today."

He answered, "Of course not. I wasn't aiming at him. I can't aim at anybody and squeeze a trigger."

"Is that generally known?"

Nord shrugged. "Well, I don't talk it around. It wouldn't make

good publicity. Or maybe it would—I dunno. Only, it isn't the sort of thing I want written up. I suppose anybody with eyes would see I was faking. Bixby knew, naturally, that I never aimed at him. And anybody could have noticed. It's no real secret. I've been doing it for years."

"So it wasn't a murder try the first time," I said, half to myself. "It was something else." I thought that over, then said, "You were the guy who tossed Orlando down a flight of stairs a year ago and cracked his neck, aren't you?"

Nord's features stilled under the grease paint. "That's right." He was very watchful now, I thought. Waiting for my next words.

I asked, "Why?"

"He tried to pull a publicity gag on me. I didn't like it."

I said, "Mind telling me what it was?"

Nord said, "Somebody was supposedly writing me threatening letters. Threatening my life. He didn't even let me in on it. He was my publicity agent then, getting paid to keep my name in the papers. Anyway, I kept finding notes slipped under my door and Benson figured I'd call the reporters. Maybe I would have. But my wife found one of the letters. She's a semi-invalid, you know."

I hadn't known.

"Her heart's bad," Nord went on rightly. "She had an attack and the doctor almost didn't bring her around. Luckily, she didn't die, or

I'd have killed Orlando Benson then. All I did, after I found out who'd started that clever little publicity gag, was to poke him in the jaw. He fell down the steps himself, trying to get away from me. You noticed he never sued me for assault. Well, now you know why."

I said, "And is that generally known?"

"No." Nord hesitated. "As a matter of fact, Bixby was asking me about it yesterday."

"You told him what you've told me?"

"Sure," the actor said. "I can trust Bixby to keep his mouth shut. I hope I can trust you." He waited a moment. "You've guessed why I'm talking so much, I suppose?"

I answered, "Candidly, I haven't. Why?"

"What I said in the first place. Maybe I should try to hire you. I know damn well I had a motive for killing Benson. I didn't see myself spilling it to the cops unless I had to. But I wanted it on record." He grinned at me. "If you have to, you can testify that I gave you the low-down and that I'm your client." He put his hand in his pocket and it came out with a thick wallet.

I stepped back. "Nope," I said. "Right now, I'm doing this for fun. Later, perhaps."

I left him, but I looked up John Bixby before I went after Tip. I had a question to ask him. I found

him in his dressing room and asked the question.

"That's right," Bixby said. "Benson was trying the same stunt with me that he tried with Kelly Nord. When I started getting letters, I remembered Kelly had dropped a word or two once when he was a little high. So I questioned him. Then I went up to see Benson."

I asked, "What about your autographed picture?"

"The picture?" Bixby looked vague. "Oh, yeah. He'd been asking for one for his collection. When I went into Benson's office, he had one of me he had gotten from the studio. It was lying on his desk, and while I waited for him, I wrote on it what I did. Then I stuck it in my pocket."

"Well, when he came in, I asked him if he was behind those threatening letters, and he said sure, it'd be swell publicity. I got mad. If he'd told me in advance what was going on, it would have been different. But to let me think—"

I got it then. Bixby had been dope enough to take those anonymous notes seriously. He had been scared shirtless. No wonder he'd blown his top at Orlando!

He said sheepishly, "Anyhow, I lost my temper. I said a few things. Orlando backed down and tried to tell me to take it easy. I calmed down a little, but just as I was going out, he asked about the picture, so I pulled it out of my pocket and tossed it in front of him. He looked at it and did a burn and then smashed it with

a paper weight. We both acted like a couple of kids, I suppose. But—"

"Uh-huh," I said. "Thanks. You've helped a lot." He was starting to talk about hiring me when I left.

III.

I went back to the property department. The bald man with the moth-eaten mustache had a big cabinet open, firearms nestling in their racks inside, and was pointing out one after another to Tip, who was perched on a stool, watching interestedly. I ran an eye over the cabinet; nothing was missing. But there were other cabinets ranged around the room.

"Hello," Tip said. "You're out of luck. Everything's in place."

I said, "Are these cabinets kept locked?"

Props nodded. "They sure are. I keep the keys with me all the time."

"How about duplicates?" I asked.

Props shrugged. There were, of course. There had to be. But they were kept in the front office where they could be easily reached in case a lost one had to be replaced.

Tip put in, "But there aren't any missing."

"O. K.," I said. "But just for the record, would you mind opening the other cabinets? They've got guns in them, I suppose?"

They had. A beautiful collection of rifles, shotguns, automatics, revolvers, some modern, some an-

tique, though the most valuable ones were, of course, kept in a vault. I ignored the rifles. A rifle couldn't easily be carried in a man's pocket out of sight. But I examined the sidearms more carefully and used my nose.

I stopped at a .38 automatic neatly hung on its rack. I smelled it again. Then, using my handkerchief, I slid it out and examined it thoroughly. I said to Props:

"Has this room been left unattended for any length of time since Benson was shot?"

The man looked at me and a flush of color came over his face. He swallowed. He said, "Yes, for a half-hour. I went out to see the excitement."

Tip craned forward. She asked, "What is it?"

I said, "An automatic. It's been fired very recently. Somebody could have come in here with a duplicate key and borrowed it." I pulled out the clip, then yanked the slide. An empty shell popped out. There were seven live cartridges in the clip.

"And then replaced the gun later?" That was Tip's voice.

Props suddenly yelled, "Hey! Look at that barrel!"

I said, "I see the marks. They're fresh, I think. What do they add up to?"

Tip looked puzzled, but Props knew guns. He said, "I'll be damned. A silencer!"

I nodded. "You've got some in stock?"

Props said, "We sure do. Different kinds. Right in this drawer

here." He took the key out of the cupboard door and used it to unlock the drawer. It was obviously a master key, probably made to fit any lock in the prop room.

We couldn't be sure which silencer had been used, but several of them could have fitted the .38. I studied the automatic again. It had been wiped clean, even inside the trigger guard, which is where most smart boys slip. I fitted the silencer on the barrel and dropped the whole thing in my pocket. It made quite a bulge, but it might have been anything at all, for all the casual observer could tell.

"All right," I told Props. "Stay here. I've got a few things to attend to."

"I won't get in any trouble?"

"No," I told him. "It wasn't your fault keys were left lying around the front office. But you'd better not do any talking right now."

"Believe me, I won't," he answered, and I went out. Tip hurried after me.

"Don't leave me out of this," she said. "I want to know what you found out from Kelly."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "That reminds me. Kelly interrupted us just when you were telling me you were a client of Orlando's once."

Tip stopped dead-still and turned to face me. I stopped, too. "Now, look," she said. "I suppose you suspect me too. Well, if you do, spill it! I'm no stooge."

"I didn't say—"

"O. K. I was one of his clients a couple of years ago. I was

working here in the pay-roll department and got tired of pounding a typewriter. I knew what publicity can do, the right kind. So I paid Orlando to get me some. As long as Breese was handling the routine, I didn't have any kick, but Orlando took over and was more interested in my legs than he was in my future. I didn't mind paying cash for publicity, but I wasn't going to throw in myself as a bonus. I stopped being a client, that's all."

"Well," I asked, "he got you out of pay roll into acting, didn't he?"

"I paid him for it," she said tartly. "In cash!"

But another thought had slipped into my mind, one I hadn't recognized at first. "Pay roll— Hey, Tip, listen! They've got all the salaries listed there, haven't they?"

Her eyes were still a little angry, but she said, "Naturally, they do."

I asked, "How far back do the records go?"

She answered, "Probably fifteen years. Why?"

I ignored her question. I said, "How's the arrangement? Alphabetical? I mean, Orlando Benson would be under B? Easy to find?"

She answered, "Yes. His card would be, but I don't get it. What's this got to do with what we were talking about?"

"Plenty," I told her. "Tip, I'll see—"

She said, "I know. Another brush-off. Next time you want information, try the 'Britannica.'"

I almost went after her, but I didn't. She wasn't seriously an-

noyed, I figured, and what I had on my mind couldn't wait. It was, I thought, time I looked up Lieutenant Cahill.

He was talking to one of the fingerprint crew when I found him. Al Cahill was a short, thick, gray-haired man with mildly humorous features and a wide, froglike mouth. Ever since he'd seen the Sherlock Holmes pictures, it had been the disappointment of his life that he didn't look like Basil Rathbone.

He didn't seem worried about it now, though. He threw me a quick, curious glance and said, "Well, well. Jimmy Adams finally decides to take a bow. I heard you were around."

I said, "Hello, lieutenant. I had a little work to do. Stuff that couldn't wait."

He exclaimed, "Fine! We haven't made an arrest yet. You were here when Benson was shot, weren't you?"

I nodded. "And I've got some information," I said, "but I need your help."

He grinned. "So that's why you decided to look me up. I thought so. Go chase yourself."

I said, "If you can get me access to the files in pay roll, I think I can put the finger on the killer."

Cahill's eyes sharpened and he lost his grin. He demanded, "You on the level, Adams?"

"It's on the level."

"Well," he said indecisively. "Tell me a little more about it. Then I'll let you know."

"So you can grab the credit?"

The lieutenant scowled. "Oh! You want it all. Like that, huh?"

I said, "To hell with the credit. We'll split it. I'll even take ten percent. I'm trying to wrap up a murder for you, and you argue about credits. You sound like a writer."

Cahill said, "O. K., we'll go over to the pay-roll department. Then maybe you'll tell me what you've got in your pocket."

I slapped the bulge of the .38. I told him, "Then maybe we'll go somewhere else. For example—"

For example, Orlando Benson's outer office. Afternoon sunlight came through the windows and made patterns on the expensive rug. The photos on the walls looked at us curiously. So did Simon Breese, over his typewriter.

I said, "Excuse us. Breese, this is Lieutenant Cahill. Lieutenant, meet Mr. Breese. I think he's the gentleman who can give us the answer to the puzzle."

Cahill stared at Breese and obviously didn't think much of the fat man. Breese stood up, blinking. "You mean Mr. Benson's death? I . . . I don't understand. I didn't see—"

"I didn't say you saw the murder committed," I said. "Though you could have, if you'd looked out the window. No, I'm talking about something else. You were Benson's secretary when he was in business before he broke his back. Then you took a job with Panamint in the story department. But I'm talking about since then. The last couple of months."

Breese's head bobbed, his jowls shaking. "Oh. But I still don't know—"

I grinned at Lieutenant Cahill. "Listen to this. Breese, you were with Orlando Benson a couple of years ago, when he sent phony threatening notes to Kelly Nord, weren't you? And you knew about it?"

Breese answered, "Well, yes, I did know. I didn't like it. It didn't seem like smart publicity. But what could I do?" He shrugged. "I wasn't the boss."

I said, "And just lately Orlando tried the same stunt with John Bixby, didn't he? Those threatening notes you told me about—Benson wrote them himself?"

Breese nodded. "Yes. I told Mr. Benson it wasn't wise, but since he got out of the hospital he wasn't easy to work with. He didn't take advice very well."

"All right, lieutenant," I said. "Here's what happened. Benson wanted credit for publicity on Bixby. He faked some threatening letters to Bixby and called me in to act as a bodyguard, to protect Bixby. I was an outsider, and wouldn't have spotted the phony angles as fast as a studio dick. Also, a private dick watching over the actor, would make good newspaper copy. Then somebody, the murderer, took the blanks out of a .38 and put in bullets. That wasn't a murder attempt. The killer knew that Kelly Nord never aimed directly at his target. Now, figure out what happened after Kelly fired those shots."

Breese said, "Mr. Benson was upset—"

"You're damned right he was," I cut in. "He was scared as hell of losing his job here. Suppose those bullets had killed Bixby? Suppose those notes got traced back to him? Not only would he lose his job, but he might find himself facing a jury. No wonder he fired me as fast as he could. From the moment Kelly fired those bullets, and missed Bixby, Orlando Benson was through with that publicity gag he'd fixed up. He didn't know who had done the switch, but plenty of people disliked him, and anybody could have done it. He was washing his hands of those threatening letters as fast as he could."

Breese said, "I told him—"

Cahill interrupted, "What about the murder? Benson was killed, Adams. You can't dodge that."

"I'm coming to it," I said. "A man won't commit murder unless he's forced to it, or unless the circumstances are ideal. Our killer figured he was forced to it, and he fixed up the circumstances to suit himself. Remember those publicity stills? The original scene, with bullets in Kelly's gun, was just a frame. It was nothing but a build-up, so the murderer could suggest doing the scene over, in a way that would give him a chance to kill Benson without being suspected. And, at that point, Benson was so afraid of losing his job, that he wasn't capable of thinking for himself. He was just willing to grab at any suggestion somebody offered him."

I put my hand in my pocket. "You suggested taking those stills, Breese. You told Orlando Benson where to have it done, right in front of Sound Stage 4. He was used to accepting your ideas, anyway, wasn't he?"

The fat man put out his hands and gripped the edge of the desk. "You're crazy!" he said hoarsely. "You're crazy as hell!"

I went on, "Benson was a lousy publicity man. You were his idea supply. You were the brains. You did the work and he hogged the credit. You get seventy-five bucks a week, and he got a thousand. Until he broke his back and went away, you worked for him. Then you took a job here in the story department, and they found out what a good idea man you really were."

"I checked your records in pay roll, Breese, and you were pulling down five hundred a week while you were in story. Until Benson came here as publicity head. Then you left your high-pay job to work with him for seventy-five per."

I waited, but Breese didn't say anything. Cahill shot a quick glance at me, then looked at Breese again.

"O. K.," I said. "You wouldn't have done that unless you had to. What was Benson holding over you?"

Breese spluttered, "You . . . you can't prove—"

"Now that we know what to look for, we can prove plenty," I said. "I know damn well Orlando Benson had a hold on you, and forced

you to do the work while he collected the big dough. And after you'd had a chance to be free, to get credit for your ideas, and to get paid more than you'd ever been paid in your life before, you couldn't stand going back to the old routine, could you?"

The fat man said in a queer, breathless voice, "I wasn't there when he was killed. You know I couldn't have done it."

I said, "It was like shooting a fish in a rain barrel. You'd told Orlando exactly how to arrange the scene in front of Sound Stage 4. Then you waited, till you could synchronize your shot with Kelly Nord's, and you shot Benson by simply turning around in your chair and bracing the gun against the window sill behind you."

I took the automatic, silencer and all, out of my pocket and tossed it on the desk beside the typewriter.

The element of surprise did it. If Breese had stopped to think, he would have known that I wouldn't give him a loaded gun. But just then he couldn't stop to think, after the way I'd been pounding him.

He grabbed the gun, his fat mouth shaking. Words spilled out

of his blubbing lips. Most of them didn't make sense, except the part where he screamed that nobody was going to send him back to New York to face a murder charge. He sounded crazy, talking about an old murder charge when he'd just bumped Benson. But it proved my deduction that the publicity man had held a threat over him.

We let him go. Lieutenant Cahill's men were waiting for him just beyond the door. He backed right into their arms.

I watched them carry him off, then went downstairs and out to the parking lot and got into my coupé. I pulled out into the road that led to Westwood Village and stopped at the red light by the employees' gate. Tip was standing there, waiting for a bus.

I drove alongside and flipped open the door. I said, "I'm going as far as you'll let me, if that'll be any help."

She made a face, then grinned. She hopped into the coupé, but this time she didn't sit way over in her corner. She said, "A drink would be nice," and snuggled down.

The light changed to green.

THE END.



DEATH PAYS IN FULL



♥ *Believe me, it's no joke, getting caught in a lady's boudoir by her husband, particularly when the lady's stretched out dead.*

The apartment house was in the better part of town where rents were high and the going tough for a bill collector.

There was a panel of mailboxes by the main entrance and the name was listed over one of the boxes, "Mr. and Mrs. E. G. Talz." Their apartment number was 207. I got in by waiting until a woman in a mink coat, leading a lap dog on a silver chain, came out. She didn't bother to glance at me as I passed her.

I walked upstairs to the second floor and touched the bell button beside the door to 207. After a

moment, the door opened and a woman looked at me with politely raised eyebrows and the single word, "Yes?"

She was worth looking at a long time. Her eyes were dark-brown and her hair was smoothly pulled back in a sheen of black. She wore an afternoon dress that was a little too low at the neck, drawn together in a peasant-style looseness that no peasant could ever afford, and her skirt was full and short. She wore the right colors.

I handed her one of the cards Mike Rafferty, the boss, had ordered for me. She looked specu-

latively at the printing that read, "George Boiton—Adjuster." Her eyelashes were very long.

"The office has asked me to see you about an adjustment," I said, smiling. "May I come in a moment?"

She still looked puzzled and I made a very slight forward movement that was enough to clinch it. She opened the door and I stepped into the apartment.

She indicated a chair for me and sat down on a davenport at the opposite side of the room. She had nice legs.

"An adjustment?" she asked. "I don't understand."

"Credit adjustment," I explained, and brought out the bill. "Six months ago, you purchased a fur coat from Bellem's. Its price was one thousand nine hundred dollars, on which you paid a down payment of one hundred dollars with the stipulation that you were to pay the balance within one year. There has been no payment and you have failed to answer their inquiries. I represent the Acme Collection Agency. By the terms of your contract, your failure to pay the monthly instalments now makes the entire balance of one thousand eight hundred dollars due. There will also be a slight charge of ten dollars for collection expenses."

I stopped talking and looked at her. It was a bad account. They usually were by the time they came to us, so bad that we got a straight forty percent of what was collected. And of the forty percent, I'd get half if I was able to get the money.

I could use it. The ten-dollar collection charge was thrown in for good measure.

She tried to smile, but it wasn't very good. She was worried.

"I'm afraid I can't pay you," she said.

"I'll take the coat then," I told her flatly.

She bit gently at her lower lip and looked away.

"Can you give me a little time?"

"You've had quite a bit, Mrs. Talz."

Somewhere in the apartment, there was a slight sound. She glanced nervously at a door.

"If you'll come tomorrow I'll have some money for you," she said quickly.

She stood up when the door suddenly opened and a man came into the room from the back part of the apartment. He was middle-aged, tall and thin. His nose was too long for the rest of his face and his eyes were put too closely together. His lips were simply a thin line. He wore gray flannel slacks and a blue sports coat.

"Hello, Mr. Talz," I said.

I knew him. We handled a few accounts for him occasionally, but we didn't like them. The accounts he gave us were from his one legitimate enterprise, the Talz Sports Shop. His other accounts Mike wouldn't have touched with leather gloves. They varied from two night clubs, a numbers racket, a string of pinball machines to a few beer joints.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped.

"Collecting a bill."

"For what?"

"A fur coat your wife bought from Bellem's. It's for eighteen hundred dollars with ten dollars' collection fee."

The woman was looking steadily at Talz.

"Now, don't get excited, Ed," she said quietly. "I can explain."

He looked at her grimly.

"I gave you two grand to buy that coat. What did you do with it?"

I expected her to shrink into the frightened wife pose. She didn't. She said, "That's none of your damned business."

I didn't expect it, and now I saw that she had a neat package of anger wrapped up behind the brown eyes.

"Why, you—" Talz spluttered.

"Go to hell."

I waited. I was getting a few surprises, but if I just sat and waited, someone might get sore enough to pay me the money.

They disappointed me. Talz turned abruptly and said:

"Come back tomorrow at three and she'll have the money for you in cash."

I stood up. "That will be fine, Mr. Talz. I'm sorry if I've caused any trouble, but—"

"Shut up and get out."

For a handsome commission, I can afford to take a bit of abuse. I smiled and left the apartment. I closed the door very quietly as I

went out and, behind me, there was complete silence.

She opened the door for me at three o'clock the next afternoon. She was a little more sophisticated in her dress this time. The material was smooth and clinging. It was all right.

She smiled and told me to come in.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," I told her. "But it's my job and everyone has to earn a living."

"I understand," she said. "I don't blame you. Ed sent word a few moments ago for you to wait for him. He wants to talk with you about something."

"The money?" I inquired.

"No. It isn't that. I have it here. Would you like a drink while you're waiting?"

She nodded toward a table where she'd already been at work.

"A short one," I said.

She mixed drinks for both of us. Mine had a slight shortage of soda, or else an overage of Bourbon. I put the glass down.

"He'll be here soon?"

"He said at about a quarter to three. I'll get your money for you now, if you like."

I nodded. That suited me fine. I didn't want Talz to change his mind any about the payment.

She got up with a brief display of the nice legs and went to the doorway through which Talz had come the day before. She closed the door after her and I was alone in the living room.

She didn't come back. At a quar-

ter after three, I still was alone with the second drink I'd poured for myself. I wondered when Talz would arrive. At half past three, I still was alone.

I went to the closed door and tapped lightly. No one answered, and abruptly, there was something about the whole thing that I didn't like.

Carefully, I turned the doorknob and pushed the door open until I could look into a hallway beyond it. The hallway was empty and quiet. I took a few steps to the first opened door on the side and looked into a bedroom.

Butterflies began to do nose dives in my stomach. I took a deep breath, held it for a second, and then let it out slowly.

There was no use waiting any longer for Mrs. Talz. She was never coming back. Someone had caved in the right side of her head with the marble base of a bed lamp. She was on the floor in front of a dresser and, on the dresser, was a pocketbook that had been emptied. There was no currency in sight.

I walked down the hallway, looked into another bedroom and then a kitchen. There was a kitchen door. The apartment had two exits.

A door chime sounded above my head and it sounded like Big Ben. Right then, I didn't want to open the door for anyone. It was no place to be opening doors. I couldn't answer the call and say, "Come in. The lady of the house has just been murdered. We were here alone."

Panic swept through me like fire

through a hayloft. My hat was in the living room. I got that fast on tiptoes and remembered to wipe the hallway doorknob with a handkerchief and to use the linen on the kitchen doorknob as I let myself out. Maybe I was letting myself in for trouble, but those fingerprints could be more trouble if I left them. I didn't want to get mixed up with murder. I'd have too much to explain.

The door chime still was sounding when I left.

I circled through hallways. I remembered Talz knew I would be there in the afternoon. I had to do something about that. Walking down the hallway to the front entrance of the apartment, I found Pinky Houit at the door. He grinned. Pinky collected for the City Credit Bureau.

"You got one against 'em, too?" he asked.

My lips felt as if they would crack, but I managed to return his grin as I looked at the thin, red-headed collector.

"Yeah. I was supposed to be here at three. I hope they haven't gone out. They had a good sock of dough waiting for me."

"Well, they don't answer."

"What time is it?"

"About twenty of four," Pinky said.

"Been ringing long?"

He nodded. "About ten minutes. I believe in giving 'em a run for their money. Sometimes they break down and answer if they get sore enough. That's all I want. Just to talk with them."

"Guess they're not here then," I said.

He shrugged. "If they are, they ain't answering."

We walked down the hallway and out of the building.

"Have you got a good one on them?" I asked.

He gave me a suspicious glance and then shrugged again.

"Almost a grand. She charged a diamond ring."

We came to my car and I offered him a lift. He pointed to his own car and went on. I got in my coupé and swung into traffic. Perspiration was seeping from under my hatband. I was beginning to wonder if I would have been smarter to call the cops, but it was too late now. If Pinky told them his story, mine would sound like a phony.

I wished I'd never seen the Talz family.

About three minutes later, I wished that more than ever. I wished it so much, I pulled out of traffic and parked because I'd remembered something that made me a little sick.

"You're smart," I told myself. "So damned smart, you've elected yourself to a death cell!"

I'd just remembered that there were two doornobs in the Talz apartment that were wiped very clean of fingerprints. But on the coffee table was a highball glass that undoubtedly had some very fine fingerprints that were going to match perfectly with the ones I

had filed for identification purposes at police headquarters.

There were no police cars parked in front of the apartment building. I went directly to the apartment and touched the bell button. There was no answer. I didn't expect one. But I waited five minutes.

I left the front door, walked down the hallway and turned into the small one that led to the back door. Both hallways were deserted.

I'd worked the trick on my own apartment door when I had been locked out. It might work on the back door to the Talz apartment.

From my wallet, I took a small celluloid calendar and carefully manipulated it between the door and the frame where the spring lock held. The door was loose enough and, after a few minutes I felt the lock spring back and I pushed the door open.

That was when I noticed the small piece of celluloid on the floor. Evidently I'd broken off a corner of my card in the manipulation. I stooped to pick it up when I glanced at the smooth-cornered card in my hand.

For a few seconds I stood poised with outstretched hand and then I stood. I could leave that for the cops.

The living room was exactly as I had left it. I wiped the glass clean, thought it over, and took it to the kitchen and placed it among other glasses on a cupboard shelf.

The panic that had spurred me into hasty action before was gone now. I didn't like staying in the apartment, but I'd never get an-



other chance and I might need everything I could find.

I kept my eyes away from the woman on the floor as I carefully inspected the bedroom from the doorway. There wasn't much that looked as if it would help. A faint odor of perfume hung over the place like the odor of flowers at a funeral. I shivered.

In front of the open pocketbook, the usual things a woman carries were sprawled, as if someone had turned the pocketbook upside down. I went to the dresser and looked at the stuff.

From the doorway I had missed something. Inside the pocketbook was an addressed, stamped, unsealed letter and several small slips of paper folded together.

I looked at the slips. They were receipts from the City Credit Bureau, each for twenty dollars "on account" and each signed by Houit. Evidently, Pinky had been making weekly collections on the account he held.

The envelope was addressed to Jack Henshaw with a San Francisco street and number. I slipped out the letter and read it:

Dear Jack:

He found out yesterday about the ring and coat and suspects that I sent the money to you. He has given me the money to pay up the bills and I'm afraid not to do it.

If you're ready, I'll leave him. He doesn't know where you are, but be careful.

I'll call you next Monday night from outside the apartment, so be home. I hope that everything is all right now and that I can leave him forever to be with you. I love you.

Alma

"Dear Jack" was going to wait a long time for her to call him, I thought. And at least I knew where Talz's money had gone and why there had been the angry exchange of words about it. Talz evidently was having wife trouble.

I tossed it around in my mind for a moment and began to make sense out of the parts.

"He could have killed her and framed me," I thought. "It was a natural. Call her and tell her to have me wait. While I was in there with her, he could have come in the back door. When she came after the money, he could have killed her. Taking the dough would make it look like murder for the money. Then he'd tell the cops that—"

I was thinking too hard. I didn't hear him until he spoke.

"You made too much noise opening the back door," he said.

Talz was standing in the doorway to the bedroom. There was a gun in his hand. His lips were drawn tight and his eyes were as cold as blue ice.

"You were here when I came in?" I asked, and wondered why I asked a question like that. In spite of my hundred eighty pounds and a fairly tough existence, I was scared. I was too scared to be asking simple questions like that.

"I'd just found her when I heard you," he said. "I've been in the clothes closet across the hall."

I swallowed hard and glanced at the gun.

"I didn't kill her," I told him.

"Where's the dough you took from her pocketbook?"

"I haven't got it. I didn't do this."

He shook his head slowly. "Don't bother lying. I'll let the cops find the dough on you."

"They won't find it. And they'll listen to my story."

He shook his head again.

"You won't be telling a story," he said. "Dead men don't talk."

He didn't have to explain. It was all in his eyes and the way he held the gun. I searched wildly for something to say.

"You'd better read the letter she had in her pocketbook," I blurted. "There's a guy in San Francisco—Don't kill a man because of her. Read the letter first."

"I know all about the guy in San Francisco," he said.

His eyes narrowed and a strange look of anger and something that might have been grief, came across his face.

"She cheated on me," he said in a rasping voice. "She stole from me and gave me a bad time from the day I met her. But she was my woman. Do you understand that, you rat? She was my woman and you killed her!"

The anger had mounted to a rage that crept into his voice and shone in his eyes. A rage that could drive a man to kill another man, to kill a wife who was caught cheating!

I wondered how it would feel to have hot lead tear into me. I wondered if it would hurt and how it would feel to die.

Our eyes locked and I tried to

push the thought out of my mind. I had to say something to stop him. I had to delay it while there was still time and the rage in his ice-blue eyes was still clear, before the redness of mad hate clouded the eyes and the muscles of his gun hand contracted.

Only it didn't add up, I suddenly realized. I'd tabbed him as the man who might have murdered her. Maybe this was a good act. A man has a right to defend his home. He could plead that and get a pat on the back from the cops for shooting a murderer. Only, if he had deliberately murdered his wife and was permanently pinning the rap on me with a bullet to clinch it, the rage must be phony. It was an act. And I didn't think it was!

His breath was rasping in his throat and he had moved forward a step. I had to stop him.

"I got your message," I said. "I waited, but you didn't come."

For a second, I thought he hadn't heard me and then his eyes cleared a trifle of the rage.

"What message?" he snapped. "I told you yesterday to come for the balance. And I called that guy at City Credit and told him I was cleaning up your two grand and his one. What message are you talking about?"

"The one you sent for me to wait for you. I waited. You didn't come."

He looked at me intently.

"You can't stall death," he said.

"I'm not trying to stall death. I'm trying to find out what happened."

"Talk straight."

"Your wife said you had sent a message for me to wait."

"You'll have to do better than that."

Maybe he was skeptical, but it had stopped him for the moment. I pressed on. I had an idea. Perhaps it wouldn't work, but it was all I could think of doing at the moment. If he had been crazy about her enough to go into a rage, he'd be sloppy about her, too.

I glanced down at her body and the mashed head, and looked up quickly. I gulped hard and let a quaver get into my voice.

"I'm going to be sick," I muttered. "I'm going to be sick all over her."

It worked. A look of revulsion came into his eyes.

"Get out of here then, you damned fool. Not in here. Not around her!"

I stumbled away from the body toward the door. Instinctively, he stepped back to let me by.

Every ounce of my hundred eighty pounds was behind the fist that connected with his jaw. He jolted against the door frame and slid to the floor.

I picked up the gun, put it into a pocket and looked down at him. He wasn't going to be interested in things for quite a while, I decided.

The telephone was in the living room. I dialed police headquarters. A calm, efficient voice answered the call. I explained that there had been a murder and where to send the cops. The voice said that help

would be at the apartment within a few moments.

I dropped the telephone into its cradle and glanced at my watch. It was almost five and Pinky Houit should be checking in at his office. If the cops were going to listen to my story, it would be better if Pinky were there to confirm what I had to tell.

I dialed again and, after a moment's delay, Pinky's voice came over the wires.

Briefly, I told him about the murder.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Come over here and tell the cops that you were at the door when I came. About our leaving together. The time element is important."

"Look, George, I don't want any part of a murder," he objected.

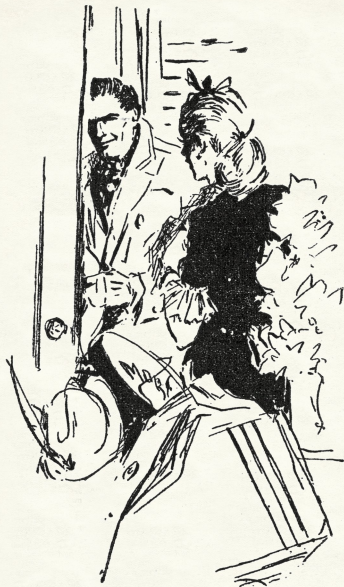
"After I tell them what happened, they'll question you, anyhow. It'll just make it easier all the way around. Besides, I think you'll have a better chance of collecting your account," I said. "If you nail Talz in front of the cops and he admits that he was going to pay us off, it won't hurt either of us any."

"You're in a spot, ain't you?" Pinky said decisively.

"Yes. And I'm going to have to tell them to talk with you. You'll give me a break if you'll come over now. I want to hear your story before Talz becomes conscious."

"I'd like to help, George, but—"

"O. K.," I said wearily. "I'll



give you a split on my commission when I get my dough from Talz."

There was a brief silence and then his voice:

"That's different. I'll be over, but you got to make it clear to the cops that you asked me to come and that I ain't mixed up with the murder."

"Thanks, Pinky. I appreciate this."

I put down the telephone and eyed the bottle of Bourbon that was still on the coffee table. I used the dead woman's glass, but the whiskey tasted just as good.

The man in charge of the homicide squad was in his fifties, a small, gray-haired man with alert eyes and a pleasant voice. His name was Jones. When I finished talking, he smiled wryly and looked from me to Pinky and back to me again.

"That's quite a story to ask us to believe," he said.

I nodded. "I'm in too deep to do anything else but tell the truth. Hell, I wouldn't have called you if I'd killed her. Talz is still out. I could have got out of town by now. And I wouldn't have brought Pinky over. He's the only one who saw me around here about the time that she was killed. I'm laying myself wide open."

Jones looked at Pinky Houit.

"Does he tell it the way it happened as far as you are concerned?" he asked.

Pinky nodded. "I came here to get the money for the diamond account like Talz told me to do.

I was late and rang about ten minutes. No one answered. George came while I was ringing. We went out together. That's all I know about it."

"Any idea who killed her?" Jones asked him.

Pinky shrugged. "From what George says, Talz must have been plenty sore at her. Maybe he did. Maybe the California guy George read about in the letter came back and did it."

Jones looked thoughtful and glanced down the hallway where there was a good deal of activity by the bedroom door. On the davenport across from us, Talz was stretched out, still unconscious. His mouth was open and he was snoring. He didn't look so tough that way.

"On the other hand," Jones said to me, "after Talz caught you in the room, you haven't any other out but the one you're taking."

His voice wasn't so pleasant and his eyes failed to smile. Abruptly, I knew why the small, gray-haired man was head of homicide. He was looking at me as if he could already visualize me in the death chair, and I knew he'd put me there if he could.

I lighted a cigarette and wished I dared take another drink. He caught my glance at the bottle.

"Go ahead," he told me. "You've already told me you've had a few drinks from it. The fingerprints won't be any different. It looks as if you've wiped up the rest that you left around here."

I knew that he was thinking of

the glass and that an assistant already had told him that the marble-based murder lamp also had been wiped clean.

I had the drink and sat back in my chair. Pinky lighted a cigarette and looked at me pityingly.

"I think I know who killed her," I said.

Jones didn't spark to my statement. His expression remained unchanged and his eyes regarded me impassively.

"You're doing the talking," he answered. "But it had better be good. Let's hear it."

I shook my head. "First, I want to show you something."

He and Pinky followed me to the kitchen. I pointed down at the small piece of celluloid on the floor and handed him my wallet.

"There's a celluloid card in my wallet, but it's whole. That piece of celluloid wasn't broken from it," I said.

He took my wallet, examined the card and nodded.

"Go on," he said.

"I used the card to get in here when I came back, as I told you," I went on.

He nodded again. "It's an old trick."

"Someone else did, too," I said. "But he broke his card and didn't notice the piece that fell to the floor."

Jones massaged his jaw with a thoughtful hand. In back of him in the hallway, a police photographer set up a camera in the doorway to the bedroom. Pinky watched us with deep interest.

"Any idea who it was?" Jones asked.

"In her letter to the man in San Francisco, she said that Talz had given her money to clean up the debts on the coat and ring. She had been paying on the ring already.

"So there's one guy besides me who was called in this afternoon to be paid. The same guy who has been collecting from her for several months. When a collector comes in a place to get a payment, he usually learns where a woman keeps her money. She probably went into the bedroom each time for the twenty she gave him. And he knew that they kept the hall door closed.

"Talz called him this morning and told him to come around for his grand and also that I'd be there for two grand."

"What the hell!" Pinky Houit erupted. "Do you think I—"

Jones interrupted him.

"You mean, he could have planned the whole thing?" he said. "Called her and gave her a phony message from her husband to make you wait? That would keep her occupied to give him a chance to come in the back way and lift the money. Only, you think he was caught and killed her. So he came back and rang in case anyone had seen him come in. That would make it look good. Is that it?"

"That's the way I see it," I admitted.

"Why, you—" Pinky Houit cried.

Jones held up a hand to interrupt him again.

"You're thinking fast," he told me. "But a lot of men think fast when they're on a spot for murder. Sometimes that isn't enough."

I looked at the piece of broken celluloid he had picked up from the floor.

"Why don't you ask for Pinky's wallet?" I suggested. "Maybe there's a celluloid card in it with a corner broken off. Maybe that piece you're holding will match the break."

Jones looked at Pinky Houit and silently held out his hand.

"You go to hell!" Pinky snapped. "You can't frame me for murder!"

"The wallet," Jones said quietly.

A thin line of white edged around Houit's lips and his eyes shifted about the room in a quick look of desperation.

"You can't do this to me," he snarled. "I'm going to get out of here."

He started for the back door. I stepped in front of him and he swung hard. I caught the blow on my shoulder and used my right for the second time that day.

Pinky Houit went off balance and down. I stooped over him and

jerked a wallet from his hip pocket.

"Maybe this isn't according to the laws of search, but here's his wallet," I said, and handed it to Jones.

Jones took it and drew a celluloid card from a compartment. Quietly, he matched the broken corner against the piece of celluloid he had retrieved from the floor.

"It matches," he said softly.

He took a small sheaf of currency from the wallet and ran through it.

"About three thousand dollars," he mused. "He must have been plenty sure of himself to carry it on him when he came here."

"He probably wanted it on him in case things went wrong and he had to get away in a hurry," I suggested.

On the floor, Pinky Houit moved and tried to get up. Jones helped him.

"I'm taking you in for murder," Jones told him in the same quiet voice.

Pinky Houit looked at me and called me a very vile name. But I didn't mind. For a narrow escape from the death chair, I can afford to take a little abuse!

THE END.



BY PEIRSON RICKS



SHEEP IN THE MEADOW

● *"Too much prying around ain't good for the health," said Carter Dawson, as he plunged through the black meadows in search of a strange, alien presence.*

After he finished the milking, Carter Dawson walked around the one-story frame house and stood in the front yard. It was a clear, mild night. He could hear the frogs singing in a hoarse, endless chorus in the meadow below his place. His wife, Rena, came to the front door to tell him supper was ready.

"Listen," he said.

Rena listened. "I don't hear anything."

"That's just it," he answered. "The frogs stopped singing. There's somebody in that meadow again."

"Why should anybody be fooling

around with that old meadow after dark?"

"I don't know," said Carter. "I don't know the answer to lots of things around here, and I'm glad I don't." He turned and entered the house.

Carter pulled up a chair to the kitchen table and seated himself. Rena served him a slab of crisp fat meat straight from the frying pan. He dipped into the bowl of North Carolina collard greens, helped himself to a big orange sweet potato. He began to mash the potato with his fork.

His wife was a plump, healthy-looking young woman with stringy

blonde hair and a tired but pleasant face. She was wearing a faded-blue gingham dress and a white apron. She kept pushing a vagrant wisp of hair back from her forehead with a patient, repetitious gesture.

"Maybe it's somebody frog-gigging," she suggested.

Her husband shook his head.

"No. It ain't frog-gigging. Anybody gigging frogs would flash a light."

Carter Dawson was tall and lank with mild blue eyes and a politely stubborn mouth; his hair was sandy-colored. He was in his shirt sleeves, and he wore faded blue jeans.

Rena stirred her coffee thoughtfully. "Carter," she said, after a while, "have you noticed that nothing seems right around here since Red Lehman ran away with that money?"

Carter winced as he always did when anyone spoke of Red Lehman's dishonor. He had been fond of Red. "What do you mean?"

She hesitated. "I don't know exactly. Just everything seems queer, sort of off-key. Haven't you noticed?"

"Maybe so."

"Somebody ought to look into it, Carter."

"Listen, Rena. I'm not going to have anything to do with it. I concern myself with things that concern me. Too much prying around ain't good for the health."

"That meadow concerns you," she told him. "It abuts our property."

"If the frogs want to sing," he said, "let 'em sing. If they want to stop singing, let 'em stop."

"That's not the point, Carter Dawson, and you know it."

After supper, Carter Dawson sat in the front yard and smoked his pipe while Rena washed the dishes. He gazed at the dark, silent meadow below him. Occasionally, some hardy individualist among the frogs set up an intermittent croaking near the creek bank on the far side of the bottom, but the chorus, the massed voices of the frogs, was still. "The third time this week," he mused. He shook his head.

He remembered what Rena had said about Red Lehman. That made him think of something Bragg Hollman had said, and that made him squirm uncomfortably in his chair. Bragg had said, in his growling, ponderous voice, "It was worth the money he stole to get rid of him. It was sure a black day in my life when I went into partnership with that red-headed scoundrel."

Carter had always figured it the other way around—that is, until Red had absconded with the cash assets of Lehman & Hollman Feed Store. Red was lazy and irresponsible, everybody knew, but until that act, no one had supposed him crooked. It was hard to believe. But Red had gone to the Ebo Center bank, withdrawn all the firm's money and skipped town. You couldn't argue with facts.

Red hadn't been much of a

businessman. He had spent more time in the Ebo Center barber shop, passing the time of day with the boys, than he had spent behind the counter in the feed store. Some of Red's well-wishers in extenuation pointed to the fact that the partnership fared better during Red's absence than it did during his presence. Bragg Hollman, brusque and humorless, with small appetite for the simple business of living, was thereby able to devote more of his time to the contemplation and practice of profit and less to the beratement of his far from energetic partner. For when the two partners were together in the store, it was plain to see that they didn't run parallel on fundamentals.

Many a time Carter Dawson had seen big Bragg Hollman, black-haired, with scowling, bushy black eyebrows, twirling his heavy brass watch chain as he watched some farmer, who had come in to buy a hundred-pound sack of cattle feed, stop, instead, to listen to Red, who was holding forth on seining or possum hunting or something as interesting. The watch chain would spin faster and faster till Bragg could stand it no longer.

"By God, there's a man wants to buy something, Lehman! Sell it to him!" he would roar in his deep, rasping voice.

Red wouldn't even look around; he would just go on chatting in that sleepy drawl of his.

Carter remembered, distinctly, the first time he ever had seen Bragg Hollman and Red Lehman

together. It had been seven years ago. Bragg had just come to Ebo Center to buy cattle; he and Red Lehman had been standing in front of the bank, Bragg in his shirt sleeves, a limp black alpaca coat over his arm. He had the thumb of one hand hooked in a gallus strap; the other hand was twirling that heavy brass chain. Red Lehman was standing in front of him, leaning close, talking smoothly, gesticulating extravagantly with slow, eloquent hands. Carter even remembered what his own first thought had been on seeing those two together, "There's Red Lehman, spellbinding a stranger." Red had done the job so well that the stranger, who had come to Ebo Center to buy cattle, remained to sell cattle feed in partnership with his persuader.

When she had finished cleaning up the kitchen, Rena came out to sit with her husband in the yard.

"Why, the frogs have started up again," she commented.

"Yep," replied Carter. "They just started." He knocked out his pipe. He stood up.

"You're not going to bed this early?"

"Nope. Think I'll take a little walk." He went into the house and got his flashlight. He came out the back door, circled around the out-buildings, and headed down the lane toward the meadow.

The night was clear; he could easily make out the meandering course of the path through the scrub pines, sedge and tangle of

honeysuckle. He slipped the flashlight into his hip pocket, descended the path and came out into the flat bottom. The meadow was thick with tall, head-high Johnson grass and sedge, dotted with patches of briars. In little depressions, where pools of still green water stood, were sudden clusters of reed and cattail. Underfoot, the turf was moist and squashy.

Carter began to cross the meadow. Abruptly, the frogs were silent.

He made his way patiently through the heavy grass, pushing around the thicker clumps of briars, skirting the puddles. Ever so often, he crossed a path of parted, downtrodden grass such as he was leaving behind him. Most of these tracks, which criss-crossed the meadow, had been left by the hunters who came here occasionally in search of birds or rabbits.

Again and again he knelt and, holding the nose of his flashlight close to the earth, masking it with his hat, examined a track closely. He peered at the heavy matted carpet of dead grasses, which, close-packed, would retain no print for long. Over and over again, he found nothing. But at last, near the center of the bottom, he found a track which still held faint indentations pressed into the moist carpet by a pair of tramping feet; it led toward the creek.

He straightened up and followed the path. As he neared the creek, the grass cleared out somewhat, became sparser, runtier. Sand, washed up through successive

floods, had spread an infertile veil over the rich bottom soil. At last, the grass grew so short and thin that it would no longer hold the trail Carter was following. He stopped and stared about him. In the bright moonlight he could see, some fifty or seventy-five feet away, the dark wall of willows and birch and heavy underbrush which clung to the bank of the creek. He advanced toward this wall of faintly rustling growth. He was barely thirty feet away when, almost in his face, it seemed, there was a quick flash of orange flame and the shocking report of a shotgun blast. He wheeled around, and, stumbling and floundering, dived into the tall grass of the meadow.

He lay in the damp grass, panting. Whoever had fired that shot hadn't been fooling. Carter recalled, with a chilling sensation down the groove of his spine, the rush of air on his face as the load of shot sped by.

He listened, but he heard no sound other than the light rustle of the leaves and grasses in the night wind. After a few minutes, he began to move cautiously through the grass on a line parallel to the creek. He crept along in a downstream direction for a hundred yards before venturing toward the creek again. He crossed to the stream, crouching low, and with a profound sense of relief, entered the heavy fringe of underbrush along the bank. Once in this cover, he began to move back upstream toward the point at which the gun had been discharged.



The frogs had begun to sing once more. Suddenly, they were still. Peering out upon the moonlighted meadow, Carter caught sight of a dark, flitting shadow just entering the tall grass. A moment later, the phantomlike figure had disappeared. Only the silence of the frogs convinced Carter that the flitting shadow he had seen was real and not fantasy.

When, after ten minutes, the frogs started singing again, Carter snapped on the flashlight and cautiously began examining that section of the creek bank from which the shotgun blast had come. As he was about to turn away, the light beam picked out a small scrap of white flashing from the leafage of a low shrub. He reached into the shrub and picked up a torn bit of paper caught there, glanced at it, then frowned. On it, printed in decorative, old-fashioned script, was the single word, "Sheep." The word and style of lettering seemed vaguely familiar. Where had he seen that word, lettered in just that fashion, before? The answer, which seemed barely outside the circle of his consciousness, eluded him. He started to throw the scrap of paper away, then reconsidered. Where had he seen that lettering before? He shook his head, folded the paper and tucked it into his pocket.

As he was climbing the slope to his own place, Carter saw at a distance the bright-red eye of a lantern coming down the path, flashing among the scrub pines. He quickly left the path and squatted

among the pines. The lantern drew near, but it wasn't until the tossing flame was almost directly in front of him on the path that he caught sight of the blue gingham skirt within the ring of light and suddenly understood that this was his wife come to search for him.

When he stood up and called to her, she screamed.

"Why, Rena, what's the matter?"

"Oh! You gave me such a scare! Are you all right, Carter? When that shotgun went off down yonder—"

"Sure, I'm all right. But listen, Rena. If a person thinks he's heading toward trouble, he ought not to walk down a path with a light in his hand."

As he was undressing for bed, Carter remembered the scrap of paper. He took it out of his pocket, showed it to his wife. "Ever see anything like that before?"

She nodded. But, like her husband, she couldn't put her finger on the source of her memory of it.

In the morning, Carter went down to the meadow to examine in daylight the scene of last night's episode. In bright, clean sunlight, the ominous fringe of heavy growth that clung to the creek bank seemed bland and innocent, without guile. At this spot, the creek made one of its casual, hardly perceptible turns. Carter knew the place well, had fished here for catfish innumerable times, perched on the naked roots of an old elm that leaned out from

this little point of land. He poked around through the brush, scratching his head. He found nothing that seemed unusual or suspicious. He couldn't figure it out at all.

Finally, he returned to his own land. But, late in the morning, Carter came in from the field in which he was working, and got the car. "I'm driving into town," he told his wife. When he arrived in Ebo Center, he parked in front of the post office. He joined the little knot of loungers standing under the awning, exchanged greetings with them. After a few minutes, he brought out the scrap of paper and showed it around. "Any of you fellers know where that comes from?"

"I've seen something like it somewhere," said Davis, the tobacco warehouseman.

"It does look familiar," commented Anderson, the druggist.

But none of them could place it.

Carter Dawson showed the paper to everyone who came to the post office. He showed it to Ed Royal, who clerked in the hardware store.

"Why, sure," said Ed, "that's a piece of label off a cardboard box that sheep shears come in. You've got the word, 'Sheep,' the other half says 'Shears.'"

They all remembered then, and laughed at their forgetfulness.

"That reminds me," Ed went on, "the last time I ever saw Red Lehman was when he came into the store to buy sheep shears. Said he promised to help Doc Rollins clip his sheep. The next day, I heard

ole Red had cleared out with a pocketful of money. I could hardly believe it."

"I didn't have no trouble believing it," interjected a deep, rasping voice. They all turned their heads. There, standing on the edge of the group, was big Bragg Hollman. He was looking at Carter Dawson. "That wouldn't be a thousand-dollar check in your hand, would it?"

"No," said Carter. "It's a piece of paper I found. Ever see anything like it?"

"Don't believe I did. I never had no time to go 'round picking up pieces of paper." He laughed harshly. He went on into the post office.

"Now, why should anybody make a remark like that?" inquired the druggist.

"I don't know," murmured Carter Dawson. But he hardly heard the question. He was thinking about something else.

He started home, but he kept thinking about Red buying those sheep shears. He turned around and came back to town. He went by Joyce's boardinghouse, where Red had lived, and talked with Mrs. Joyce. No, she said mournfully, she hadn't seen any sheep shears among his things. If he owned any, he must have taken them with him. "You might ask his partner," she suggested. "He always eats dinner here. He'll be coming in soon."

When Carter came out of the house onto the front porch, Bragg Hollman was coming up the walk.

"Mr. Hollman," called Mrs. Joyce, "here's a man inquiring about some sheep shears that Mr. Lehman had. I told him you might help him."

Carter wasn't very happy over the meeting. "Howdy," he said uncomfortably. "I reckon I've already found out what I want to know."

"And what did you want to know?" asked Hollman.

ing to himself. "It all seems to add up to one thing," he concluded. "Red Lehman's affairs are somehow mixed up with what's going on in that meadow below my place." There was something else to it, too, something incomplete that left him feeling oddly similar to the way he had felt when he was trying to identify that sheep shears label. "I feel like I've almost got the answer to something," he mur-



"I was asking about some sheep shears that Red had bought."

"Yes? Well, the next time you want to ask about sheep shears, go to the hardware store." Carter started down the steps. "By the way," said Hollman, "you're a mighty busy feller, ain't you?"

There wasn't anything Carter could say to that.

Carter drove home slowly, talk-

mured. "But whatever it is, it just keeps slipping out of my grasp. Now, how did I pick up that feeling?"

After supper, Carter took down his double-barreled shotgun from the pegs on the wall; he breached it and loaded it. But when Rena came to the door and saw him with the gun, he put it back on the pegs.



"Just looking it over," he said.
"It's a good old gun."

She didn't say anything. She watched him go out the front door and sit in the yard. A little later, he heard her in the kitchen.

"I don't reckon I ought to carry a gun, anyway," he told himself, as he rose and quietly slipped out of the yard. "Anybody who goes around with a loaded gun and the

trigger cocked is liable to end up with the kind of trouble that gunpowder can't remedy."

He followed the lane without difficulty in the bright moonlight. He strode along through the runty pines, dark, squat shapes beside the path, listening to the hoarse, ceaseless chorus of the frogs.

He heard, or imagined he heard, a slight, almost imperceptible sound over to the right of the path in the darkness of the pines; it was a sound such as a ranging dog might have made among the vines and grasses, or a night bird might have made it alighting in the pines.

Carter stopped in the path; he cocked his head to one side and listened. He stood there for several minutes, listening. But he heard no sound other than the singing of the frogs. After a while, he went on. "I'm getting skittish, just like an old woman," he told himself disdainfully. But a little farther on, he paused again. That little group of pines over there, indistinct in the shimmering moonlight—hadn't one of them moved? He peered at the dark, blurred shapes. They all swam together, then separated again. "What's the matter with me?" he exclaimed irritably. "I'm a regular granny." He went on. But he couldn't banish the vague sensation of uneasiness.

When Carter Dawson reached the bottom of the slope, he decided to cross the meadow on a diagonal so as to bring himself to the creek bank several hundred yards downstream from the point at

which he had received the warning blast from the shotgun the night before. He could move up the creek, then, covered by the heavy growth that bordered the stream.

He slipped into the high grass and began to push his way across the bottom. He moved slowly, stepping quietly, cautiously. For a while, the frogs seemed unaware of the alien presence in their territory; they sang on hoarsely. Then, suddenly, they were silent. Carter Dawson stood stock-still, hardly breathing. Had he been the one who disturbed them? For a brief moment, he doubted that he had. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went on.

When he was almost across the meadow, he stopped again, and listened. He heard a little wind come up and stir the grass, but that was all. He went on.

He entered the dark wall of brush on the stream's edge and stood there for many minutes, staring out upon the moon-bright meadow. All he saw was the sea of tall grass, gently rippling. He began to move upstream, parting the branches with care as he picked his way through the dense growth.

Suddenly, quite close at hand, he heard a noise—a brisk, positive noise, like the striking of two sticks together. He froze. That was no noise of the wind, nor was it the noise of bird or small wild beast. He stood, leaning forward, one foot placed uncomfortably before the other, not daring to move. At last, he slowly lifted his forward foot and drew it back. As he

did so, he balanced himself by lightly touching a leafy branch. But he was too taut, too intent on what he was doing. He swayed dangerously, clutched at the branch, and for a few seconds, caused a furious rustling. Then he was still. But it was too late. He stood motionless, his pulse racing.

After a while, he thought he could hear breathing close by in the darkness. His mouth was dry. He wanted to swallow, but couldn't; his throat only made a painful constriction that left him more uncomfortable than before. The noise, the presence—whatever it was—seemed to be between him and the creek. Suddenly, with a start, he realized that, standing as he was, his head and shoulders would be silhouetted against the moon-bright meadow beyond. Quickly, he squatted.

When he had done so, a slow, distinct whisper issued from the nearby darkness. "I can see you," said the whisper. "I got my gun pointed right at you. Stand up and step out into the open."

Carter didn't move.

"Stand up!" ordered the whisper. "I don't aim to ask you no more."

Carter stood up.

"Now, step out there."

Carter stepped out into the moonlight.

"You're smart, ain't you?" said the whisper. "Maybe you're too smart. What do you keep nosing around for?"

"Me? I'm just interested in shearing sheep," said Carter.

The whisper didn't speak again for a long time. Then:

"What do you mean by that?"

"Figure it out yourself," said Carter.

The bushes bordering the creek parted and a great hulk of a man came out into the moonlight; he was carrying what seemed to be a shotgun. "I tell you one thing I've figured out," said a low, heavy, rasping voice. "Those that go out of their way to look for trouble, can't complain when they've found it. Well, you've found it."

"Hello, Bragg Hollman," said Carter.

"That's right," returned Hollman. "But it was better for you when you didn't know who I was."

"And now that I do know?"

"It's just too bad."

Hollman was standing some eight feet in front of Carter Dawson; he was holding the shotgun against his protruding stomach with the barrel pointed up at an angle.

"Listen, Bragg," said Carter, and then he leaped. He covered the space separating them in two scuffling bounds and had his hands on that gun, trying to wrest it from Hollman's grasp. The next instant, both barrels of the gun went off, and the two men were rolling in the sand and thin grass, grunting and cursing. Hollman let go the gun and scrambled back. He staggered to his feet, panting heavily.

"You're still too smart for your britches, Dawson," he growled. "You see, I don't take no chances." He reached into his hip pocket and

brought forth a dark object. Carter caught sight of a glint of moonlight along a shiny barrel. "You've got an empty shotgun, Dawson, but I've got something else. Stand up."

Carter stood up.

"You're going with me, Dawson. We're going to my feed store." Hollman reached out and, with his left hand, plucked up a nearby tuft of high Johnson grass. He began to twirl the grass tuft around and around. Carter Dawson watched with fascinated eyes as the grass tuft spun. That was it—the clue that had been trying to force itself into his consciousness! The last few times he had seen Bragg Hollman, Hollman hadn't twirled his watch chain.

"You know why we're going to my feed store, Dawson?"

"No."

"Because a man has the right to protect his own property," he said softly. "He can shoot a feller who's breaking into his place of business."

"That's right," replied Carter, "but he wouldn't do it if that feller had found a certain watch chain, would he?"

"What?"

"You see," said Carter. "Now maybe you can figure out why you couldn't find it yourself."

"Give me that chain," growled Hollman.

"Wait a minute. You don't think I'd have it on me, do you? It's up at my house."

"Are you willing to bargain?"

"Sure."

"Get moving then. Head for

your house. And don't forget I've got a gun."

Carter led the way. They were halfway up the lane when a light flashed on and a woman's voice, cool and steady, called from a clump of pines:

"Drop that gun, Bragg Hollman, and stand where you are."

"Hello, Rena," said Carter. "I figured you'd just about make it this far after you heard that gun go off." He exhaled noisily. "Believe me, I'm mighty pleased to know I wasn't mistaken!"

Carter Dawson was standing in his yard, talking to the sheriff.

"But why should he be so anxious about that watch chain?" asked the sheriff. "It was just a cheap brass chain, as I remember it."

"That's right," said Carter. "But maybe it wasn't losing the chain that bothered him, but where he lost it."

The sheriff considered that. "I begin to see what you mean," he said thoughtfully. "And I see something else, too. Red could

have withdrawn that feed store money from the bank with Hollman's consent, couldn't he? If Red disappeared, then Hollman would have the money and no one would ever know about it."

They found Red Lehman's body, stuffed in a gunny sack, anchored beneath the roots of the old elm where the creek undercut the bank. Clutched in his hand was a heavy brass chain from which dangled a little metal disk which carried the impressions of a four-leaf clover and a horseshoe. Engraved on the disk was the legend, "Good luck to Bragg Hollman."

Bragg Hollman had looked everywhere for that damning piece of evidence—everywhere, that is, except the gunny sack into which he had hastily stuffed the body of his victim. Bragg thought he had dropped his good luck in the struggle. It never occurred to him that he had sunk his luck beneath the roots of that old elm tree.

The coroner said it was the first time he ever had heard of anybody being murdered with sheep shears.

THE END.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

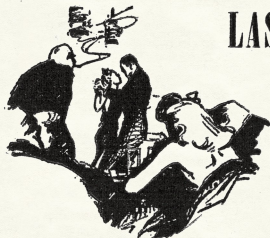
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TANGO JIM'S LAST DANCE

BY ROD PATTERSON



● *"Baby," said Tango Jim to his dancing partner, and he meant business, "I'm not letting you take a walk-out powder on me now"*

Tango Jim Morrones knocked, then entered Maizie Delmar's dressing room downstairs in the Blue Lagoon Casino at Taluga Springs, nodded to the girl who sat in a rose silk negligee before her make-up table under a pair of glare-hot bulbs. He moved on to the open window that overlooked a kind of rear patio and the moonlighted Gulf beyond. The palms along the coastal highway, a block away, looked like stage props in a tropical setting of painted stars on a painted canopy of midnight sky.

"What's on your mind, baby?"

Tango inquired casually, almost too casually.

Maizie turned her slightly frowning gaze his way. "Why?"

"While we were doing that last number," he said, not looking at her now, "I saw you panning those two strange guys at No. 2."

"Oh, that?" She laughed unnaturally, returning rather abruptly to her make-up, pausing, then very matter-of-factly, "I thought I knew them, that was all."

Tango Jim leaned one shoulder against the wall, tapping his toe to the muffled beat of the orchestra

upstairs. He lighted a cigarette with his lighter, his dead-black eyes finally resting on her reflection in the mirror. "Quit stalling, baby, I'll find out sooner or later."

"I'm tired." She made an impatient gesture with her hand and the powder puff, her tanned cheeks paling a little. "Nothing else. Honest, Tango."

He stared morosely across the room. Born in Brooklyn, New York, of Irish parents, he nevertheless looked more Latin even than a Mexican matador on fiesta night. His nose was thin and aquiline, his cheekbones high and taut against dark skin, his hair as black as new paint, with a string-straight white part and a broad wave above the left temple. His real name wasn't Morrones—it was Moroney.

"Let's shake this burg, baby," he suggested quietly, exhaling twin streams of smoke. The last part of it fuzzed a bit, like a whisper. "We'll catch the early-morning train for New Orleans. Heard from Iron-head Jones today. We can get four weeks at the Mardi Gras, at a hundred and fifty per."

Maizie opened her eyes wide at his reflection in the mirror. "What's the matter, Tango?" It sounded innocent, but her red mouth curled a little at one corner. "Didn't those thirty-dollar-a-day squares applaud enough for you tonight?"

He jerked up both elbows like a boxer blocking a blow. He ducked his head and stood up straight, moving in that careful, feline way toward the door which he opened an inch or two, then turned his face

toward the light. She was touching up her full-curving eyebrows, careful, intent, but with an uneasy waiting look behind her long lashes.

"Tango, I'm sorry!" His silence had made her blurt it out impulsively. One hand came to her throat and she faced him, eyes wide, round and troubled. "I . . . don't mean to seem ungrateful. Only—"

"Take it easy, baby."

They had met in Philly, he on his way South for the winter, she working in a grubby railroad lunchroom. The moment their eyes had met, something clicked in Tango's consciousness. Afterward, when he closed his eyes and said, "Baby," to himself, her face and figure were there as big, as beautiful, as life, and twice as real. He was a hooper, a specialty man, and she had been a ballroom dancer from out West somewhere, or so she said. Of course, he knew she was fibbing about the West part of it. She had Myrtle Avenue, Brooklyn, in her rather husky voice. But she could dance. And good!

"We go on again at one, an hour from now," he said, easy with a hard-toothed smile. "Dig you later, kid."

"Tango!"

He stopped on his way out, turned back slowly, still smiling, his straight black eyebrows going up a bit. Her eyes, usually the color of wood violets in Prospect Park, looked black under his inquiring scrutiny. He went over and took her hand, holding it lightly with both of his own, grinning now. "Baby,

if you walked out on me, I'd be working for buttons in some grease-ball joint!"

She blinked against the close-held glint of tears. "What would I do," she whispered, "without you?"

"Get along O.K.," said a strange voice from the open door.

Tango straightened, whirling on patent leather heels.

They both saw the short thickset man who was blocked solidly in the door frame, the blue eyes onyx-hard and cold under shaggy sandy brows and the floppy brim of a Panama, the rumpled Palm Beach suit, the pointed yellow shoes that looked too small, the mouth that was too small, too tight.

"Why didn't you knock?" Tango asked, his teeth close together.

"Who wants to know?" The stranger bored his eyes at Tango, then at the girl, finally back at Tango. "Oh, yeah!" His voice had a kind of grating purr, like that of an animated cartoon character. "You're that Morrones guy. Hi-ya, Tango!" He looked at Maizie after that and almost leered. "Duchess, you're looking swell."

Tango's jaws hollowed out as the muscles set. "Brother, I do not like your talk."

"Who cares?" The stranger eased his broad frame farther into the room, finally placing the loose drape of his shoulders against the wall, his lips stirred by the pale pucker of a smile. He studied Tango from head to foot, absorbing the details of his appearance, the natty Tux he wore so easily, the neat bow tie, the careful way he

combed his hair. Then he quit smiling. "Outside, bum. I want to talk to her alone."

Tango said calmly, "Baby, shall I toss him out?"

Maizie didn't answer. Tango looked around. Her face seemed frozen in the same expression she had worn before the stranger's voice had broken in. The wonderful natural rose tint in her cheeks was gone, as though erased, leaving streaks of chalk. Her pallor made her hair look like carved wings of lacquer over her temples, wings set back in massive tight-pinned braids at the nape of her neck. Her lips were gray.

"Keep your hair on," said the stranger with a surly laugh. "I ain't going to hurt your girl."

Maizie's lips moved faintly. "Let him stay, Tango. You stay, too."

The stranger crooked dark-haired hands over his plaited cowhide belt. His eyelids came down a little, shutting out expression. Just round blue discs showed, then small, cold half-moons peeping through those slits of flesh. "Sure. What's your hurry, bum? Let's make it a cozy little threesome."

"This is Mart Lally, Tango." Color was creeping back to Maizie's cheeks. "A friend of mine."

Tango didn't move his eyes from the stranger's face.

"I had a hunch," Maizie said in a low, labored tone, "you'd turn up here tonight. How come they let you come down here?"

"Got in through the parking lot." Lally laughed shortly. "Then

through the kitchen. Them steaks I saw—black market?"

Maizie sat statue-still, watching Lally steadily. "What do you want?"

The stranger slid a step closer to where she sat, ignoring Tango. "I missed you, Duchess. Why'd you do it? Why'd you have to take a powder like you did?"

Tango followed him with his dead-black, bitter eyes. His knuckles whitened at his sides.

"Can't you leave me alone, ever?" Maizie asked in a shaking voice.

Lally leaned a thick hand on the mirror's frame. His eyes were open now; their stony glitter showed. "Have I got goose pimples? Relax, duchess. Am I a plague?" His mouth twisted sidewise suddenly. "Give him a rain check, sis. This is a business call."

Tango waited. Then he heard her say resignedly, "All right, Tango, you can go. I'll be all right."

He didn't speak, didn't look at her, but started toward the door, not hurrying, but putting his feet down deliberately as he walked. Behind him, Lally said, "How about a little kiss for Uncle Mart? For old time—"

There was a rush of feet behind Lally. Two hands gripped and spun him reeling away from the girl. Then, as he tried to turn, a bunch of iron-hard knuckles clubbed him in the face, and he went into a sidewise stagger that didn't stop until his shoulders jarred the wall across the room.

Stiffened legs held him up, but his eyeballs rolled back whitely, and his mouth hung open like a tear. Afterward, his right hand strayed down mechanically along his side toward the bulge in the pocket of his Palm Beach coat.

"Mart! For God's sake!" It was Maizie screaming.

Tango stood beside her, unruffled, calm as a matador before the kill. He didn't look at her, only said, "I'll call the cops."

"No!" She seemed to gasp, to choke. "Tango, please go!"

He went this time, all the way, and he didn't look back once to show he cared what happened to her, to him, to anybody else. His face was like a mask as he paced toward the rear end of the corridor and the narrow stairs that led up to the kitchen and the auto parking lot.

His hand followed the sticky rail as he climbed toward fresh air. His pumps slapped the steps with a cranky violence. In him was a deep, corrosive bitterness. In the upper hallway, he remembered the two strange men at No. 2 table whom Maizie had so covertly watched during their spotlight dance. Something he did not bother to analyze pulled him toward the front of the casino.

He reached it by following a kind of passageway screened by close-meshed latticework from the dance floor and tables, a way used by employees in a hurry, occasionally by couples seeking privacy until they were discovered and

returned to the morality of shaded lamps in the restaurant.

Catlike, Tango came to the latticework behind the table where the two men sat when he had seen them last. They were still here, drinking bottled beer, smoking black cigars. Tango was very close to them, with only the screen between, close enough to hear their conversation if and when they talked.

The band was playing "Full Moon, Empty Arms," and a smooth baritone was chanting the lyrics over the microphone.

Dancers moved like wraiths on the wax-bright floor. When the orchestra finished with a run in brass, applause sputtered like muffled firecrackers, died out with a grudging patter of handclaps in the lamp-stippled gloom.

Tango Jim moved close to the latticework. Through the interstices, he could see the profile of one of the men as he drained his glass and set it down. The face had a jowled look, the features mushed together around the mouth, like a bull dog's. He had crisp hair, cut close, a reddish brown.

His companion was thinner. He had his back to Tango. It was a shapeless kind of back, sloping shoulders, a lean neck with tight-pulled tendons running from the blonde hair down under the edge of a frayed stiff collar. Both men wore dark suits and saddle shoes. A pair of hard straw hats with gaudy bands lay crown up beneath the table.

The orchestra began again, a

waltz. A waiter with a formless blob for a face, came out of nowhere and placed two fresh bottles of beer before the two men, whereupon he vanished as suddenly as though he had been yanked away by a rope around his waist.

The heavy man said, "Here comes Cashin now. You start the talk."

Poised behind the screen, Tango Jim saw the squat, rolling shape sliding between nearby tables at the edge of the dance floor. Joe Cashin owned the casino, a pleasant fat man with tiny white teeth and a Brother Elk smile. He squeezed his plump midsection between two tables and came up, breathing through his nose. "Good evening, gentlemen."

One of the men kicked a third chair toward him. "Sit down, Joe, and we'll let you buy a drink."

Cashin lowered himself to the seat, perching anxiously on the edge of it, a question in his slightly bulging eyes. "Is something wrong? The waiter said—"

"It's murder," the thin man said, sand and gravel in his voice.

Cashin jumped visibly. He opened his mouth, but no sound came.

"Sure," the thickset man added softly. "We came here after Maizie Delmar."

Cashin flipped a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his white drill jacket, and swiped at his double chins. "As bad as that?" he gulped. "My God!"

"We're from the New York police," the thin man intoned.

There was an uneasy, liquid stirring in Cashin's eyes. "They're good, them two. I pay 'em ten bucks a night for that tango."

The thin man sat staring bleakly across the wide reaches of the casino, at the crowd. There were no vacant tables. Joe Cashin did a good business in the carriage trade. "Where's Maizie?" the thin man asked blandly.

"Take it easy, will you?" Cashin said, sighing. "How do I know—"

"We didn't come for the floor show, Joe," the heavysset man murmured. He moved the lapel of his coat an inch, then flicked it down and smoothed it out. "Phone the chief of police if you want any more than that. We've got extradition papers signed."

"Who'd she kill?" Cashin sucked in his cheeks. "I don't seem to remember—"

The thin man poured himself a beer, watching Cashin closely, while the foam brimmed over the glass to the table cloth. "The Lenox case, in New York."

"I don't read the tabloids," Cashin began.

"A month ago," the thin man said with a hard patience. "She helped a couple of guys stick up a big shot. He got shot when he put up a fight."

"How'd you know she was here?"

"Head work, Joe," the heavy man growled. "Now you can take us to where she is."

Cashin shrugged. "She draws a crowd for me. They're good."

Behind the latticework, Tango Jim heard the heavy man say something indistinguishable. His nerves whipped tight. He felt sick, hot and cold, all at once. So this was the end of everything. He tried to think calmly. No, by God, it wasn't going to end this way! Maizie was all right, a sweet kid. If she'd got mixed up in a killing, there'd been a reason—a good reason. Self-defense, even. Robbery and homicide? To hell with that argument!

Then he remembered Mart Lally, downstairs with Maizie. He straightened convulsively, his eyes glittering and three quarters shut, huge drops of perspiration beading out over his brows. Lally might have come here to kill her, to silence her! Hard as a diamond, cold as ice, Lally was capable of anything!

Beyond the screen, Cashin was griping, "You guys are bad for my ulcers. Breakin' up my act. A drink? To hell with you! You come in my place with a chisel and a couple of badges! And you cost me dough!" Chair legs grated over the floor; they were getting up. "O. K., I'll show you where she is! But, listen—" Tango didn't get the rest because the voice was smothered by the slashing notes of a trumpet solo and the thud of feet.

Tango waited a short moment, staring through the latticework. Joe Cashin was waddling off on

his short legs, with the two cops moving behind him, ducking the dancers, gently shoving people back.

There was a stairway over there leading down to the dressing room corridor, not the one Tango had climbed to get here, but one used by waiters and bus boys coming to work through the parking lot outside.

If he hurried— Tango whipped himself around and ran back the way he had come. His Tux coat flapped against his ribs, and his feet, when he reached the rear stairs, slapped the steps four at a time. He went down elevator-fast.

The corridor was dim but not completely dark. Maizie's door was closed now. A long streak of ochre-colored light filtered a pale glow through the hall like a yellow neon resting on the floor.

Moving forward like a toe dancer, balanced, poised, he reached the door. Paused listeningly, a dampness on his upper lip, he heard no voices in Maizie's dressing room, only small sounds of a trunk being pulled across the floor, the muffled catch of breath very like a woman's strangled sob.

There was nothing else to hear, no time to wait for anything. For, at that moment, the staircase toward the front of the building began to creak and groan. There wasn't much to see here in the darkness until someone on an upper landing flicked an electric switch. Then a thin spread of

light flowed down the stairs and part way into the corridor.

By that faint glow, Tango saw three men—first their feet and legs, then the upper parts of their bodies, finally their faces. Joe Cashin was leading the way, with the two cops a step or two behind.

Flattened hard against the wall, Tango considered breaking back to Maizie's room, locking the door, and somehow getting her out of there while the cops tried to break in. But there was no time, no time for anything except to do what he now knew he had to do—delay them here in the hall.

Immediately after that decision, a queer thing happened. The air seemed to suck itself away from him. Maizie's door had opened a crack. It was a draft he felt. He turned his head. The light in the room had gone out. Somebody was standing there, inside the darkened room, just out of sight. In his mind, Tango saw Lally's face, his marbled eyes, the revolver in his hand.

He whipped his gaze back toward the stairway. He had heard a sound, a kind of grunt or a groan, a faint scuffle, then a fall. And he was staring at only two men—the two policemen—and Cashin lay at the foot of the stairs, utterly motionless.

"Didn't you see him going for that gun?" one of the cops demanded hoarsely. Both men were bending over the still form and one of them was searching for

something, his hands moving like the heads of pecking birds.

Now both men stepped over Cashin's body and started down the corridor toward the spot where Tango was flattened against the wall. It was almost dark at this end, but the light behind the two men made both look blocky and huge, like men coming into a tunnel's mouth. One of the cops, the thin one in the lead, held a gun, Joe Cashin's gun.

Tango steadied himself. The men were trying other dressing rooms, opening doors, disappearing, then coming out again. The heavy man had a pocket battery torch which he played along the wall, but fortunately not ahead of him.

Tango was tense, but he wasn't worried now. He knew what he was going to do, how he was going to do it. He waited, not breathing, and his arms came up. The thin man reached him first. Tango moved out from the wall, squared himself, measured his man and hit him hard with a knotted fist.

The impact made a soft sound, like a hammer striking a melon and splitting it. The thin man dropped as though his legs had been cut from under him. But even before he hit the floor, Tango swung at the heavy man a step behind. His fist on the lumpy jaw and the gun shot came simultaneously. The heavy man had drawn a gun somewhere along the hall, had fired it wildly when his companion fell.

Dust, smoke, a blinding flash, the huge echo of the report, swirled

around Tango. He didn't feel anything, nothing but a stab of pain in his wrist and up his arm that didn't come from a bullet but from the big man's jaw against his fist. Then he was looking down at the two policemen at his feet, blinded, stunned, incapable of any reaction other than mild surprise that it had been so easy.

By chance—it was a full half-minute before he could hear sounds of any kind above the ringing in his head—he saw the thick legs and then the torso of a man sliding down along the stair rail from above. Breath ran out of his lungs in a hard gust. It was Mart Lally. Lally was starting toward him, had seen him where he stood. The big man seemed to freeze to the rail, halted a dozen steps from the corridor.

Tango's mind clicked clear. Bending quickly, he scooped up the revolver the heavy man had let fall, cocked the hammer back with an oily snap. Lally was twenty feet away and ten feet above him, and Lally's hand was coming out from under his coat with the glitter of a gun in it.

"Oh, yeah?" Tango said, very grimly, very happily. He fired once, moved two steps forward and fired again, stopped and watched Lally dive out slowly from the stairs, collapse like a bag of old rags and bump down to the bottom. He fell across the motionless form of Cashin on the floor.

It happened so fast, after so much confusion, that in the end, it

was not nearly as satisfying as it should have been. Tango watched Lally stir and sit up, and he saw Joe Cashin rising on elbow-propped hands, blinking stupidly, like a man waking from sleep. Now both men sat on the floor, Cashin with his head in his hands, Lally with his back against the steps, his right arm dangling useless from the shoulder.

"You bum!" groaned Lally, staring, white-lipped. "Oh, you dumb bum!"

Tango held the revolver poised preparedly, not speaking, waiting, the beginnings of puzzlement on his perspiration-streaked face. Joe Cashin was blinking at him, trying to speak, but no sound came from his mouth, only a kind of croak.

Suddenly, there was a lot of noise and yelling upstairs. Boots were thudding down the stairs. The orchestra had stopped on an after-beat. White faces appeared above in the stairwell, seemingly suspended in space, like masks in a shop window at Hallowe'en.

Mart Lally's coat had fallen open. There was the gleam of metal on his wrinkled vest, near one armhole—the glitter of a badge. He was staring at the two men on the floor at Tango's feet, was staring again at Tango's set face. "Cop killer!" He said it like a sigh.

Tango licked dry lips. "Who—" he started to say, but Cashin, on the floor, had found his voice. "Lally's from New York—the police—" He had to push the

words out through his twisted lips.

Tango snapped his gaze to the two men on the floor at his feet, then returned it to Lally. The big man grimaced with pain, then his mouth relaxed and was very calm. "They're wanted for murder in Brooklyn, bum. They been posin' as a pair of dicks, but it didn't work, not with Cashin, here."

Tango looked at the fat man whose color was ebbing back into his flabby cheeks. "But you said—I heard you—"

Cashin seemed to comprehend. "Hell, I can tell the difference between a volunteer fireman's badge and a policeman's shield!" he said gruntingly. "Besides, I'd already talked to Lally when they showed up. I knew they were the ones he was trailing."

"Yeah," sneered Lally, trying to ease his shoulder and arm. "And I'd have grabbed 'em both without a shot if you hadn't gone 'and messed it up for me. But never mind, you've laid 'em out for me!" He tried to grin, but failed to do anything but leer.

Tango put out a hand and leaned against the wall. "What about Maizie?" His voice was dry and harsh. "What've you got on her?"

Lally leaned against the bannister, weariness in his hard eyes, weariness and scorn. "Don't you read the papers? The duchess is in the clear. We want her as a witness, that's all. Those two mugs there on the floor robbed and killed a big shot the duchess was

out with one night. Can't you read, bum?"

"Why'd she run away," Tango asked steadily, and very quietly, "if she was in the clear?"

"Because," Lally answered with heavy irony, "the big guy is her half-brother. He threatened to kill her if she didn't keep her mouth closed. But she talked to me, then disappeared. I knew I'd find those mugs if I found the duchess and stuck around awhile. It worked. Is that enough for you?"

Tango's silence was tacit admission that it was.

"Here!" Lally fished with his good arm and threw the handcuffs toward Tango along the floor. They made a bumping, jangling sound. "The least you can do for me is slap the bracelets on that pair! And, for Pete's sake, stop pointin' that gun at me!"

The call buzzer over Maizie's mirror buzzed on and on, like a large and very angry bee. It stopped, then started up and didn't quit again for quite a while.

Tango Jim didn't even hear it. And, to judge by the look in Maizie's eyes, she didn't, either. They

stood very close together in the dressing room, she with her hair done up in one smooth, glistening wave over her forehead, he with the dirt washed off his face and hands and his black bow tie on straight.

"Baby"—he grinned, a very un-Spanish grin—"they've got the spotlight on up there and we're not in it."

"Who cares?" She whispered it. "Do you?"

Then she placed a deliberate finger on the tip of his nose and pushed very gently, twice. She studied him earnestly, as if she had just discovered something about the shape of his mouth she hadn't noticed before, and wanted to make up her mind about something in as brief a time as possible. Then, suddenly, she came up on her high, slim heels and kissed him squarely on the lips, hard.

He didn't let her go for a long time. And the buzzer buzzed.

"Tonight," he said at last, "you can lock that trunk you packed."

"New Orleans next?" she asked, in a voice that shook a bit.

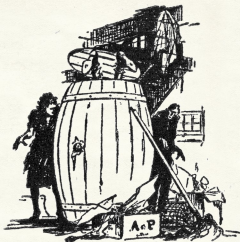
"It's back to Brooklyn, baby." He grinned down into her eyes. "We're going home. For good!"

THE END.



HOUSEBOUND

BY
MARGARET
MANNERS



● *It was like daring an unknown curse for the woman to step outside the area of that dark, brooding house.*

Elliot Maitland turned sharply from the high narrow windows draped in the *café-au-lait* plush that he hated. He felt like taking the old woman by her shoulders and shaking her.

"Sarah!" he said loudly, because the cook was deaf. "What time did Mrs. Maitland leave the house? How soon after lunch? Why didn't you try to stop her? Didn't you realize that it might be dangerous for her to go out?" It seemed to him that all Sarah's intelligence went into her cooking, that he might as well be talking to the walls.

The old woman stood near the door, peering down the long narrow parlor that is the common set

piece of New York brownstone houses. She had known this room for almost twenty years; she had known it in the old days before the judge disappeared, and she was completely at her ease in it.

"I can't understand it," she said plaintively. "She hasn't gone out since the old master vanished. His turning up alive like that must have unsettled her!"

Elliot shuddered in distaste. How many times had he asked his wife to get rid of this old woman! Her helplessness irritated him, her memories irritated him. Ever since Elliot had married Vivian Carmody, the old servant had taken to speaking of the judge as

the old master. Sometimes it amused him, making him think of a museum painting rather like the one of the judge hanging over the mantelpiece, beetle-browed and righteous. Most of the time it annoyed him. But, then, so many things annoyed him these days.

"Has Rhoda gone home yet?" he asked in a last desperate hope that he might get information from the younger maid who was married and lived out.

"I told you, sir. We didn't expect you back. Mrs. Maitland told me to send Rhoda home early and just leave out some cold supper for her. You said you'd be in Washington till the end of the week!"

"Good God!" Elliot thought. "Soon the old hag will be telling me I'm not welcome in my own home!" And with that thought came another. His home? Everything in it had belonged to the judge, and everything in it had to remain as the judge left it when he vanished. Stepping into another man's shoes had its disadvantages.

"Will you eat something, sir?"

"No!" he shouted louder than necessary. "Go up to bed! I'll wait for a little while."

"I'd telephone the police, sir, if I was you."

He turned pale. "You don't think—"

"Well, yes, I do. I think she was going to the police about—" Sarah stopped awkwardly. "I mean—well, about Judge Carmody, or the man that says he is Judge Carmody. Good night, sir."

But the cook's explanation of

Vivian's unexpected excursion hardly relieved his anxiety. He paced the room, frowning, hemmed in by the atrocious dark walls, always confronted by the absurd windows. Vivian liked the gloomy house furnishings as little as he did, but the thought of any change prostrated her, made her hysterical. He thought bitterly of the petty tyranny he had endured since their marriage. What a thing the human mind was! Washington or no Washington, he shouldn't have left her at that particular moment. She had seemed so self-possessed, so determined not to do anything, that he had been sure of her. Her calm assumption that the claimant judge the *Evening Standard* was sponsoring could not be her husband, was the only line to take. None of their sensation-mongering hints should have shaken her. "Her refusal to co-operate," as they put it, was the only dignified way to deal with the situation.

If he had thought for a minute that she'd get hysterical— But how was he to guess? Her reactions had been perfect.

"I don't care what they say!" she had said, tightening her lips. "It can't be George! That horrible drunken tramp! And they're wrong about my being afraid. What have I to fear? He was pronounced legally dead before I married you. I'm not responsible for anything!"

He himself felt far from secure about the old codger's identity. He pressed her. "But how can you know?" he asked. "Men have dropped out of life before this, and drunk themselves even lower

in debauchery than this old creature!" It gave him a sense of superiority to feel that the flamboyant wreck picked up by accident on the Bowery might actually be the lost husband of impeccable morals. The lost husband whose disappearance had the power to bind Vivian hand and foot to this house since the day when he had left it and never been seen again.

Vivian had laughed at him, freely, unworried. "It's quite impossible!" she said decidedly. "George did like to drink, but not that much. And that would have been no reason for leaving. I never interfered. Why, even during prohibition, he was much too honest a judge to have a bootlegger. That's why we have those barrels of cider still left in the old wine cellar. He used to bring them in from the farm and let them get hard. A glass now and then was more than enough for him."

"Well," Elliot declared, "even if he isn't the judge, he's liable to convince everyone that he is. With the *Standard* behind him—"

"Really, Elliot! You sound worried. You're going to tell me that it would make any difference to us? Besides, the whole thing is too silly. Half of his acquaintances swear the man is the judge, and half swear he isn't. 'He seems to know a lot about law.' 'He's a battered rhetorician, and remnants of his old silver style still shine through the tatters!' Can't you see they don't care who he is? It's just a nine days' wonder, and they're playing it to the hilt!"

Elliot stalked the length of the room and glared at the portrait over the fireplace. It really was an uncanny resemblance, and any coarseness in the *Standard's* claimant could be put down to the disintegration of time and habit. The puritanical boys were just the kind who broke down completely when they did break.

And he had thought she was so sure of herself! When he had left, she had gone rushing madly to the police, showing everyone that she was afraid of the impostor. "Damn you, Vivian!" he thought. "After all the hoops you've made me jump through in the last few years!" But, hell! Nothing was perfect! And, after all, counting everything, it had been worth it. Better than poverty and struggle. And now the old boy had come back!

It must be true. Because why else would Vivian leave the house after all these years? He knew the force of her phobia. It was like daring an unknown curse to step outside that charmed area. The logic was clear. If she had been able to leave the house that afternoon for the first time in ten years, it was because she was convinced that this was the judge! Nothing terrifying and mysterious had happened to him, therefore her whole phobia was baseless. She was free!

He thought about it and decided that though he'd never heard of a case like it, that was the way it had to be.

He remembered the afternoon when he had first rung the bell of this dark, brooding house. He tried

to see himself as he had been then. Slight, diffident, afraid of what he was going to do. Certainly having a secure income had made all the difference. No, with all the unpleasantness of being Vivian's husband, it had been worth it.

He had been poor. He had worked hard, studying his chosen subject at night, collecting material for his paper on phobias. His paper, which had to be good! He made two trips to the house before he actually had the courage to mount the steps and ring the bell.

Even walled in and alone as she had been all those years, she was handsome and full of life. Her eyes were so bright! She had attracted and repelled him at once. And now, since their marriage, she had grown more and more demanding. More and more, she had cut him off from friends and outside contacts. She wanted him to herself.

He looked at the portrait and wondered uneasily what life could have been like for her in the old days with a cold-blooded man like the judge. No wonder she didn't believe that this old reprobate was the strict, fatherly husband— But she did believe it! Or else why had she gone?

That first interview when she had tried to explain the peculiar, unorthodox operation of her phobia came back to him.

"And since the judge disappeared," he prodded, "you have not been able to leave the house and walk past the place where you saw him last?"

"That's quite right!" She smiled nervously.

"But before that?"

"Oh, before that I was all right!"

"How do you explain your fear, Mrs. Carmody?"

"I've come to the conclusion that I'm afraid I'll disappear, too. Vanish as he did. You know, it was just as if the earth swallowed him! Nobody ever found a trace. I know it's stupid! I've cried so many times to conquer it."

"What happens when you try to pass that spot?"

"Things black out. Panic. Once I forced myself— When I came to, I was screaming and didn't remember anything."

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely, watching her beautiful white fingers plucking at her handkerchief. "I know it must be painful to you to talk. I'm very grateful. The opportunity to do this piece of research means a great deal to me."

She had responded graciously to his appeal, explaining also that she could bear nothing in the house to be changed. As she talked, he saw what she was like. Lonely, starved for love, forced to keep to the dreary, unchanged house! At that moment, the surprising idea of marrying her had entered his mind.

When he had finally brought himself to propose sometime later, he had seen hope of happiness and an intense eagerness in her eyes. But she had hesitated. "I can't, Elliot. I'm afraid!"

He had been patient, meek, understanding, and at last he had been able to win his way into that house.

Of course, they had to be quietly married at home. "In this very parlor," he thought, smiling wryly, "with the portrait of the judge staring down at us."

She had shuddered when he first kissed her, and had clung to him, saying fiercely, "You're mine, you're mine." He almost felt like one of the things in the house that must never be changed.

Well, it had freed him from toil, but it had bound him to her and the judge's house.

He had planned it to be very different. Evenings out with his friends! She could never spy on him, or turn up at inconvenient times, as other wives did. But she had bested him there, too. He found it harder and harder to get away. There would be hurt silences, complaints, the endless, infuriating cry of, "You don't really love me!" or, "You know I'm cooped up here, and yet you go out and enjoy yourself!"

And when he stayed in, the house depressed him. It was so much the judge's house, that he felt like an intruder. The draperies and dark wood scowled at him. He longed to get in a decorator and make something bright and pleasant out of this musty discomfort.

"If only," Elliot thought, looking at the parlor walls, "if only it would happen to her. If she would disappear in the same way, life would be a new and wonderful experience!"

At the top of the house, in the front, was a room that would be just right for his den. It had been

the judge's study, and had a dark-room attached. When he had once suggested moving things in there, she had turned white with fear. Nothing, nothing must be touched!

Alarmed at her intensity, he had promised her. So the photographic equipment, the fingerprint files and the dust-gathering law books remained in possession of the best room in the house.

The fingerprint files had been an unsuccessful experiment of the judge's. He and some friends who believed in the value of complete identification files on every citizen as a deterrent to crime, had started a volunteer fingerprint bureau. It had limped faddishly along, bitterly attacked, for a few years. One day, the judge himself had dissolved the organization, returned or destroyed the fingerprints, and that had been that.

He had tried even harder to get her to turn the old brick-arched wine cellar into a rumpus room. It had been his one hope. "I can have my friends down there, darling. You needn't even be bothered. They can come in through the basement entrance. You won't need to feel lonely or afraid, because I'll be right here in the house. Throw out those old cider barrels. They've turned to musty horrible old vinegar. Let me fix the place up a bit!"

She threw herself down and began to cry like a beaten child. He wasn't happy with her! He was bored already! Didn't he know that she would move heaven and earth to let him do what he wanted? Only

she couldn't! She just couldn't! "I'm afraid I'll go mad!" she sobbed wildly.

He gave it up and never mentioned it again. Oh, yes, security was pleasant, but the disadvantages were sometimes almost unbearable.

And now she had left the house! It this rabbit the *Standard* had pulled out of the hat really was the judge, she'd be cured. They could make a few changes, provided, of course, that the old devil left them anything. He wondered uneasily what the law was, regarding a man who returned after he had been declared legally dead. Could he take everything from them?

He went to the magazine stand and pulled the day's newspaper out of the rack. He didn't have to look far. It was right on the second page.

The returned Judge Carmody wanted it understood that he had disappeared of his own volition. He would expect nothing from Mrs. Maitland. She was legally married. In his eyes, the money was hers. He would be quite content with a modest settlement, the house and a small amount. His wants were simple, he said. He had forsaken the ways of a corrupt society.

Elliot drew a deep breath. Let him have the house, and welcome.

It was his, anyway, every stuffy nook and corner of it. As for the modest settlement—well, the old boy didn't sound very demanding, and he probably wouldn't live long.

But all this was idle speculation.

Suppose the old man was not the judge, after all? Easy enough to understand how the mistake had happened. A roving reporter had offered the thirsty old man a beer, commenting on his strange likeness to the vanished judge. Wouldn't a seedy character in that position be tempted to say, "I am the judge, my boy!"? A down-at-the-heels actor, a one-time law student, could carry the rôle without any great strain. Such a person had nothing to lose, much to gain.

Excitement coursed through him. Vivian had gone down to identify the judge, convinced that it was he. What would happen if she discovered an unknown fraud instead? Would the phobia return with full force upon her? Would she know again the fear that her former husband had been the victim of a mysterious fate? Finding herself outside the zone of safety, in that condition, anything might happen to her.

He savored that slowly, and came down to earth. After all, it was too much to expect that she would obligingly vanish. She would probably pass out and they'd take her to the hospital. He'd have to call for her, and life with his wife and his wife's house would go on in the same hellish pattern.

Damn! Why did she have to come back? Why, for just this once, couldn't things be perfect? The thought of the money and the freedom made him dizzy. And then, like a flash of light, a revelation, he saw that perhaps Vivian need never return!

It was a beautiful idea! He worked out the details slowly, in appreciative wonder. Not the least virtue of it was this, that if anywhere along the line he struck a snag, he could abandon the plan and it wouldn't matter. Why, he could just prepare everything for fun, anyway. He didn't really have to do it.

Of course, it all depended on whether there was still some of that deadly stuff he'd read about among the judge's photographic equipment.

He went up to the top of the house, thankful that Sarah's bedroom was off by itself and that she was deaf.

His fingers trembled as he searched. It would be just his luck— And then he saw it! Through his unnatural elation, he still thought, "I won't really do it!" He lifted the bottle down with his handkerchief.

Later he would put it back and no one would ever know he had thought of—

Downstairs again, he put the bottle away where it would be ready.

Then he went out to the telephone in the hall and, with inept fingers, found and dialed the number he wanted. His mind raced over the details while someone at the other end of the wire tried to get Captain Maclane of the identification bureau. The hour was late and they seemed to be having a good deal of trouble.

When, at last, the strong voice reached him, little beads of perspi-

ration were shining all over his forehead. His own voice sounded hoarse and unreal. The captain was warmly reassuring, full of enthusiasm for the judge's fingerprint files. Mrs. Maitland had been there with a reporter from the *Standard*. Yes, indeed, the case was finished. The old man would never bother them again.

Elliot listened in a daze. Each word gave him hope, and yet intensified his fears. Good that it wasn't the judge! But now there was the chance that she might do something foolish and get herself picked up. An opportunity like this might never come again. Although he had not taken his scheme seriously, now, when it seemed that his chances might slip through his fingers, he was amazed at the avidness of his ferocity.

The captain's voice went on. Incredible that the judge's fingerprint, taken in a ritual moment at the launching of the Society For Universal Identification Through Fingerprinting, should be the means of unmasking the impostor! Mrs. Maitland had been wonderful. She had remembered them, and brought them all the way down. "Imagine," the captain roared in an excess of enthusiasm for his subject. "Witnessed and notarized! A thing like that doesn't happen in a million years!"

Elliot pulled himself together. He might as well set the stage and wait. "I'm terribly worried," he said. "My wife hasn't returned. She has a phobia about leaving the house, you know. It might very

well turn out to be a dreadful experience for her."

"Oh, I don't think so." Captain MacLane was pleasant, but less interested. "She left sometime ago. Seemed to be quite all right, cheerful and charming. It's just luck that you got me at all at this hour. I usually—"

Elliot let his voice get frightened and unreasonable. "Can't you see the danger she's in, now that the man was proved not to be her husband? I'm convinced that she was able to leave only because she thought he was the judge. You see? She has always feared— She might even— Look, you'll have to do something!"

The captain's voice was weary now, but very patient. "It isn't my department, Mr. Maitland. After all, she hasn't been gone very long. Don't you think she decided to have supper out, and then did some shopping or went to a movie? After ten years, a woman would have a lot to catch up on!"

Elliot went limp with relief. He had to sound paralyzed with fear, but at the same time, he didn't want to be so convincing as to start them looking for her now.

"I suppose I am unduly alarmed," he said weakly. "Her fear was such a real thing, powerful! I suppose she must have communicated it to me. I was afraid that finding herself like that, she might do herself violence."

"Yes? Well, if she doesn't show up by midnight, you might call Lieutenant Davidson in your precinct. He's a friend of mine. He'll

take care of you. Good-by, Mr. Maitland."

Elliot hung up the receiver and wiped his forehead. He had only one fear now, that a call would come from a city hospital, asking him to come for his wife.

He went back into the parlor and picked up a novel he had bought before leaving for Washington as a present to keep Vivian quiet. Not that it had, he thought grimly.

He had read the first sentence three times without understanding a word, when he heard the key scraping in the lock of the front door. His face took on a look of sharp anxiety not altogether feigned. His wife met him in the hall, smiling and glowing.

"Vivian!" he said. "Why didn't you telephone?"

She pouted. "Why should I? You said you wouldn't be back until—"

"I know. You've no idea how worried I've been. I called the police."

"Silly! I feel wonderful!"

He took two steps toward her. So much depended on her answer. "Where have you been? Tell me everything! Restaurant, shops—"

Her cheeks flushed and she drew him into the parlor. "No, I wasn't hungry. Too excited! I went to a movie! My, how they've changed since— It was wonderful!"

He relaxed a little. "How do you feel?"

"How do I feel? Wonderful. Safe, safe!"

"My!" He was mildly surprised.

"You are cured. Did you meet anyone you know? Did anyone see you come home? This street—"

She looked puzzled. "I didn't meet a soul. And I know nobody saw me; it's very dark out. But why are you so anxious?"

"Don't be a fool." His voice was harsher than he intended. "If anyone saw you out after all these years, we'd have a lot of very unpleasant publicity."

He hadn't expected that to count with her, but strangely enough, she sobered immediately. "You're right. We don't want anyone to know, do we? Even if I can go out, we won't do it very often, and then always together."

He could barely repress a shudder at the sound of that cloying

"together." He pushed her into a chair. "We must talk about this. It's important. Did you have any fears?"

She frowned, as if they weren't talking about the same thing. "A few. Oh, it was such fun!"

"Wait," he said. "I don't understand this at all. I was sure that you'd been able to go out because you were convinced that the old devil was the judge. Since he wasn't and you came back all right— Don't you see, it means we've had the wrong slant all along? It means you're not afraid of something outside—you're bound by a psychological relation to something inside!" He was no longer interested in her, or her phobias, but he had to keep talking; he had to

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seem interested. "I did wrong to give up my studies," he said suddenly. "You're a marvelous case. I can do a book!"

"Elliot!" She was tired, edgy. "I don't think I'd like that. I mean, being Case No. 3, or the Carmody phobia! Study someone else, but do leave me alone! Besides, I don't know that I am cured." Her voice returned to its habitual querulous note. He was glad of it for the first time. It gave him no reason to alter his plans, to regret anything. She was a nuisance.

He felt sudden cruelty rise in him, a desire to make her squirm. "Let's see," he said. "What first made you want to go down there with the fingerprints?"

"Oh, darling, I don't know! I just remembered them, and the old man was being so nasty. I was afraid—"

"Ah! Of what were you afraid?"

"Elliot! How can you?" Her voice broke tearfully. "I've had a tiring day, dear. You say you were worried about me. This coldly scientific analysis is a little unnerving."

For a second, he was startled by the fear in her eyes. Could she read what was passing in his mind? Was that room in the cellar mirrored in his eye like a photograph for her to study? He turned away so that she should not see.

"It's just that it interests me so much," he said gruffly. "We'll discuss it tomorrow. It's wonderful for me that you're cured. Why, it means everything!"

"But perhaps I'm not." She seemed terribly nervous.

"Of course you are. You couldn't have gone out if you hadn't been."

"It was after I read the paper," she said dreamily. "Then I knew I had to do something. That nasty old man wanting this house!"

He raised his eyebrows. "Yes," he said, grasping the remark as an excuse. "The house! Now we can alter it!"

She trembled. "I'd really rather not. I mean, let's do it slowly. The shock— Besides, it really has a good deal of charm and—"

"Nonsense!" So she was mean enough to thwart him without reason. He wanted to strangle her. Instead he said, "You're either over these things, or you're not. The upstairs study can be redecorated, and the rumpus room— We can remodel that damn cellar! Vivian!" He hoped he sounded more artless than he felt. "Let's go down now and plan it. I have a number of grand ideas."

She was so pale that again he had an uneasy feeling that she guessed what he intended. "Really," she said, "I'm much too tired. Some other time, darling."

It was hard to be patient. He felt like grabbing her and dragging her down there. For now he realized that he meant it. He was playing this game for keeps.

"I know," he coaxed her gently. "But this is an occasion, darling. I'll make you a cup of hot chocolate, just the way you like it, very sweet, with lots of cream. Then we can

take it down with us and look things over. After all, Vivian, this is a happy night for both of us. You might encourage me! It will take only a few minutes."

"Oh, all right," she said. She still seemed faintly worried.

He gave her a quick kiss on her cheek, and told her to put her feet on the ottoman, to relax until he was ready.

When he returned with the steaming mugs, she was still lying as he had left her, head back, eyes shut. Very handsome, he thought, but too rich in color, too warm, too much of everything. He would have liked a smaller woman, a fairer woman, one who would be more dependent. After all, she was fond of him, but it was as if she'd bought him with her big, old-fashioned house and her money.

"Here's yours," he said, offering her a cup. "Let's go."

At the top of the dark, twisting flight of basement steps, he heard his voice, gentle and thoughtful, asking her to be careful. "We'll have these stairs fixed the first thing," he promised.

She gave him a petulant smile and went down with careful, hesitating steps.

The wine cellar was not a cheerful room, with its spider webs and dank corners. Vivian stood in front of him in the dim light of the one small bulb and shuddered. "She knows," he thought. "Somehow, she can tell. My God, I don't want to have to fight her."

"It's chilly, dear," he said. "Drink your chocolate."

She raised it to her lips like an obedient child. "You've put too much sugar in it," she told him fretfully. Her voice rattled hollowly against the brick walls. Except for the huge cider barrels standing in the arches, the room was bare.

Excitement made him giddy. "I had thought," he said loudly, "that we could finish the walls in linoleum. A bar set in the arches when those filthy barrels have been hauled off—"

"Please, Elliot! No!" It was almost a scream.

"My dear, what is it?" There was no use having a noisy struggle. Strange how she kept getting this fear!

"Let's leave the barrels," she said. "A decorative touch! Elliot, I'm chilly. Let's go upstairs."

"Of course, we'll go immediately. Finish your chocolate. And we will leave the barrels there." He thought cynically that he certainly would leave them there. That was the whole—

The empty mug slipped from her hands and smashed into fragments. "What a shame," he heard her say. "The only nice Victorian thing in the house." Then he saw her face change, become ugly, repulsive. Her eyes sought his through the pain, and this time he read knowledge, complete and horrified, in her look. "From the study," she gasped. "Cya—"

He watched her falling away

from him into pain that was ludicrous in its distortions.

It was soon over.

He pulled himself together and began the ghastly business with the barrel. It might take quite a while, but obviously, vinegar was just the thing for his purposes. Afterwards, he had only to call Lieutenant Davidson. "Captain Maclane said I should call you if my wife didn't come back. I've been waiting—" He would have just the right degree of panic in his voice.

It was hard to pry the top from the heavy tun. He thanked his stars that the staves were solidly fixed to the hoops, otherwise—

He looked down into the depths, and then prodded with his hand. It didn't seem possible that—There was something solid. "God Almighty!" he shouted at the thing in the barrel "The judge!" He stood there shaking, unable to move. "Pickled in cider," he said hoarsely. "For ten years!"

In a trance, he saw before him little pictures of his life with Vivian. Little pictures in ugly gilt frames like the one around the judge's portrait. Her pale, frightened face when he had first suggested getting rid of the cider barrels. "Nothing must be changed! I dare not leave the house!" Because someone might look in a cider keg? That was her phobia! That was what she had feared—the thing in the barrel! Ah, she had known about

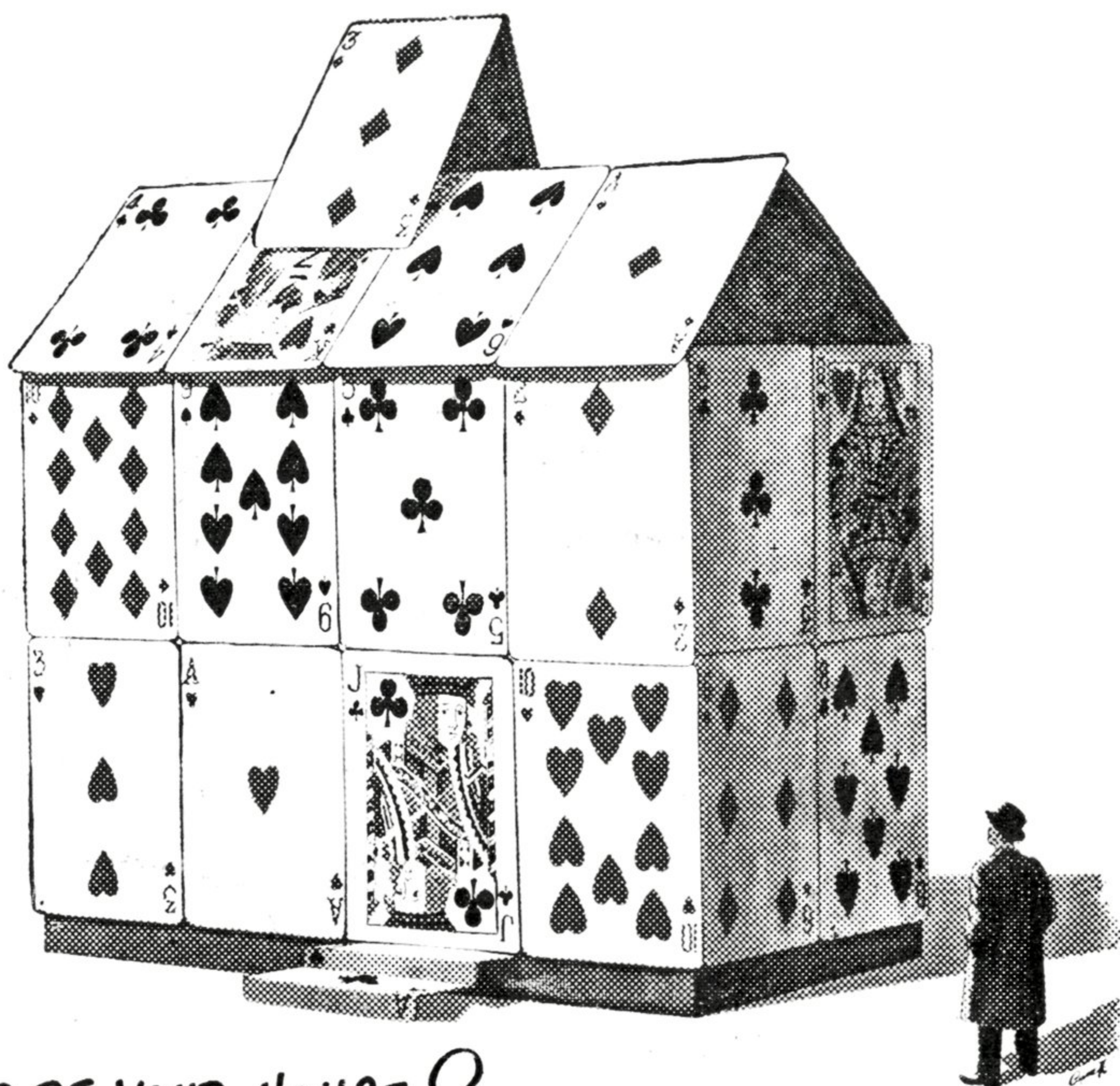
the poison in the photography closet. It was fear that the old man would take the house from her that had sent her out—a fear greater than her fear of leaving it.

He laughed harshly, almost with relief. "Well, then, this wasn't murder, really. Just poetic justice. Why, the little— Let her go in the other barrel, then," he thought, with unrestrained brutality.

He went on grimly doing what he had to do. He fixed the top in place. There were two of them now! Good God, no wonder she hadn't wanted to come down!

He could travel, of course. The money would be a magic carpet to everything he wanted. And then his heart almost stopped beating, as if a cold hand had reached out and grasped it. He could hear the blood roaring in his ears. He couldn't leave. There would always be the fear, no matter where he went, that they would find the body. These days one couldn't hide from justice. And he couldn't stay alone for years in that hated house, not without going mad. He could see himself driven by fears, finally babbling the truth in his madness.

At that moment, he understood that he was inheriting more than money from Vivian. He, too, had a secret in the cellar that he must guard. There would be no traveling. He was as housebound as she had been!



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