STREET & SMITH'S

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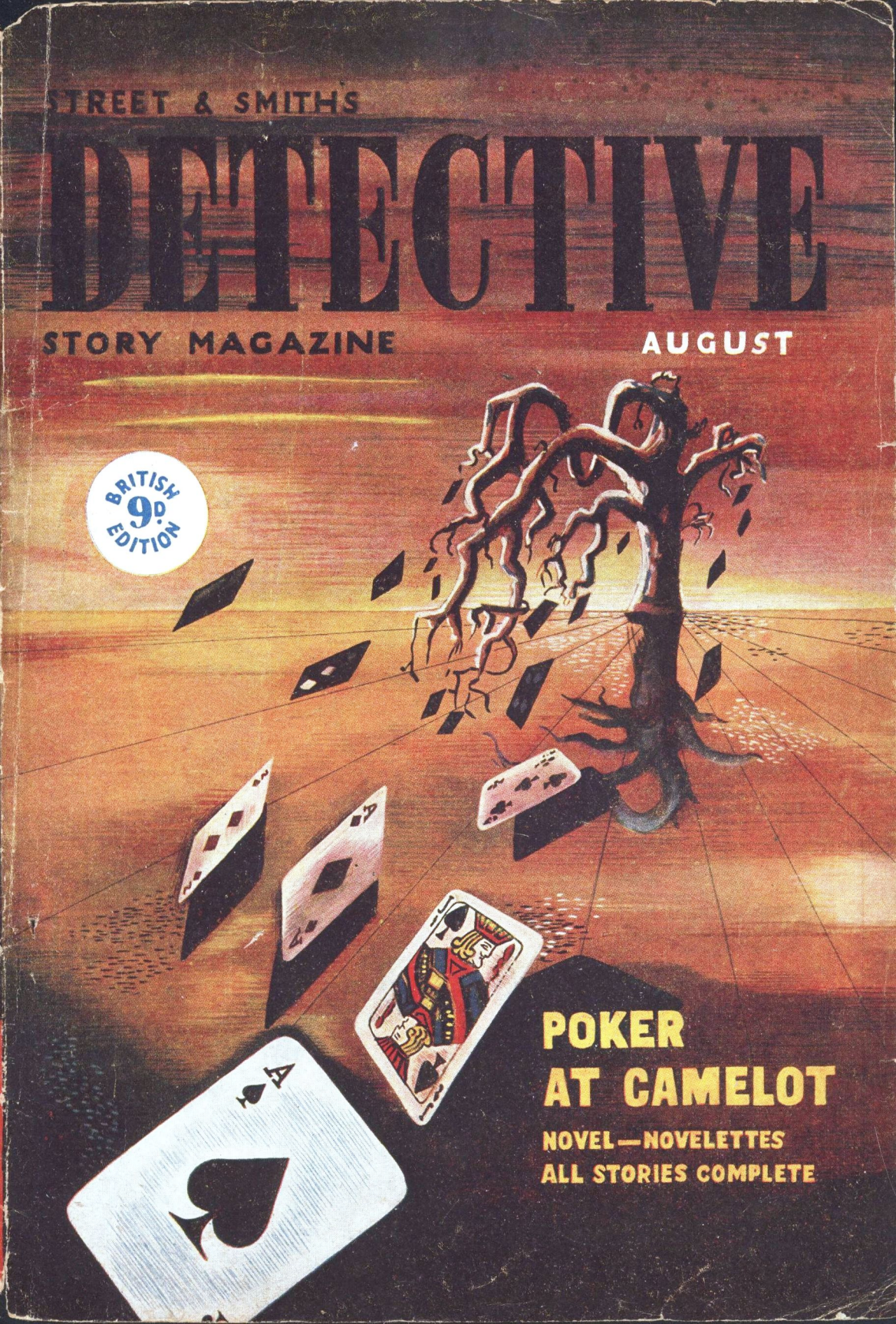

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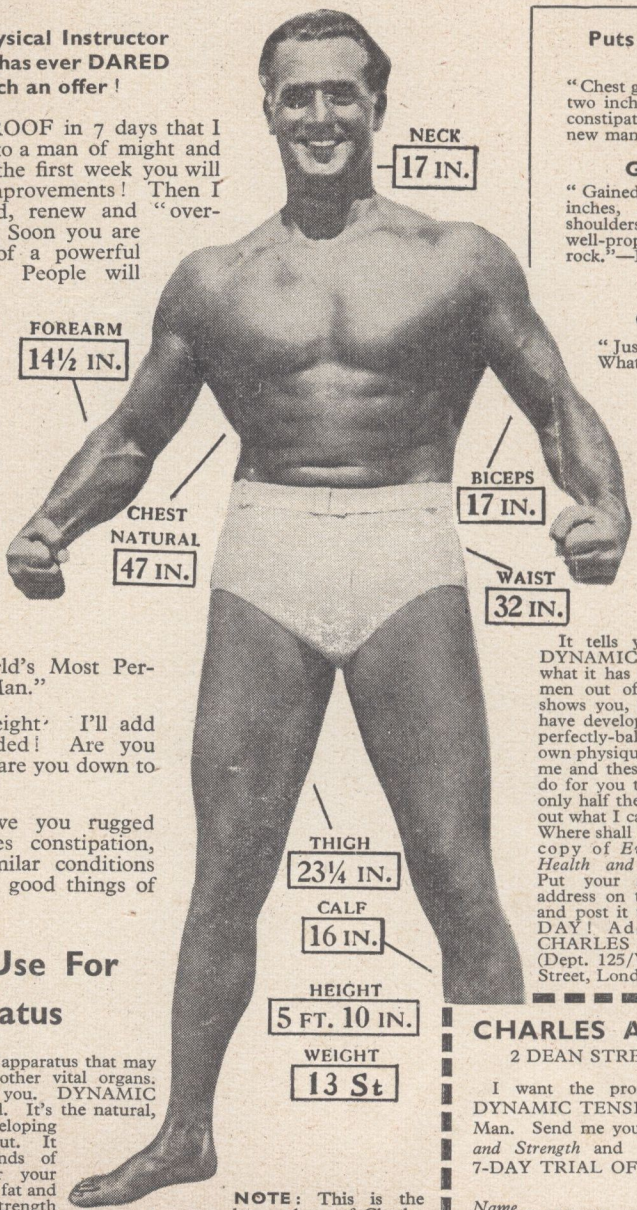

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STREET & SMITH'S

DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

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

From the rocking chair

By ROLAND PHILLIPS

House slippers, a rocking chair and Sergeant McBride, a guy full of surprises. . . . As in the old days, he rings the bell again.

I.

INSPECTOR GARRISON winced as he scanned the headlines on the front page of the noon edition, glanced at the photographs and skimmed through the smaller type. The rooming house was a wreck, all right; several lives lost and many injured. The sixth serious blaze in the past five weeks. Any one of them might have been labeled an accident, but half a dozen in succession—

"You see this?" he demanded, thrusting the paper at Sergeant McBride who came into the office without knocking.

"Who hasn't?" the sergeant grunted. "Why haven't you done something? Or are you leaving it for the insurance dicks?"

"We've been co-operating."

"Is that another name for shadow-boxing?"

"I won't deny we've been running in circles," Garrison admitted ruefully. "That's why I've yanked you off the farm, out of your rocking chair and slippers. You're pretty much of a wreck, Mac, but you still know your way around, and—"

"Never mind the wise cracks," McBride cut him short. "Just how have you got this thing sized up?"

"I think we're bucking a smart guy with a well-organized gang behind him. It's a firebug racket that's evidently paying off. You take a bankrupt plant, a shopkeeper whose business is in the red, a lodging house proprietor who claims he can't make a profit because of the rent ceilings —all of them heavily insured. They're desperately in need of money, but the majority of them shy away from turning arsonists, afraid they'd bungle the job and probably would, wind up with a stiff prison sentence. That's where this expert steps into the picture, does the torch work without leaving any evidence behind and collects a fat fee when the insurance company pays off. Sound logical?"

The sergeant nodded. "It'll do to start with. And, according to the newspapers, this master mind you refer to presumably travels under the name of Fred Sprague. Who dug him up?"

"One of my stoolies."

McBride made a wry face. "The name's probably a phony."

"The confounded press has been playing it up strong. Don't know where the leak's been." Garrison sank lower in his chair. "We've dredged the town for suspects without turning up a single promising lead," he went on gloomily. "Neither have the insurance boys, so far as I know. I realize a man minus any sort of description isn't much to offer you, Mac, but you can have the pick of my outfit. They'll do all the leg work."

The door opened and a young man looked in. "A girl downstairs to see you, inspector."

Garrison beckoned. "Come in, Corbin. This is Sergeant McBride who's taking over the fireworks headache. You'll string along with him. Mac's a hard-shelled dick at times, full of surprises. Sometimes they bring results, and that's what we're after."

McBride shook hands with the stalwart detective, sized him up and liked his appearance. "We're taking off from scratch down a blind alley," he commented.

"Bring in those suspects you picked up this morning, Corbin," the inspector directed. "We'll let the sergeant give them the once over. What were you saying about a girl?"

"She's been waiting for half an hour," Corbin said. "Neat little wren. Seems upset and spouting tears all over the place."

The white-faced girl the detective led into the office was young, undeniably

attractive, expensively dressed and obviously frightened. She waited until Corbin had left before speaking

"I'm Sophie Woltz," she blurted out. "A . . . a man's been killed . . . murdered. He was shot in my apartment."

"Did you shoot him?"

"No, no," she protested, backing away. "I didn't do it. He was a friend of mine. We were to be married, and—

"Who shot him?" Garrison demanded.

"I don't know."

"Who was the murdered man?"

"Mr. Sprague," the girl said.

The inspector sat forward in his chair and flicked a glance at McBride who was studying the girl intently. "Fred Sprague?"

The girl nodded.

Garrison cleared his throat. "Sit down, Miss Woltz," he said quietly. "Tell us exactly what happened."

"It's . . . it's all so horrible," she choked. "I can't believe it's true." She closed her eyes a moment as if to hold back the tears. "We'd gone shopping this morning," she went on with a perceptible effort. "When we returned to the apartment, I . . . I stepped into the kitchen to prepare lunch. Then I heard a shot and ran back into the living room. Fred was on the floor and . . . and a man was running out the hall door."

"Oh, you saw him," Garrison said.

"Only his back—a tall man in a gray suit. I was too . . . too terrified to scream or even more for an instant. I went over to where Fred lay. He was groaning and tried to speak, tell me something, but I couldn't understand. Then he was quiet. There was blood—" She broke off and began crying.

Garrison waited a moment, watching the girl. "Who was this Fred Sprague?" he inquired at length. "What was his business? What did he do for a living? Had you known him long?"

"Only about three or four months. He . . . he told me he was doing confidential work for the government—research, I think it was."

"What kind of research?" McBride asked abruptly.

"I believe it had something to do with chemicals," the girl said.

"Pyrotechnics?"

Miss Woltz shook her head. "I wouldn't know that. I never asked him any questions about his work."

"You've no idea who might have fired the shot?" Garrison pressed.

The girl said she hadn't, that the man must have got into the apartment while they were out, hidden himself in a closet and awaited their return. No, she hadn't met any of Mr. Sprague's friends and he never mentioned any of them by name. His home was in Washington, he told her, and he was living in a hotel here. She couldn't just recall which one it was.

The inspector nodded. "We'll look into this at once, Miss Woltz. Thanks for notifying us so promptly. We'll have to detain you—temporarily, that is. Let us have your address and the key to your apartment."

"It's the Carleton Arms on Park Street," she said, taking the key from her handbag. "The second-floor front. You . . . you'll hurry, won't you?"

The matron was called and took the girl in charge. When the door closed behind them, the inspector smote his desk. "Maybe this is the break we've been waiting for, Mac!" he exclaimed jubilantly. "Dropped right in our laps. The name clicks, and I'm convinced that these fires have been started with chemicals. Grab Corbin and hop to it."

McBride got up stiffly and accepted the proffered key. "Better not crow yet," he advised. "I've lived too long to believe in miracles."

II.

THE two-story Spanish-type apartment house faced a park. It was in a good neighborhood and evidently catered to people of means. The entrance was through a patio gay with awnings. In the center an ornate fountain trickled into a goldfish pool flanked by potted shrubs and several easy chairs. Two children were dabbling in the water and a man with a brief case on his knee occupied one of the chairs. He barely glanced up as McBride and Corbin passed.

There was no elevator and the men mounted the stairs. In the upper hall the sergeant unlocked the door of the front apartment and walked in, Corbin at his heels. The man sprawled on the rug in the living room was dead, had been for some time, McBride decided. He was young, blond and well-dressed. One shot had been fired into his chest at close range and the slug must have found his heart.

Squatting, McBride explored the dead man's pockets which gave up a wallet, some keys and loose silver, a stub-nosed .38, fully loaded. The soft brown hat beside the man bore the initials F.S. in the sweatband. The wallet, with the same initials, contained a few bank notes, some receipts made out in the name of

Fred Sprague, but bore no address, and a photograph of Sophie Woltz.

"What do you make of it?" Corbin asked after the sergeant had replaced the property. "Is this the bird we've been looking for? Think the tearful little miss told the truth about his demise, or has she pulled a Frankie and Johnnie?"

McBride picked up the hat, placed it on the dead man's head, squinted up at his companion. "What do you say?"

"I'd say the lid was a couple sizes too small," Corbin stated.

The sergeant nodded, flipped the hat aside, got up and inspected the adjoining bedroom. Everything seemed to be in order. He walked back into the kitchen. A service entrance opened from it onto a small, enclosed porch, and a narrow flight of iron stairs led down to a paved court below. The kitchen door was unlocked. A shelf on the porch held an array of empty milk bottles.

When he returned to the living room, it was to see Corbin on his knees beside a divan. "Found this underneath," he announced. "Might have been kicked out of the gun that was used, an automatic."

"Bright boy," McBride murmured. He took the cartridge, turned it over in his fingers and thrust it into his pocket. "You stay here. I'm going to rout out whoever's in charge of the building. Maybe he can help us."

The elderly, bald-headed man in faded overalls who was watering the shrubs in the patio admitted he was the janitor. Yes, he had heard a disturbance upstairs perhaps an hour or more ago; sounded like a shot, but he hadn't investigated. No, he hadn't seen Miss Woltz leave, but he had seen her come in shortly after noon, she and a man.

"Remember what he looked like?" McBride asked.

"A young fellow," the janitor replied. "I've seen him here before. Me and Major Dawson was talkin' when—"

The sergeant turned to the man seated near the pool who looked around at the mention of his name, a square-shouldered, ruddy-faced man wearing glasses. A discharge button was in his coat lapel.

"I saw the couple you refer to," he said. "I know Miss Woltz by sight, that's all. The gentleman with her was tall, good-looking, a blond. I'm Dr. Dawson," he added, rising with a smile. "Just out of service, but they still persist in calling me major. I'm taking a vacation before resuming my practice."

"Pleased to meet you," the sergeant acknowledged. "My name's McBride, of the detective bureau. I was a little too old to get into the last scrap. Mind coming upstairs with me, both of you?"

"Not at all." The doctor closed his brief case, tucked it under his arm.

The janitor hung back. "What's the matter? Has somethin' happened to Miss Woltz?"

"Not to the lady," McBride returned. He led the way to the second floor and into the apartment living room. "Is this the man?"

Dr. Dawson moved beside the quiet form, studied the white features. "I'm quite sure it is," he responded.

"How about you?" McBride turned to the janitor.

"It's the . . . the same man,' the other faltered and backed away. "I . . . I don't know nothin' about this," he protested. "I ain't been up here today."

"That'll be all for now. Much obliged to both of you." McBride held the door open and closed it again when the two had left. "Well, so far Sophie's story stands up. She seems to have come in with this man and the janitor claims he was a regular visitor. The third party—"

"Where's the evidence there was a third?" Corbin broke in. "You've only the girl's word for it."

The sergeant nodded toward the hat. "How are we to account for that? I don't believe the blonde was wearing it."

Corbin shrugged. "Maybe not, but I still think Sophie pulled the trigger on him."

"It's possible." McBride walked to the window, stood looking down into the street. A moment later he beckoned. "Am I seeing things, or is that little Hermie Kruger toddling this way?"

"In person," Corbin declared.

"Huh, the last I remember he was serving a two-year rap for blackmail. I put the finger on him myself. Damned if he isn't turning into the patio," the sergeant muttered. "If he's visiting here—"

The men waited expectantly. Brisk footsteps sounded along the hall outside and a rap came at the door. "Duck into the kitchen," McBride whispered. "I'll take care of Hermie."

Corbin vanished. McBride moved to the hall door, opened it, reached out as the man in the doorway recoiled, fairly yanked him inside.

"Come right in, Kruger. Long time no see. What you wanting here?"

The slim, sallow-cheeked man struggled to free himself. "Let go! I ain't done nothin'."

McBride frisked the man, found him unarmed. "Come on! Make with the talk," he snapped. "What brought you here?"

"I . . . it was to see a guy about a proposition," Kruger stammered.

"Who?"

"He said his name was Sprague."

"Friend of yours?"

Kruger shook his head and squirmed under McBride's tightening fingers. "I just met him once. I don't know—"

The sergeant whirled the man about, nodded toward the body. "Is that the man?"

Kruger stared down at the corpse. "That's him," he gulped. "That's the one. What . . . what's happened, sergeant? You plug him?"

"What's this proposition you spoke of?" McBride demanded.

"That's what I come to find out."

"Where'd you meet him? When? What was said? Better give it to me straight now."

"I only met him a couple days ago," Kruger said. "That's the gospel. Never seen him before. It's up in Benny's gym where I'm watchin' a couple pugs work out that the guy comes up to me and says did I want to sit in on something good. I says sure if it's strictly on the level, so he tells me his name and I'm to see him today, three o'clock, here.

"But yesterday I'm readin' in the paper about a Fred Sprague who's suspected of being behind these fires around town, and it has me thinkin' maybe it could be the same guy who propositioned me."

"Go on," McBride urged as the other hesitated.

"I figured it would be smart if I got a load of his racket first, make a pass at hookin' up with him and then spill things to the inspector."

McBride gave a bleak smile. "Expect me to believe that?"

"It's the gospel, sergeant. So help me!" Kruger mopped at his damp face. "You got me labeled a punk, and I've served a couple stretches, but I'm drawin' the line at mixin' up with firebugs, burnin' innocent folks and that stuff. Not me. You think this is the right guy?"

"I'm about as sure of it as I am that you're handing me a straight story," the sergeant growled. "What I should do is toss your pants in the can," he added, "but I'll lay off this time. Now get the hell out of here and don't make yourself too hard to find later in case I want to invite you to headquarters."

Kruger needed no urging. He eased through the door and slammed it behind him. When Corbin emerged from the kitchen, McBride issued instructions.

"Get on Kruger's tail. Take the service entrance. And watch your step!"

Corbin sped away. From a front window the sergeant saw Kruger crossing the park. Once he had vanished, McBride picked up the phone, got Garrison.

"Shoot the homicide boys up here," he ordered.

"In the bag, is it?" The inspector's tone was jubilant.

"You can tell the world," McBride said. "I want to talk to that smart stoolie of yours. Bring him in. And, by the way, how long's little Hermie Kruger been sprung? . . . A year? Well, he popped up here a few minutes ago and spoke a nice piece. . . . What? No, I let him go. Corbin's tailing him. I'll be along presently."

He hung up, and after a tour of the premises walked downstairs, waited for the squad car. "Second-floor front," he told the lieutenant in charge. "The door's unlocked. Get your pictures and prints to Garrison soon as possible."

A few minutes later he was at headquarters where the inspector greeted him.

"Sit down and give, Mac! I've sent for Vroom. What's the Kruger angle? Think he's in on this affair? I'd like to know—"

"What I want to know," McBride cut him short, "is who put the slug into Sophie's alleged playmate?"

"As long as we've got the playmate, why fret?" Garrison countered. "Now that Sprague's a dead duck—"

"I don't think he is," the sergeant declared.

The inspector scowled. "Didn't you just phone me it was in the bag? Said I could tell the world? The newspapers already have it."

"It'll make a good story," McBride said mildly.

"Damn it, Mac! You hinting this was a plant?"

The sergeant revealed all that had taken place at the apartment during his visit, what he had found on the premises and on the dead man, repeated the testimony of those he had questioned.

"Apparently, the man Sophie brought to the apartment is the bird who was plugged," he summed up. "We'll accept that for the present. But she tells us he tried to talk before he died, which we're not accepting because a man with a slug in his heart doesn't have any last words. The initials on the wallet, the hatband and the receipts I found would indicate

the corpse is that of Fred Sprague, but the hat's much too small, which seems to queer the setup. Then Kruger appears on the scene at the right moment, identifies the victim as Sprague and rattles off a yarn to back it up, which I'm not prepared to swallow yet."

"So we're still fumbling in the dark," Garrison said glumly.

McBride nodded. "Unless we're ready to think the girl turned killer, there must have been another actor in the tragedy." He fished an empty cartridge from his pocket, tossed it onto the inspector's desk. "Kicked out of an automatic that erased our blond. Find who pulled the trigger and we'll probably have the man we're looking for."

"Sprague?"

"If that's the name he travels under. After all, we're building our scenario around one man's word—Gus Vroom's. Think he's told the truth?"

"Vroom's O.K.," Garrison said. "He's proved that in the past. Operates the Whiteway Club where you may recall some of our undesirables hang out."

The sergeant wasn't impressed. He got up, said he wanted lunch. Half an hour later he returned and was disturbed to learn that no word had come in from Corbin. The inspector said Wallace of homicide had made his report and delivered a batch of photographs. An attendant interrupted to announce a visitor and Garrison looked up to beckon toward the man in the outside hall.

"Come in, Vroom. Been waiting for you." He introduced the newcomer to McBride.

The sergeant eyed the dapper, middle-aged man critically. "How and where'd you get wind of Fred Sprague?" he demanded bluntly.

"From a chap named Carl Hormer," Vroom answered. "He's been in and out of my place for the past month, seems to have money, plenty of leisure. He showed up a few nights ago and got tight, appeared to be brooding over something and I heard him mutter Fred Sprague's name, curse him roundly. As much as implied he was forced to carry out the man's orders and was sick of the job. When he mumbled something about fires I got suspicious and phoned the inspector who told me to hold the man until he arrived, but Hormer disappeared before I came out of the phone booth. I've no idea where he lives and haven't seen him since."

"That isn't much to go on," McBride said. "What's his description?"

"He's young, good-looking and a blond? Wears expensive clothes and—"

"Resemble this man?" McBride demanded, lifting one of the damp prints from the desk.

Vroom glanced at the photograph that had been taken in Sophie Woltz's apartment.

"Why, that's him. That's Hormer." He shot a glance at the inspector and back at the sergeant. "Dead, is he?"

"Seems to be," McBride returned. "Who'd he travel around with?"

"Always was alone when he showed up in my place."

"Well, that's all just now." The sergeant motioned toward the door. "May want to talk to you again. Meanwhile, remember the old Chinese proverb," he added. "A shut mouth catches no flies."

"But it may trap a firebug, eh?" Vroom intimated.

Garrison grinned as the door closed behind the man. "Sometimes a stoolie is worth while, Mac. Now we seem to have a caption for our corpse. Carl Hormer. Let's say he has been taking orders from Sprague, soured on him and spoke out of turn. The boss sees his name in print, finds out who ratted on him, and there's a dead guy messing up Sophie's living room. Is that a fairly clear picture?"

"It's getting in focus," McBride admitted.

The phone rang and the sergeant reached for it, was relieved to hear Corbin's voice. "What's that?" he queried, frowning. "Yeah, I can find the place. Stay put. I'll be right over." He turned to Garrison. "Corbin found Kruger dead, shot. I'm on my way. Back soon."

The address given him was a dingy rooming house near the river. Corbin, waiting outside the building, led the sergeant up a narrow flight of stairs and into a back room on the third floor.

Hermie Kruger lay across an unmade bed. Shot through the throat, he was not pleasing to look at.

"I had a job trailing him," Corbin said. "He must have suspected what was up. I lost him once, caught up with him later, followed him here. I waited outside and across the street a while, and when he failed to reappear I got hold of the landlady and she directed me to his room. This is the way I found him. The door wasn't locked."

"Where'd you phone from?"

"A store on the corner."

"While you were waiting for Kruger to show up, did you see anyone leave here?"

"Several people," Corbin admitted, "but no one I recognized. However, there's a back entrance and a couple of fire escapes. The killer might have used either. Or maybe he's still in the building."

McBride moved about the shabby room, peering into the one closet, rummaging through the dresser drawers. Nothing of interest rewarded him, and he was making toward the window when he spied a suitcase under the bed. He leaned down, pulled out the battered case, snapped back the catches. It was not locked. Opened, it revealed a mass of crumpled newspapers. Buried among them was a metal container. He unscrawed the cap, peered at the silverlike contents and grunted.

"What's that?" Corbin asked.

McBride winked. "Fireworks." He replaced the cap and tucked the container under his arm. "We'll let Wallace and his ghouls come over and go through their routine. You stick around until then."

Back at headquarters, the sergeant found Garrison reading an early edition of the evening paper that featured the news of Fred Sprague's death. "Well," McBride announced, "we lost one of our bird dogs. Little Hermie spoke his piece and got paid off in lead. You know the answer."

"Sprague," Garrison said.

"Who else? He isn't a trusting guy and made sure Kruger wasn't talking. Here's a little souvenir I picked up on the premises." The sergeant planked the container on the desk, unscrewed the cap. "Know sodium when you see it? No? Well, I'm not positive, it may be potassium. They look something alike."

"What in blazes—" Garrison began.

"Blazes," McBride repeated. "Exactly. That's what this stuff makes and leaves no clues. It was popular with the army and also saboteurs during the war. I found it in Hermie's suitcase."

The inspector grunted. "How come you know so much about incendiaries?"

"Studied them. I was fire warden in my home town during the war. Sodium ignites when water reaches it. A firebug wraps the stuff in heavy paper, tosses it into the water around piers and wharves. It floats, and when water soaks through the paper the sodium ignites. If it's in contact with an inflammable material you've got a fire on your hands. Potassium acts the same way while phosphorus works just the opposite. As long as the stuff's wet, it's harmless. Let it dry out and exposed to the air—"

"That's enough," Garrison protested. "Maybe this is the way our fires were started, but that isn't putting a finger on the murdering arsonist. So where do we go from here?"

"That's up to Sophie Woltz."

"You mean release her? She's a material witness and—"

"Sure, I know," McBride interrupted. "It's highly irregular and all that, but we can always pick her up again. She may try to get in touch with the man we want. It's a chance worth taking."

"All right," the inspector reluctantly agreed. "I'll gamble on it, although you may be adding to my grief if she vanishes."

"Keep your fingers crossed," McBride advised, "and don't cry into the sodium if our plans miscarry. You might burn down this rookery."

Half an hour later, from a secluded doorway opposite police headquarters, McBride and Corbin watched the girl leave the building, saw her turn briskly along the crowded street and enter a drugstore.

"Afraid of that," the sergeant grumbled. "Probably phoning our man. If he suspects our ruse, he'll warn her to steer clear of him. You get inside and bend an ear."

Corbin darted across the street, entered the store. McBride saw the girl emerge presently, hesitate a moment, then get into a taxi parked at the curb. He reached Corbin's side an instant after the cab whirled away.

"Don't think she got her number," Corbin reported. "Heard her give the taxi driver the Carleton Arms address, so she's likely headed for home to phone from there. Not so good, he?"

"We'll trail along," McBride said, and flagged a passing taxi. "Follow that yellow cab," he barked at the driver, flashing his badge. "Don't lose it."

It was dusk now and the street lights began to come on. McBride kept his eyes on the cab a block ahead. They rolled across town and turned north into the broad avenue that paralleled the river. The yellow car remained in sight ahead of them. No doubt of its destination now, the sergeant reflected. Sophie appeared to be homeward bound.

McBride ordered the driver to pull over to the curb at the far corner of the park. From that vantage point, he saw the yellow cab draw up in front of the apartment house, saw the girl alight and disappear into the patio. The men dismissed their cab and struck off along a

path that wound through the dim park. They stopped in the shadows of a tall, clipped hedge and surveyed the apartment building on the opposite side of the street.

Lights shone in all street windows of the building except those of the second-floor front, north wing, which marked Sophie's living room. Either the occupant had not yet entered her apartment, or if she had, preferred to remain in the dark. The sergeant speculated upon that, and was about to comment upon it when it suddenly dawned upon him that he had neglected to return the girl's key. If she hadn't a duplicate, she would probably have to find the janitor, get him to open her door.

Abruptly, lights came on behind the half-closed blinds of the living room, then almost as abruptly were extinguished.

"What do you suppose that means?" Corbin ventured as the windows remained dark. "A signal? Perhaps—" He broke off, touched the sergeant's arm. Look! Isn't that Gus Vroom coming out of the building?"

It was. McBride grunted. Vroom crossed the street, turned into the park and came rapidly along the path that led to where the detectives stood in the shadows. The men drew back, waited. In a dozen steps Vroom was opposite McBride. As the sergeant stepped forward, Vroom wheeled with a cry and his hand reached toward his hip. McBride grabbed the man's arm, drove a fist against his jaw. Vroom dropped to the ground.

The sergeant was instantly beside the fallen man, turning him over, probing his pockets. He inspected the gun he found; it seemed more suitable for a woman's purse than a man's pocket, saw it was loaded and got to his feet.

"The inspector's stoolie seems to be out cold," he murmured to Corbin. "Take care of him. I'm going places."

No time for speculation or conjecture now, McBride decided. As he crossed the street he noted that the windows of the girl's apartment were still dark. He skirted the patio entrance and ducked into the area-way. It was pitch black, but he found the narrow stairs, mounted them and reached the porch. The kitchen window was partly open, the room beyond dark, silent. He found the door unlocked, slipped inside and pressed on cautiously into the living room. Step by step he advanced only to stiffen as his foot brushed against something on the floor. After a moment's hesitation, he risked striking a match.

Sophie Woltz lay almost in the same spot where, a few hours before, he had found the murdered Carl Hormer. The girl's blouse was torn, the front of it soggy red. A gun on the rug near her outstretched hand brought a scowl, but, without stopping to inspect the weapon, he sought the girl's limp wrist, fancied he could detect the barest flutter of a pulse. Suddenly recalling the doctor in the building with whom he had talked earlier, he groped his way outside, almost collided with a man at the head of the stairs.

"Where's Dr. Dawson's apartment?" he demanded.

"Right across the hall," the man responded.

McBride hammered upon the opposite door. The doctor, book in hand, clad in lounging robe and slippers, answered the summons.

"Miss Woltz? Shot?" the doctor exclaimed upon hearing the news. He tossed aside his book and followed the sergeant back across the hall and into the other apartment, switching on the lights as he entered.

Dawson made a brief examination of the girl, stood up presently and shook his head. "Sorry. We're too late. She's been gone for some time—probably an hour." He eyed the sergeant quizzically. "What brought you here tonight?"

Ignoring the question, McBride crossed to the phone, dialed, and after a wait reached the inspector's desk. "Mac speaking. I'm at the Woltz apartment. . . . Yeah, that's where she landed. What? . . . No, she's dead, shot. Looks like suicide, but isn't. Apparently, chalks up victim number three for our quarry today, and the last. Lucky I got on the scene in time. . . . Talked? Sure she did. Cracked our case wide open. Chase yourself up here for the big surprise party.

McBride cradled the phone. The pressure in the small of his back neither surprised nor alarmed him

"Keep your arms high!" a voice behind him commanded.

He obeyed and smiled as a hand snaked over him, took the gun off his hip. Still smiling, McBride lowered his arms, turned to confront his captor who backed off, holding one revolver leveled pocketing the one he had taken from the sergeant.

"Thought I'd bait you into exposing yourself," McBride taunted. "Afraid your victim might have lived long enough to

mention your name, weren't you? She didn't. You might have been assured of that if you had a shred of medical knowledge. Why, the moment you switched on the lights here I realized you must be familiar with the layout of this apartment, although you'd told me you knew Miss Woltz only by sight. And when you claimed the girl had been dead at least an hour, I knew you weren't a physician, never had been. The girl wasn't in the building more than twenty minutes before I found her. Two blunders, Sprague. That's who you are, right?"

The man hunched his shoulders. "Why should I trouble to deny it when your remarkable deductive powers are to be wasted?" He nodded toward the door. "Suppose we continue our discussions in my quarters. We're not so likely to be interrupted there."

Unprotesting, McBride led the way across the hall and into the opposite apartment. He heard the door close behind him, the bolt shot; turned an instant too late to avoid the clubbed gun that caught him a glancing blow back of the ear, dropped him to the floor.

"Make yourself comfortable, sergeant," Sprague said. "We'll mark time until your friends have come and gone."

McBride sat up, bracing himself against the wall, waited until his head stopped spinning. "They're not liable to leave in a hurry," he predicted.

"We'll see," Sprague returned.

"Had a busy day, haven't you?" McBride went on. "All because you blasted a playmate who talked out of turn. Found yourself with a corpse on your hands. Embarrassing for you and for Miss Woltz, wasn't it? So you cooked up a neat story to account for Carl Hormer, and at the same time hoped it would call off the search for the elusive Fred Sprague. The girl and Hermie Kruger collaborated. After Kruger had appeared and spoken his piece you closed his mouth, and a few minutes ago you shot Miss Woltz, suspecting her release was a police ruse to get a line on who she was serving, and fearful, under pressure, she might confess. You tried to make it appear a suicide to avoid investigation. You've tried hard to cover your trail, but you haven't succeeded."

Sprague laughed softly, derisively. "It's still well-covered, sergeant. The police are still chasing a phantom. Perhaps I did fail to palm off Hormer as myself, but I've a far better plan in view now, one in which you're to play a star rôle."

"That sounds interesting," McBride said. "Just where do I come in?"

"A one-man performance," Sprague replied and laughed again. "Once your friends left, a fire will break out in this apartment, an extremely bad fire. It will be kindled with materials of which you may be sure I have expert knowledge. Within a short time, the place will be a blazing furnace and you'll be in it. The body that is recovered later—what remains of it—naturally will be accepted as the occupant of the apartment, Dr. Dawson."

"Temporarily, perhaps," McBride countered. "Garrison won't—"

"Wait, please," the other protested. "I've giving your inspector credit for being an astute man, planning on it. He remembers the girl hurried home after being released, which might indicate she intended to get in touch with the man you've been seeking, possibly a resident of this building. He finds her shot, of course, but you'd informed him she'd talked before she died, cracked the case wide open, you boasted. No doubt the fire here will arouse suspicion. Investigation is going to reveal that the alleged Dr. Dawson was an imposter, never saw service with the armed forces, wasn't even a physician. Begin to see how it all adds up, sergeant? The so-called Dr. Dawson was actually Fred Sprague. He's dead. I'm far away under another name. That's the end."

"Except that I'm still unaccounted for," McBride reminded him.

"Which will remain an unsolved mystery."

McBride shook his head. "I'm afraid not. There's one little flaw in your plan, one thing you've overlooked. It—"

He stopped, listened. There were sounds in the hall outside now, the shuffle of feet and voices. Evidently, Garrison and his men had arrived. He felt his pulse bound. Sprague snapped off the ceiling lights, left a table lamp burning. McBride drew up his knees, his eyes fixed upon the revolver that still menaced him.

"Now that you've unburdened yourself," he went on, his voice rising, "here's the one little thing you've overlooked. Take it with my compliments."

Magically, there was a gun in his fist. Sprague recoiled with a cry. His revolver blazed as McBride hurled himself to the floor, kept squeezing the trigger of his own weapon. The room billowed with smoke and the roaring explosions shook the walls. Around and beside him wood splintered, slugs screeched. One of them

whipped across his neck, seared like a hot wire.

He saw Sprague lurch, double over and crash against the table, upsetting it, saw him turn and weave toward the window. The gun in McBride's hand had been emptied. He attempted to get on his feet, fell. The pounding at the door and the crash as it was battered down, reached him faintly. Hands lifted him, lowered him into a chair and Garrison's voice bellowed.

"You all right, Mac?"

McBride opened his eyes to find the inspector bending over him. "Stop yelling," he growled. "I'm all right and I'm not deaf."

"Hey, this guy's dead, riddled," someone behind him shouted.

The sergeant turned to see Corbin squatted beside the form on the floor below the window. "That's Fred Sprague," he said. "Alias Dr. Dawson. What did you do with Gus Vroom?"

"Turned him over to a copper," Corbin replied. "When he came back to life he explained he'd been visiting friends here. It's O.K. I checked on it. Said he didn't recognize you in the park, thought it was a stick-up, reached for his gun."

"A break for me that he did," McBride said.

"Where'd you get hold of that fool popgun?" Garrison demanded, eyeing the diminutive weapon still clutched in the sergeant's hand.

"Off Vroom," McBride replied, grinning. "I parked it in the top of my sock before venturing up here, just in case. Came in useful after Sprague lifted my service revolver and threatened to cremate me."

The inspector chuckled. "Up to your old tricks, aren't you? Still pulling surprises but not your punches. Well," he added, "I sort of banked on that when I dragged you out of your rocking chair."

By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

Pale hands I loathed

Pale, fluttering hands . . . grasping hands, cold hands . . . fascinating hands . . . hands that were all things to all men . . .

We were doing all right, Norah and I. We'd been married three years, but the honeymoon wasn't over. With us, the honeymoon should last forever, we figured at the time.

I was a police reporter for the *Star*, and on that beat you meet a lot of people, none of them likely to bolster your faith in human nature. It was Norah who did that for me. It was Norah I turned to every night for a renewal of the faith, as they say. Besides all that, she could cook. Not many like her. None like her, none I've met, at any rate.

We had a small home, out in Shore Hills, and a small nest egg in the First National, and a small heir in the rear bedroom named John Baldwin Shea, Jr. We had about everything we wanted except a new car, and cars just weren't available.

Maybe we were beginning to get smug. Maybe we had too much.

This June Drexel angle was routine enough, at first. She was a witness in the Peckham divorce mess, and I happened to run across her in the D.A.'s office. I'd taken her out, quite a few times, in high school. The way she acted, in the D.A.'s office, it looked to the others, I'll bet, as though I'd never stopped taking her out.

"Johnny dear," she asked, "have you come to rescue me?"

I blushed, and stammered, "Hello, June," and tried to ignore the laugh I was getting from the other reporters.

The D.A. looked at me sharply. He

was trying to get some dope on Peckham from June; the divorce to him was only incidental.

June sighed, and said, "Johnny and I were such good friends."

The D.A. said, "I won't be needing you any more, Miss Drexel." And to the reporters, "That's all, boys."

We started to file out, when he called, "Would you mind waiting a moment, Shea?"

I closed the door and came back. I was probably still blushing. He had a smile on his broad face. "That's where the *Star* gets its copy on Peckham, is it?" he asked.

We'd been running a campaign on municipal building graft, and Peckham's name had been mentioned frequently. "Hell, no," I said. "I haven't seen that babe since high school. If I never see her again, it's O.K. with me."

He was smirking now. "Let's not be modest, Johnny. You're not a bad-looking guy, you know. You're right in there, pitching, aren't you?"

I shook my head. I was beginning to get hot. "I'm happily married. That's the way I intend to stay. She was just trying to embarrass me, and through me, the *Star*. She's no dummy."

"No," he said, "she isn't." He was looking thoughtful. He tilted his head to one side, studying me, and tried to look chummy. "The *Star* and I usually get along all right. We've worked together before, you know."

I nodded.

"Mr. Cavanaugh would want you to work with me, Johnny."

Mr. Robert Justice Cavanaugh was the owner of the *Star*. He was a big man, a very big man in this town. I said flatly, "You'd better talk to him, then."

He nodded, and he wasn't smirking or trying to be chummy any more. He said quietly, "That's exactly what I intend to do. That's all, Johnny."

He didn't frighten me. Cavanaugh would back me. He was just desperate and frustrated and annoyed and was taking it out on the first stooge who happened along. He didn't frighten me—much.

I left the quiet room behind, and went out into the clatter of the outer office. A flash bulb went off in my face.

Bitsy Donworth, photographer for the *Courier*, said, "Nice shot. Could we have a statement, dear?"

The *Courier* was a tabloid, the kind of paper that would play up something like this. Any relation to the truth in the *Courier* was purely coincidental.

I thought of Norah. "Don't make the mistake of printing that picture, Bitsy. You'll be asking for trouble."

"The *Courier*," Bitsy replied, "thrives on trouble."

"But *you* don't," I said. "You're too small. This would be personal trouble, Bitsy." I realized I was making a damned fool of myself, but I was past caring.

Jug Elder, who handles the courts for the *Courier*, said, "Run along, dear. You don't want any trouble with us."

Jug goes about two hundred pounds. I figured about half of it was fat. I should have run along, as he said. But I walked over to him, and slapped his face. My name is Shea.

He drew his big right hand back, and I let him have it, right on the button.

I could feel the shock traveling up my arm, and I could see him go crashing backward into a desk. I saw the flash bulb go off again, and then the red went flashing through my brain, and I was moving in.

The next thing I knew, a couple of reporters from the *Journal* were holding my arms. Jug was getting up slowly, rubbing his chin. Bitsy was on his way out. The D.A. stood in his doorway, asking, "What the hell's going on out here?"

One of the *Journal* reporters said, "Jug fell down, didn't you, Jug? You all right, now?"

All the stenos, the cops, the help in the outer office were watching us. It had happened so quickly that none of the girls had had a chance to scream.

"I'm all right," Jug said. He didn't look at me. I'll bet he didn't even want to look at himself.

There was a murmur of voices from the spectators. The D.A. took one swift glance around the room, and then his door closed.

I went out with one of the *Journal* reporters. He said, "The *Courier*'ll print that picture. They'll make some kind of a lousy story out of the whole thing." He swore.

"They'll probably print both pictures, now," I said. "I wonder, you think there might be a libel angle—"

He shook his head. "Not the way they'll write it. Avoiding libel suits is a business they understand. They've made an art out of that."

He left me, there on the sidewalk, and I walked down to the coupe. I was thinking about June. I was remembering her hands, her pale, fluttering hands, always

moving, always reaching. They'd repelled me, back in high school, repelled me and fascinated me. I remember, I could never take my eyes off them.

She had jet-black hair, this June Drexel, and her pale complexion was almost sickly in its whiteness. But she'd done a lot with that contrast, that and the dark-blue eyes. That and the reaching, grasping hands.

As though she couldn't get enough of whatever it was she wanted. A high-school kid wouldn't know what it was. I wasn't sure, even now, and high school was ten years behind me. There'd been a war and a wedding and a birth in my life since then.

To hell with her, I thought. To hell with her and her hands.

I drove back to the office. I went up to the city room and hammered out a couple of routine stories from the department.

Our local political man, Tom Alexander, was working at the machine next to mine. I asked him, "You think this Peckham was playing house with that Drexel dame? You think his wife's got a case?"

He smiled cynically. "The *Star* thinks so, slave. The *Star* would like to nail Peckham any way they can."

"But why?" I said. "Peckham's no bigger than some of the other grafters in this burg. Why him?"

He shrugged. "Ours not to reason why, Johnny." He lighted a cigarette and considered his next paragraph. Then he looked over at me. "Is this a professional or a personal interest?"

"Why should it be personal?" I asked.

"I don't know." He pulled at an ear. "Your tone of voice, I guess." He frowned, and went back to work.

To hell with June Drexel, I thought again. And to hell with the *Courier*. Just for good measure, I threw in the D.A.

I went over to pick up Sammy Berg and we went out to lunch. I told him what had happened.

He shook his head sadly. "You know Cavanaugh, Johnny. Dignity, all the time; ethics, every minute. He'll blow his stack."

He didn't, really. The early-afternoon edition of the *Courier* came off the press, and there was yours truly, in both poses. There was a story you could read any way your mind happened to run, though it would prove most interesting to a low mind.

I remember thinking, I hope Norah doesn't see this, just before I got the summons from R.J.

I was nervous. I won't say I was frightened, not at first, but the palms of my hands were wet, and I wanted a cigarette. In R.J.'s office, nobody smokes.

His desk is on a dais, sort of, and he's looking down at you, even if you're standing, which you usually are, in his office. I was standing now. It was very quiet in the room. He had the *Courier* spread out on his huge desk.

He's a distinguished-looking gent, tall and beautifully tailored, and not quite fifty. He was looking more than a little troubled at the moment.

He looked down at me gravely. "Mr. Shea, you . . . ah . . . appear to know this June Drexel rather well."

"I knew her in high school," I told him. "I haven't seen her much since."

"Much? How much, Mr. Shea?"

I was still nervous, but the Shea temper was climbing, too. I could feel my neck get warm. I said, "I've seen her around from time to time, and said hello. In public places, you understand. It's nothing like the *Courier* tried to suggest."

His face was still very grave. That's why I couldn't understand his smile, just then. It was a small, cold smile. "And that's all?"

"That's all."

He seemed to be trying to read my mind. He stared at me quietly for a moment. Then, "Do you think she's Peckham's girl?"

"I don't know," I told him. "She isn't working, and she isn't married. She must be somebody's girl."

He ignored that. He said, "I've a complaint from the district attorney, on you, too. I got it at lunch, at the club."

I said nothing.

"He seems to think you know more about this than you're telling, too."

I shook my head. "I don't."

He had a letter opened in his hands which he kept sliding back and forth from one hand to the other. "You know, of course, that the *Star* put Gargan in office?"

Gargan was the D.A. I nodded.

"You know that we are working with him and for him, all the time?"

I nodded again.

"Yet, you create a minor riot in his office. You lose your temper and strike a fellow worker. You embarrass not only this paper, but the district attorney." He seemed to be working himself into a temper. "I hope you realize the gravity of all this, Mr. Shea."

"I lost my temper," I said. "I wasn't in my right mind. That Drexel dame brings out the worst in me."

"Oh," he said, and was silent a moment. "You haven't seen her since high school, but she brings out the worst in you. Would you mind telling me, Mr. Shea, just how long ago you went to high school?"

"Ten years ago," I replied.

"I see." He put the letter opener down on his desk. He was fumbling with a tiny jet elephant he wears on his watch chain, now. "Ten years ago." He studied me. "You're an extremely competent employee, Mr. Shea, but still subject to discipline. Do you think a month's leave of absence would be adequate punishment?"

I stared at him. Finally, I said, "I didn't expect any punishment. I didn't figure I had it coming."

He smiled. "That would be for me to decide."

I was trembling, now. I said, "Whether I work here, or for some other paper would be for me to decide. I wouldn't work for a paper that doesn't back up its reporters." I turned, and walked out.

I expected him to call me back, but he didn't. Some of my anger held, but not enough to prevent me from realizing I'd been a fool for the second time that day.

Tom Alexander was still working on his column when I went back to clean up my desk. He watched me quietly for a full minute, then asked, "Leave of absence, huh? The Cavanaugh curse."

"I quit," I told him.

"Sure," he said. "Of course. I'll see you in a month. That's what I bet it would be. Did I win?"

"That's what he tried to nail me with," I admitted. "But I wouldn't take it. I tell you I quit."

He swiveled around in his chair. "Johnny, don't be a sap. There isn't another paper in town'll hire you. Cavanaugh'll see to that."

"Not even the *Courier*?"

"You wouldn't work for them, Johnny. Nobody with any self-respect would work for them."

I didn't answer him. I went over to see if Sammy Berg was still in the office, but he wasn't. I left, without saying anything to Foley, the city editor. He'd find out, soon enough.

I didn't go home. I didn't want Norah to find out I'd lost my job, not yet. I still had hopes. Foley would go to bat for me; the whole city room would go to bat for me. I hoped.

I went over to Mac's and had a drink. A couple of the boys were in there, and we gabbed for a while, and then they had to go to work. Mac's is a hell of a place when there aren't any customers around. I went to a movie.

It was a lousy show. They'd spent a couple of million on it, and it was full of names, and it had been promoted right up to the budget limit. It was still a lousy show. I could produce a better one, myself.

I left, in the middle of it. I walked along Fourth Street, dreaming about that, about the big names Norah and I would be entertaining in our beach home. Norah was just giving me hell, because she'd caught me kissing one of moviedom's biggest stars, when I heard her voice.

I came back to this world, and there she stood. My Norah, my lovely, red-headed parcel of honey and fire. She stood there, on the sidewalk, with a copy of the *Courier* under her arm.

"John Baldwin Shea," she said.

I looked at the *Courier*, and into her blue eyes. "You don't believe any of that, do you, honey?"

"Is it true, Johnny?"

I shook my head.

"Then I don't believe it."

I kissed her, right there on Fourth Street.

She said, "You're so impulsive. Did you have to hit that reporter?"

I nodded.

She sighed. "As soon as I saw this paper, while I was out shopping, I went down to the *Star*. Tommy Alexander told me you'd quit. You didn't have to quit, Johnny."

"I guess I didn't," I admitted.

"And now you're going back to see Mr. Cavanaugh, aren't you? You're going to apologize for losing your temper."

"Like hell," I said.

"You've got seniority there, Johnny, and they pay better than the other papers. You're not going to forget all that."

"Honey," I said, "you let me worry about that."

Her lips set primly, and she said no more about it. "Well, we'd better be getting home. Mrs. Orlow is with Junior, but I told her I'd be back in two hours. Let's go home and talk this over."

"There's nothing to talk over," I told her.

Neither of us said anything more as we walked to where the coupe was parked. Norah was beginning to get *that look*.

Silence, on the drive home. Silence,

as we walked up the flagstones to the door, while Mrs. Orlow explained that Junior had been just fine, and slept like a little lamb, and wasn't he just that, a little lamb, though? While she looked at me curiously, probably wondering how much of the *Courier* account was true.

Things the public reads in the *Courier*, they forget the next day. But things your friends might read about you in the *Courier* they never forget. They might not believe them, but neither will they forget them.

When Mrs. Orlow had gone, Norah said, "I've never known you to be this stubborn, Johnny." She paused. "But I guess there are quite a few things about you I didn't know."

"If you're talking about June Drexel," I said, "that's ten years old."

"But you went with her then, didn't you? And yet, you've never once mentioned her name."

"I've gone with lots of girls," I answered. "I've forgotten most of them. I don't know all the boys you went with."

"You've forgotten most of them," she repeated. "But you didn't forget her."

"She's about as easy to forget as a toothache," I explained. "She's a very unusual girl."

"I'me sure she is." She hesitated, about to say more. But at that moment, Junior awoke, and started to cry. She hurried into his room.

This, I thought, would be a good time to take the screens down. This would be a good time to get out of the house. I changed my clothes quickly, and went outside.

I was trying to pry the too-tight screen off the sun-room window when Norah came out with Junior. She put him in the carriage, and told me, "I have to finish my shopping. We'll be back in a half hour."

That last sentence was just by way of letting me know that our discussion wasn't over. "I'll be waiting," I said. "I'm not going any place."

She sniffed.

She and Junior were just turning the corner, when this Caddy pulled up behind my car at the curb. It was a black sedan, long and low. I went around to the side of the house, to get the kitchen screens.

I could still see the Caddy, and I could see the smallish, thin gent who got out of it. He didn't look like a banker to me. He came up the walk, and I came around to the front of the house, to wait for him.

He was wearing an expensive topcoat, and a fine hat. He was wearing a dead expression on his thin face. His eyes were brown stones.

"You John Shea?" he asked.

I admitted it with a nod.

"I'm from the *Courier*," he said. "I've got some questions for you."

"I haven't got any answers," I told him. "Does the *Courier* furnish all their reporters with Cadillacs?"

"Don't worry about that," he said. "I'm no reporter. But if you think the *Courier* isn't backing me, you could call 'em."

I took a shot in the dark. "You're from Peckham, aren't you? He owns a piece of the *Courier*, huh?"

He studied me. I looked out to the Caddy, and saw there was another man there, behind the wheel. I looked back at him.

"All right," he said, "I'm from Peckham. He's wondering about you and Miss Drexel. The boss isn't one to wonder long."

A silence. I didn't know what other instructions the little man had received from his boss, but I was sure he'd carry them out, no matter what they were. I said carefully, "I knew Miss Drexel when I was seventeen years old. I took her out, then. I haven't taken her out at all, in the past ten years, and have seen her only a few times since, always in public places. You can tell your boss he needn't worry about me."

The little man considered me thoughtfully. "He's not worried about you. But he'll want to talk to you. He'll make it worth your while."

"I haven't anything to tell him," I said. "I haven't anything he'd buy."

"He'll decide that," the man said. "Let's let him decide that."

"O.K.," I said, "but I can't go now."

"Sure. We'll pick you up tonight. About eight all right?"

"Eight's all right," I agreed. "But don't come here. My wife would worry. I'll meet you somewhere."

"You name it."

"The filling station, two blocks down, the Gargoyle station on Burnham and Diversey. I'll drive down there and park the car."

He nodded. "At eight. We'll be there." He turned and went back to the Caddy and the car pulled away.

There wasn't anything I'd be able to tell Peckham, but I wanted to make that clear. If I'd been single, I'd have told them all to go to hell. If it weren't for

Norah and Junior, the cops would be meeting the little man this evening in front of the Gargoyle station.

I still considered calling them into it, but decided against it. Peckham, I'd heard, was a reasonable man Unless opposed.

When Norah came back, I told her, "Foley wants to see me at his house tonight. He just phoned. Maybe I'll be going back to work for the *Star.*"

She looked relieved. "Be sensible, now, Johnny. Don't let your temper get the best of you."

"I won't," I promised, quickly.

Junior looked at me, and sadly shook his head.

"Nuts to you," I said.

"Blaa-a," he said, and made a face.

"Two of a kind," Norah said. "He certainly gets his disposition from your side of the family." She came over to kiss me.

There was a faint breeze, a chill breeze, coming in from the north. Most of the trees lining Diversey were bare; what few leaves were left were dry and gray. This was the pause between fall and winter, when you can expect anything in the way of weather.

I drove slowly along Diversey, planning my words for Roger Peckham, wondering if I hadn't made a mistake. At the corner of Diversey and Burnham, the Caddy was waiting.

There was a man behind the wheel, and the small man sitting next to him. I walked over, as the smaller man got out. He stood on the curb, waiting for me. He said, "We can't take you. We've got other business. But here's the address." He handed me a card. "He's waiting there."

I took the card, and went back to the coupe. The Caddy pulled away, making time through the gears, gunning.

The card read: Kensington Towers—Tower Apartment A.

Kensington Towers was a tall, showy place overlooking the bay. Tower Apartment A meant he had one of the roof apartments, complete with open porch and a view.

The clerk told me Mr. Peckham was expecting me, and indicated one of the elevators.

I went up, and up and up, the floors going by too swiftly to count, the numbers seeming to merge, almost. At the top floor, we came gently to rest.

"To your right, sir," the operator said. "Tower Apartment A."

This looked more like an entrance hall than a corridor. I turned to the right, toward A.

The door was open when I got there, and a tall, broad man in dinner clothes stood framed in the doorway. He had gray eyes, and black hair sprinkled with gray. He must have been well past forty, but he had a vigorous, alert air about him.

"John Shea?" he asked. He was smiling.

"And you're Roger Peckham."

We shook hands, and he gestured me in. "My man is out tonight," he said. "But I guess I can still mix a drink."

I guessed he could, too. He'd started out as a bartender. This land of opportunity—

It was a beautifully designed apartment, and any person with taste could have done a lot with it. All he'd done was spend too much money for heavy, carved tables and chairs, dismal drapes, and some Oriental rugs that didn't fit at all.

He mixed a pair of drinks, and handed me one. He indicated a huge leather chair, and I sat in that.

He sat down, and said nothing.

I said, "Your torpedo seems to think I can tell you something about June Drexel."

"Torpedo?" he said, and then chuckled. "Oh, you mean Mike." He shook his head. "He's quite a boy, isn't he? He sees too many movies."

I said nothing.

"Mike's my attorney," he went on. "When I was a small operator, Mike was a small lawyer, very broke. Since I've made a few dollars, Mike's tended to put on airs. But he's a good boy. He's no torpedo; he doesn't know one end of a gun from another." He chuckled again. "This whole affair has been overdramatized, hasn't it?"

I continued to say nothing; I'd been trained to listen.

"When I saw your picture in the *Courier,* this afternoon, I decided I had to see you. Since then, I've changed my mind." He paused. "My wife and I have had a reconciliation."

There didn't seem to be anything for me to say, as yet.

He lifted his glass high. "Your health."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm glad everybody's happy."

He smiled. "And now, for other business. How would you like to work for the *Courier*?"

"I wouldn't," I said. "No offense, you understand. I just wouldn't want to."

He shrugged. "I'm changing it. It's changing with me. It's going to be a respectable, family newspaper." He sipped his whisky. "I could make you a really attractive offer. You could tell the snobbish Mr. Cavanaugh to go to hell."

"I already have," I said.

He didn't seem to hear me. He was gazing at the floor. His voice was quiet. "That June," he said. "What is it she's got? Besides those damned hands of hers—"

I thought of the hands. I thought, fetishism? But they were as repelling as they were fascinating. "I don't know what she's got," I said, "but enough men seem to be attracted to her."

He looked at me gravely, and his voice was sad and quiet. "That's what I'm afraid of," he told me. "It's an attraction I'm afraid she'll always have for me."

I looked at my empty glass. He nodded toward the decanter on a low table. I filled the glass again, and siphoned in some water.

He said, "I love my wife. She loves me. I should leave this town, but I can't. I'll have to stay. And with June here—" He seemed to shudder. "Damn her!" he said.

I felt for him, but only a little. It didn't prevent me from saying, "I'd hate to be in your shoes when you tell her she'll have to work for a living."

He stared at me in surprise. It was honest surprise, I felt sure. He said, "I never supported her. I never contributed a dime to her support."

I was trying to figure that one out when the phone rang.

Peckham went to answer it. When he came back, he looked suspicious. "It's for you. It sounds like her, like June—"

"It's probably my wife," I said quickly.

It was June. "Johnny dear," she said, "would you like a story?"

Peckham was listening, I knew. I said, "I'll be home soon."

A silence. Then, "I see. Well, before you go home, drop in here, and I'll give you a story that will blow this town apart. Would that get you your job back?"

"Drop in where?" I asked.

The line went dead.

Peckham was standing in the middle of his living room when I turned around. "My wife's worried," I said.

His face was cold and set. "That was June, wasn't it?"

I said nothing.

"I told her I was seeing you, tonight. I told her, this afternoon, that I was through. Your wife doesn't know you're here."

"It was June," I admitted.

No emotion on his face, the eyes cold and bleak. "Well," he said, "good night. And good luck."

He didn't go to the door with me.

Standing in the entrance hall, waiting for the elevator, I debated the wisdom of going to see June Drexel. I thought of Norah, and forced myself to stop thinking of her. One sentence ran through my mind, around and around. Would that get you your job back?

In the lobby drugstore, I looked up the address of June Drexel.

I was coming through the lobby again, when I saw this woman at the desk. The clerk was saying to her, "I'm not sure Mr. Peckham is in, Mrs. Peckham."

The woman was a blonde, tall and poised. She said, "He's in. Ring and you'll see. From now on, he'll always be in to me."

I went out into the chill of the night. The coupe coughed a little, as I kicked it into life. I headed it down the drive, along the bay. Home? Or to the story? What did I want with a story? I wasn't a reporter, not tonight.

The coupe hummed along the drive to Iona. I turned up Iona, and followed it to Brady. I took Brady down to Astor, and turned again. On Astor and Knapp, a small apartment building. I sat in the coupe, and lighted a cigarette.

I took two puffs, and put the cigarette out. I left the car and went into the apartment building. Four names on the mail boxes of the lower hall. and one of them was June Drexel's.

The downstairs door had no lock; there was no buzzer. I went through it, and up the stairs. I started to think about those damned hands of hers, the pale hands

Her name on the door, up here, and I pressed the bell button.

I could hear it ringing, inside, but nothing happened. I remembered how the line had gone dead. I trembled, for some reason. I tried the knob; the door was unlocked.

The door opened a crack, and I could see a light on, in there. I pushed it open a little more, and saw June Drexel.

She was sprawled awkwardly on the floor of her living room. I pushed the door open all the way, and went in.

There was a hole in her forehead, a small hole. One table lamp sent a dim light through the room, and the radio played softly. I thought a .22. It wouldn't make much noise. I knew, now, why the line had gone dead. That speech of hers

had been overheard, had meant to be overheard.

My eyes went to her hands, her now-quiet, pale hands. I saw something on the floor, about a foot beyond one outstretched hand, and I bent to pick it up.

I shouldn't have touched anything, of course. I should have gone immediately to the phone. I looked at what I'd picked up, and a pattern began forming, a pattern I couldn't believe. But the pieces came in, fitting themselves, making the picture.

I was still standing there when I heard the sirens, outside. Somebody else had phoned, evidently.

I reached over and put this thing I'd found in my shoe.

Sergeant Hutson, of homicide, was the first man to come through the door. He looked at me. "Johnny, for God's sakes—" He looked at June Drexel, on the floor.

"I didn't do it," I told him.

"You phoned?"

I shook my head. "I didn't phone. The murderer probably phoned, when he saw me come here. He knew I was coming."

"We'll have to run you in, Johnny," he said.

I nodded. "Sure." I kept my eyes from her hands. I tried to feel sorry that she was dead; one should mourn the dead.

It was a narrow cell, smelling of disinfectant, of dampness, of former occupants.

It was quiet, except for the deep breathing of other cell occupants, except for the occasional sound of voices from the lighted front room.

I sat on the hard cot, my head in my hands, thinking it all out, and worrying about Norah. Sergeant Hutson came along the corridor, to stand in front of my cell. "You want us to phone anybody else, Shea?"

"No," I said. "I want to talk to him, first." I looked up. "How about prints?"

"Plenty of 'em. The damnedest thing about prints, though. They're no good unless you got somebody to tie 'em to. Or unless they're prints on file someplace. What the hell good are they without that? We can't check 'em against the whole city."

"I'll give you somebody," I told him.

"I hope so," he said, and paused. "For your sake, Shea, I hope so." He went back along the corridor.

He isn't calling me "Johnny" any more, I thought. I'm on the other side of the fence, now.

I thought about Norah, and June Drexel, about Peckham and his wife, about Peckham's attorney, who saw too many movies, about Tom Alexander and Sammy Berg, about Bitsy Donworth—and about Peckham's offer. In the adjoining cell, somebody began to snore.

Then there were feet along the corridor, and I stood up. The turnkey and Robert Justice Cavanaugh.

His voice was firm and reassuring. "Don't you worry, Johnnny. The *Star* will back you. I'll back you, all the way. It's Peckham's work; you can be sure, and—"

"Peckham," I broke in. "You were certainly jealous of him, weren't you? Until you got tired of her. Until you wanted to get rid of her."

I could see him stiffen, as the turnkey went away. He said, "What the devil are you talking about?"

"Murder," I told him. "This afternoon you worried more about what I knew about June than you did about the trouble in the D.A.'s office. That should have been a lead. You were always after Peckham. That's another. When June phoned me tonight, she knew I'd lost my job. How? How many people knew that? Not Peckham. You did. It all ties up. Peckham wasn't supporting her. You were."

"You're talking nonsense, Johnny," he said. His voice was low. This afternoon, in his office, he'd called me "Mr. Shea." He was on my side of the fence, now.

"It took a gimmick," I went on, "to show me the way. You must have dropped it; the catch must have broken."

I reached down into my shoe, where the police hadn't searched, and brought out the tiny jet elephant he always wore on his watch chain.

A silence, while he stared at it in the dim light. Then he made one more try. "It doesn't prove anything, Johnny. It will only create a nasty scandal. They won't get me. I've too much influence. But it will hurt the paper, hurt me."

"They've got enough proof," I said. "All they want is somebody to fit it."

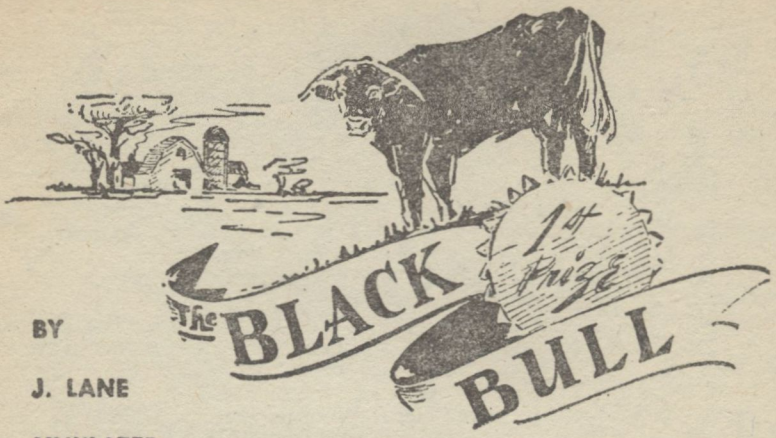
His voice was even quieter. "They don't know why I'm down here."

"Maybe not," I said. "Unless June told others what she was going to tell me. It wouldn't be so much of a scandal if you hadn't always been so noble, such a campaigner. But murder's a scandal, for anyone."

The man in the next cell rolled over, and mumbled in his sleep.

[*Continued on page* 64.

An auction sale of prize cattle with death the highest bidder . . .



BY

J. LANE

LINKLATER

I NOTICED that the sheriff had posted a man there. The deputy was standing on the edge of the crowd that surrounded the sale ring, not paying much attention to the animals as they were led into the ring, but keeping a close eye on the crowd.

It reminded me that there had been talk of trouble.

I had just arrived, was a little late, in fact. The auction sale of pure-bred Jersey cattle, imported by Kirt Mallock, had started half an hour before. The sale was being held in a grove of trees a couple of hundred yards from the main barn. At least three hundred farmers and breeders milled around the roped ring.

A mild sun poured a comfortable warmth through the trees.

Vaguely worried, I looked for Kirt Mallock himself, but couldn't see him anywhere.

A man moved up behind me. I turned quickly. The man was tall, bony, in working jeans. His hair was black and shaggy. There was a sharp belligerence in his face. His dark eyes were straight-looking, honest, and fanatically bright.

I said: "Hello, Tom. Have you seen Mallock?"

The man hesitated. He replied uneasily: "I don't keep track of Mallock."

I tried to grin at him. "You shouldn't feel that way, Tom," I said. "Kirt Mallock is a good man."

"A playboy in the cattle business," Tom Griggs sneered. "He's a detriment to us plain dirt farmers."

I said: "Well, I can't see it that way. Keep yourself out of trouble, Tom."

I wandered away, still looking for Kirt Mallock. Tom Griggs' presence at the sale troubled me. Tom was a good, square man, a farmer-breeder with no money to spare. But he, and a number of others of his kind, had no love for Kirt Mallock and resented his activities in the cattle business.

I thought they were wrong about that, but I couldn't help sympathizing with them. Kirt Mallock was a big man any way you looked at him. Physically, he was huge. And he was as generous as he was big. But he was a man of money, and a large-handed plunger besides, and could hire all the expert help he needed.

But the hostility between Tom Griggs and Kirt Mallock put me in a bad spot. As a young country agent, my job was to serve them all, rich and poor. It was the one job for which I was fitted, the job that had become my life. I had worked and studied hard to fit myself for this work of service to the farmers of my community.

And Kirt Mallock had always been helpful and friendly, in spite of the fact that frequently I did not see eye to eye with him.

I had come to a secluded spot, beyond the crowd. Under a tree two women were sitting on a bench, one middle-aged, the other quite young.

I said: "Good afternoon, Mrs. Mallock. Hello, Laura."

The older woman nodded coolly. The

younger one smiled and said: "Hello, Martin. Take a load off your feet."

"Thanks," I said. "But I'm looking for your dad."

"I think he went over to the barn some time ago."

I grinned. "See you later, Laura." She smiled. I got no smile from Mrs. Mallock, but I didn't expect it. She was all right, I thought, but too much of a society product, a handsome, beautifully-groomed woman whose main worry was trying to keep Laura from being too democratic, and also from taking an interest in a poor guy like me.

I started over toward the barn.

I had gone part of the distance when I heard someone call: "Hi! Martin Frankes!"

I stopped. It was Jake Cole, the field man for the *Bi-State Farmer*. I groaned. Jake was a long-winded bore. He was a skimpy little man with an endless supply of crack-voiced enthusiasm.

Jake had another man with him and he introduced the fellow: "This is Denton Waller, Martin. Friend of mine. Made him come out here to see something new."

I tried to be polite. "So you're not a breeder, Mr. Waller?"

Waller smiled tolerantly. He was a willowy man, well-dressed, with a thin, shrewd face. He had an easy way of talking. "Don't know a thing about it," he said. "Couldn't tell a Shorthorn bull from a Jersey heifer."

"You know Kirt Mallock?"

Waller shrugged, as if bored. "Met Mallock once," he said. "Just once. He and I don't run in the same pack. I understand he's a farmer in the country and a real estate speculator in the city. I'm a manufacturer. Lumber products." Waller chuckled. "Mallock seemed like a nice guy. A bit naive. Partial to pencils."

So Waller had noticed that. Everybody knew about Kirt's pencil-phobia. Like numerous other successful men, he was not well educated, almost unletered, had trouble writing his own name. Yet he made a practice of carrying six or seven well-sharpened pencils, quite conspicuously, stuck in his upper coat pocket.

I was very uneasy, anxious to get away and find Kirt, but I couldn't think of an excuse. I said to Waller: "You might find all this tiresome."

"Probably," agreed Waller. "But Jake dragged me out here. His paper has an office in the same building as mine, so I run into him all the time. This afternoon I wanted to play golf, but he wanted this, damn him!"

Jake jerked a scrawny thumb at Waller. "I've been trying to educate this lug. He didn't know Jerseys are milk animals, thought they were sweaters. He didn't know that all the millions of Jerseys in this country originated in the tiny Island of Jersey, off the coast of France. He didn't know—"

"Anything," cut in Waller, laughing.

I was very weary with this, especially with Jake Cole. Jake had never touched a hand to a plow in his life, yet he spilled millions of words annually telling others how to raise crops and tend cattle.

I said: "This sale is rather interesting, Mr. Waller. As Jake says, all Jersey cattle are originally imported from the Island of Jersey. The lot on sale today was imported by Kirt Mallock. It's one of the first Jersey importations to this part of the country since the Nazis were kicked out of Jersey."

"Of course," Jake said, in a disagreeable undertone, "some of the local breeders don't like a sale like this. They have their own native cattle to sell, and it makes 'em sore to have Mallock bring stuff all the way from Jersey to compete with them." He lowered his voice. "Now, there's Tom Griggs. I see he's here, watching."

"Well, I've got to get going," I said. Jake annoyed me and I wanted to get away from him. "I've got to find Kirt."

"We'll go with you," Jake offered brightly. "I want Waller here to meet Kirt, anyway."

I swore under my breath and started toward the barn, Jake and Waller tagging along with me. We entered the barn at the north end."

This barn was nothing short of a bovine palace, all brick and cement. Inside was a wide passageway, a long row of immaculate stalls on each side.

An assistant herdsman was just leading a young cow out for the sales ring. Another man was smoothing the shining hide of an almost-black bull.

I said to him: "Hello, Fred. Seen Kirt?"

Fred Lapson turned a fat, scowling face toward me. "He was here awhile ago. Didn't see where he went. Maybe over to the office."

Well, the office was at the house, some distance beyond. The quickest way to get to it was by going through the barn. Jake Cole and his friend Waller plodded right along with me. I felt irked. I didn't want to be bothered with them. Besides,

Fred Lapson, the man who had been working on the black bull, had irritated me. Fred always made me feel that way. He was Kirt's chief herdsman, a capable man, but always in a bad temper.

We had almost reached the barn's southern exit.

I was a few steps in the lead when I heard Jake squeak: "Good Lord, what's this!"

I turned to look. We had found Kirt Mallock.

He was lying in the last stall on the west, on his face. The back of his head had been beaten in. A piece of iron pipe, two-inch, about three feet long, was lying beside him.

For a moment, I felt completely lost, as if something vital had been yanked out of me. I had had a strong affection for Kirt Mallock.

From far away, I could hear the voice of Dan Massen, the auctioneer, loudly proclaiming the merits of the animal in the ring. I thought of Mrs. Mallock and of Laura, sitting placidly out there in the shade of a tree.

Then, abruptly, I swung to Jake Cole. I said sharply: "There's a deputy out there in the crowd. Tell him, quietly, to come over here. Then get into the auction ring and get Dan Massen to one side. He'll have to make up some excuse to postpone the balance of the sale. Arrange to keep the crowd away from here. But don't talk about this. Got that?"

Jake was quivering with excitement, and enjoying it. "Yes," he said.

I stared down gloomily at the body.

Denton Waller, standing quietly behind me, said soberly: "It's pretty ghastly."

I had forgotten Waller. "Yes," I said. Something about Jake Cole occurred to me, hazily. I asked Waller: "Did Jake come out from town in your car?"

"Oh, no. Jake came out in his own car, ahead of me. I followed him as soon as I could. Maybe half an hour later. He met me at the ringside."

I was eyeing the iron pipe that had dealt death to Kirt when the deputy sheriff came in. I knew the deputy slightly, a man named Stead.

Stead gaped down at Kirt Mallock. "Gosh!" he exploded. "I kind of expected trouble, but not this!"

"So you were looking for trouble?" I said.

"Sure. Mr. Mallock told me some of the breeders were sore and might try something underhanded to hurt the sale." Stead peered at me. "You know anything about this?"

I shook my head.

Stead went on: "Jake Cole told me to watch out for a guy named Tom Griggs. Said Griggs was sore at Mr. Mallock. Said he saw Griggs come up to the ringside, not long ago, like maybe he'd been over this way."

Footsteps clicked sharply down the cement aisle of the big barn. It was Jake again. Puffing along with him was a big hearty-looking man.

Jake said importantly: "I got things fixed. I told Dan here, and he handled the crowd."

Dan Massen, the auctioneer, his bulky form shaking with horror, said: "Good Lord! Who could have done a thing like this?'

"I have a good idea about that," asserted Jake. His eye caught the piece of pipe, in the straw. "Say, I've seen more of that pipe somewhere!"

"Where?" demanded the deputy.

"What the devil goes on here?" growled a voice behind me, stopping Jake's answer.

I turned. It was the chief herdsman, Fred Lapson. In a moment, Lapson saw the body in the stall. Lapson's scowling face didn't change.

Stead said to him: "You been in the barn here right along?"

"Sure," grumbled Lapson. "I been getting the cattle ready for the ring. But I didn't see nothing of this." He seemed to feel the others' questioning gaze, and he hurried on: "This is a big barn, room for a hundred and fifty head. But Kirt's regular herd ain't in here, they're over in the old barn. Only the imported stuff in here, and they're all up at the other end. Besides, there's a jog in the barn down this way. Easy for something to happen down here without anyone at the other end seeing it."

Deputy Stead said: "Guess that's right. But didn't you see anyone loitering around the barn that didn't belong here?"

"I can't recollect none."

Jake spoke up eagerly: "How about Tom Griggs?"

Lapson thought a moment. "That's right," he said then. "I guess I did see Griggs."

Jake chuckled. The others were silent. I could have cheerfully flung Jake in with a couple of mad bulls at the moment.

"So you saw Griggs?" the deputy prompted.

"Sure. Visitors was allowed in the barn here until noon After that they

was to stay out. But I caught Griggs in here, up near the cattle, about the time the sale started, which was at one o'clock. I chased him out."

"And that's all you know?" queried deputy Stead.

"That's all."

Lapson said it very emphatically, but I noticed his eyes were uneasy.

Then Jake Cole suddenly shrieked: "I knew it!"

"Knew what?" demanded the deputy.

"That pipe!" Jake was triumphant. "There's a small truck out there, where the other cars are parked. I saw it when I drove in. It's got a lot of pipe in the back, just like that piece! The car is parked not fifty yards from that door and it's Tom Griggs' truck!"

Stead frowned. "So it looks like Griggs."

"It sure does," agreed Lapson.

"Of course it was Griggs," Jake said enthusiastically.

There was silence. Then Dan Massen said sorrowfully: "It looks like Tom Griggs, all right. But I hope you're wrong. Tom's a right good man. He just takes things too serious, that's all."

I kept quiet. I agreed with Dan Massen. But, then, Dan was a kind-hearted man, and his feelings might get the best of his judgment.

Dan Massen mumbled something about having things to do and walked out of the barn. I caught a signal in his eye as he passed me, so I followed. We walked along the outside of the barn, toward the north end, until we were out of earshot.

Then Dan said: "Here's something that may have a meaning, Martin. You know that black bull?"

"The black bull? Yes."

"Well, he was supposed to be led into the ring early in the sale. Then Kirt told me to keep him out until later. That was just before I last saw Kirt."

I thought about that. Yes, it could mean something. We had come near to the north end of the barn. "You can handle the crowd, Dan?"

Dan nodded glumly and walked away.

I rounded the corner of the barn, carefully, and walked toward the north entrance. I wasn't sure about this, but it had seemed to me that Fred Lapson had had something on his mind, and had been anxious to break away from that group down at the other end.

I edged quietly into the barn, then back into a small alcove, just inside. It was dark here, but I could see down through the barn fairly well.

Presently, a man came hurrying from the south end. Fred Lapson was losing no time. He stopped at the stall occupied by the black bull, then peered down the aisle, furtively.

His hand darted into his coarse jeans and came out with a revolver. He reached down and opened the top of a hundred-pound sack of feed. He was just dropping the revolver into the sack.

I lunged out. "Let me see that, Lapson."

Lapson swung around fast. His eyes bulged in anger. Then, suddenly, he seemed terror-stricken. The fellow, I thought, was a coward; got jittery at the first sign of danger.

He pleaded: "I . . . I ain't done nothing, Martin. I . . . I found this thing."

That sounded queer to me, but I said: "Better tell me about it."

"Sure, sure. But keep it to yourself, will you? It was first thing this morning when I found it. It was right in the sack of feed.'

"Was the sack where it is now?"

"No," said Lapson. "No, sir. This is special feed for the black bull. The vet ordered it, on account of the critter is a little off condition. It was put down there at the other end, where Kirt is now. We often put supplies down there, being as it's handy to the door at the other end. This sack of feed was down there last night. This morning I brought it up here. I'd opened it last night, to sample the feed. When I stuck my hand in it this morning the gun was there!"

It still sounded far-fetched to me. "Why didn't you report finding the gun to Kirt?"

Lapson spoke through a sheepish grin: "Well, I didn't have no gun. Thought I'd like to have one, so I just kept it."

I took the revolver and examined it, broke it open. Chambers were empty. It was heavy, a .45, and fairly new. It should be fairly easy, I thought, to establish its ownership, although I wasn't sure.

I said: "Did you unload it?"

"It wasn't loaded when I found it."

I stared at the revolver, wondered what, if anything, it had to do with the murder of Kirt Mallock. It didn't seem to have a place in the scheme at all, yet, somehow, I felt sure that it belonged in it somewhere.

Lapson was pleading with me again: "You won't tell no one? I figured I'd

just drop it back into the sack, then pretty soon tell the deputy I just found it."

I thought a moment. Then I said: "We'll just drop the gun in the sack and leave it there. Don't tell anyone about it until I say so."

Lapson nervously hurried out of the barn. I kept on wondering about that gun. Also I kept trying to thing of something I had heard someone say, something in the last hour, that had registered as false to my ears. And presently the recollection began to take shape in my mind.

It was late afternoon before I saw Laura Mallock again. Law officers had come, and had gone through their routine. The beautiful Mallock farm had settled down, quietly and somberly, with the setting of the sun.

Tom Griggs, protesting grimly but hopelessly, had been arrested.

I hated the thought of Tom Griggs in jail, held for murder. It was not only that I liked Griggs, but the man had a large family, a wife who worked hard and loyally with him on his farm, and half a dozen youngsters.

I was passing the house, on the way out to the county road. Laura Mallock came out to meet me. Her eyes were lustrous with grief, but she was calm.

I said awkwardly: "I guess you know how I feel about it, Laura."

"I understand," said Laura. She hesitated, then went on: "Mother heard that you seemed to be pleading Tom Griggs' cause. She doesn't like it, Martin."

"I'm sorry."

I couldn't saw more than that.

Laura seemed to sense my troubled state of mind, and went on: "It isn't only the terrible thing that happened to dad. Oh, I know money shouldn't count at a time like this. And it doesn't with me. But . . . well—"

"Something about Kirt's finances?" I prompted.

"Yes. It will probably make things difficult for mother. Dad didn't bother mother and me with the details of his business, but he talked in a general way. You know, dad was supposed to be wealthy. He was, perhaps, but sometimes wealthy men get all their resources tied up in deals, and then a comparatively small amount of cash makes a big difference in the outcome. We know from what dad said that he was depending on the proceeds from this sale. There were nearly sixty head in the importation, counting the calves dropped since the cattle left Jersey. The total proceeds would have been over a hundred thousand dollars."

It occurred to me that somewhere in Kirt Mallock's financial affairs might lay the motive for his murder, but I had no more than a hazy idea just where.

I said: "Did your dad say what he was going to do with the money?"

"No."

One other point was working in my mind, and it was suggested by Fred Lapson's story about finding the revolver.

"Tell me, Laura," I said. "Did your dad leave the house any time last evening to go to the barn?"

Laura thought a moment. "I think so. Yes, I think he was gone about an hour." She looked up at me, and her lips tightened. "I must go. Please remember, Martin, mother feels pretty hard about Tom Griggs."

"How about you, Laura?"

"I loved my dad," she said quickly, and turned and ran to the house.

I walked over to my car. It didn't surprise me that Mrs. Mallock was bitter about Griggs. But I still had faith in him, somehow. Tom Griggs had admitted hanging around the barn, against the rules, but said he had only been trying to watch the herdsmen to see if they were covering up any defects in the animals before they were led out to the ring, so that he could tell prospective buyers. He admitted that the piece of pipe had come from his load, but insisted that he had bought the pipe in town for use on his farm, and had stopped at the Mallock place on his way home, to watch the sale.

I believed Griggs. Apparently, no one else did, except perhaps Dan Massen.

Well, it would be easy to do nothing about it, and thus avoid antagonizing Mrs. Mallock, and Laura. Especially Laura. But I just couldn't take that line. No, I'd have to do what I could for Tom Griggs, regardless of Mrs. Mallock. Regardless, even, of Laura.

And I now had a plan, based partly on what I had heard when talking to Jake Coley and his city friend, Denton Waller. I didn't have too much faith in it, but I was going ahead with it, anyway.

At mid-evening, I was waiting outside a downtown drugstore. In a few minutes the door opened and the auctioneer, Dan Massen, came out. Dan looked troubled.

He said: "I hope this works out all right, Martin."

"You phoned him?"

"Yes."

My car was at the curb and we got in. We headed out toward the country, toward Mallock farm. "You were telling me," I said, "that Kirt had you postpone putting that black bull in the ring."

"That's right."

"Kirt would have a good reason for that, of course. Looking over the catalogue, I could see the bull had a great pedigree. A fine bull. But black is an off-color for a Jersey, and that would go against him in the show ring. So, no doubt, when the bull was offered, Kirt would want to offset that disadvantage by getting into the ring himself and giving a good sales talk."

"That's what I supposed," agreed Dan.

"And the most likely reason he'd postpone it would be because he had an engagement, an important one, at the time the bull was scheduled to be put up for sale!"

"Right."

We reached the Mallock place. I parked the car on the county road and we crossed a field to the big barn. We walked into the north end of the barn. A herdsman, one of Fred Lapson's assistants, was sitting on a stool, watching the fawn-colored cattle. I talked to him, told him to go take a walk.

Dan looked at his watch and said: "We have about twenty minutes."

I found the sack of feed near the black bull's stall and made sure the revolver was still in it. I carried the sack all the way down the barn to the stall in which Kirt Mallock had been killed.

A dozen or so more sacks of feed were piled nearby. I put them all in the death stall, too, after partially emptying some of them.

A few ceiling lights glimmered down at the other end of the barn; this end was almost dark. At the back of the stall, however, was a small light, and I turned it on.

I said to Dan: "You'd better sit in here, on a sack. He'll see you right away. Take care of yourself."

"Sure," muttered Dan.

I crossed the aisle and entered one of the other stalls. This was an excellent spot for watching, unobserved. I crowded against the cement partition. And waited.

Far down the aisle, cattle restlessly pawed and grunted.

I was tensely motionless.

Then, in a few minutes, the south door opened slowly. A man peered in. He hesitated, then walked quickly toward the stall in which Dan Massen was waiting.

By the light streaming dimly, coldly, from the stall opposite, I could see Jake Cole's friend, the manufacturer, Denton Waller.

Waller stared at Dan Massen, who was still sitting on a sack in the stall. Then Dan, warily, got up off the sack.

Waller blurted: "You're no herdsman. Is this a gag?"

"No," Dan said grimly. "But you'll want your gun. It's right where you put it."

Waller quickly reached for the sack with the revolver in it. He flipped it open and took out the gun. He slipped it into his coat, and from his hip pocket took out another revolver.

He said sharply: "This one's loaded. Now talk. What do you know?"

"I know," Dan said evenly, "that you killed Kirt Mallock!"

Waller was silent a moment. He pointed his gun at Dan with a peculiar rigidity. "Listen," he said. "You thought I'd buy you off, give you money to keep you quiet. Well, I'm not such a fool. I'd have to keep on paying you, for years. No! But I'll keep you quiet with this—"

Dan lunged forward. The gun exploded. A bullet struck the cement ceiling. Dan and Waller were wrestling as I ran across the aisle. I wrenched the gun from Waller's hand, slid my arm under his chin and hurled him backward.

Waller was stunned for a moment. Then he got up, painfully, and sat down on a sack of feed.

He said bitterly to me: "So you were behind this trap?"

"Right," I said. "And what you said and did in the last few minutes convicts you!"

He didn't dispute it. "What tipped you off?"

"You said this afternoon that you met Kirt Mallock only once, at a Chamber of Commerce banquet. I knew you lied."

"How?"

"You mentioned Kirt's pencil peculiarity. It's true he carried a lot of pencils sticking out of his coat pocket. It was very noticeable, especially to strangers. But he did that only around the place here. Kirt was no yokel. At a Chamber of Commerce banquet he would have on a dinner jacket and wouldn't dream of having pencils stuck in his pocket. No, you met Kirt right here, last night, by appointment. I don't know

what for, probably some business deal that had nothing to do with cattle. We can check on that later.

"So, as I see it, you came here last night expecting to kill him. You told Kirt over the phone, no doubt, that you wanted to see him secretly, thus making sure of being unobserved. But you didn't dare shoot him for fear of attracting attention. You expected to brain him with that gun!

"You got here before Kirt and for some reason had the gun out of your pocket. Just then, you heard someone. You were alarmed and dropped the gun in the nearest place of concealment, that sack, which had just been opened. Apparently, you didn't see whoever it was you heard—I had to take a chance on that guess—but naturally you would think it was a herdsman. That is why I asked Dan to call you and tell you that he was the herdsman who saw you here last night."

"And I fell for it!" muttered Waller.

"Then," I went on, "evidently Kirt came in before you had a chance to retrieve the gun. Kirt was a big man and you couldn't take a chance with him. You had lost your chance to kill him then. So you stalled him on the deal, arranged to meet him at the same place this afternoon. Today you got here alone, after kidding Jake Cole into thinking you were coming as his guest, expecting to find your gun. But the sack had been removed. However, you saw Tom Grigg's load of pipe as you came in, and figured it was a swell substitute." I stared down at Waller. "You certainly proved your ownership of the gun."

Waller raised his head wearily. "How?"

"Dan told you the gun was where you left it. You knew you'd left it in a plain sack. It was a special mixture for the black bull, so there was no brand on the sack. The other sacks in the stall there, being regular stuff, are all printed with the brand. You didn't hesitate, went straight to the right sack."

Strain, evidently, had suddenly broken Waller. His voice was tired: "I must have been insane. But I was desperate. Kirt Mallock had an option on a piece of land. My company wanted that land badly for a factory site. My personal finances were in desperate shape. I figured if I could acquire the land, secretly, I could resell to the company at a big profit. Kirt's option would have expired in a couple of days, but I knew he'd use the proceeds from his cattle sale to renew it. And he'd hold out against me, so that he could deal with the company direct and get a full price."

Waller looked thoroughly beaten now, but I couldn't feel sorry for him; not when I remembered my friend Kirt Mallock.

I said: "Dan, let's take this fellow down to headquarters."

Kirt Mallock had been in his grave a week. Wondering how Tom Griggs was getting along, I drove around by his farm. A Packard coupe was standing in the yard, quite out of harmony with its starkly plain surroundings.

The front door opened. Laura Mallock came out. She saw me, hurried toward me, smiling.

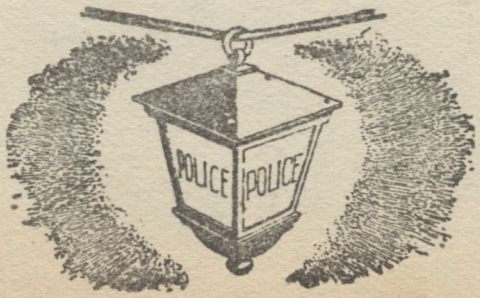
She said: "Surprised?"

"Yes."

"It was mother's idea," she said. "She thinks Mr. Griggs has real ability, if he has good stuff to work with. We need a manager at our place. I've offered him the job." She smiled again. "Mother would be glad to see you, too. She wants to thank you for . . . for the good job you did."

Laura's eyes told me that her mother wasn't the only one who might be glad to see me.

I said: "Thanks. I'll be around soon."



Joe Albemarle, detective, was a mousy little man who, occasionally, surprised even himself.

Brother Gat

By JOHN H. KNOX

I.

AT that place on Adams St. there was a squirrel that used to come down through the horse-chestnut trees at about four-thirty every afternoon. He had a regular run and it passed my second-story window. I never knew where he came from or what business he had in horse-chestnut trees, or why he had to cross the street every day just at that crowded traffic hour.

But he did. He'd come along the limbs, fierce-eyed as a ferret, and, sprawled belly-flat against the bole on his last lap before hitting the ground, he would lash his proud brush and glare with his bold, knavish eyes at the big cars passing. Then he would go like a shot, and out across the hot black pavement, right under the big wheels, it would seem. But they never hit him. You'd see him streaking over the green lawn across the way like a tawny comet and you knew he knew he had done something. And would do it again tomorrow.

I knew that squirrel was a fool. But, somehow, I admired him. In a way I can't explain, I sort of understood him, too.

I had just turned from watching him that day, taking a deep breath when he made it again, and I knew it was just four-thirty because the corn orchestra had started moaning, "Red River Valley," from the radio across the court, when I saw the girl out of the corner of my eye, and stooped to look through the window again.

She had just crossed Melbourne and come past the honka-tonk on the corner, and was now looking at the numbers on the big dingy houses. She was dressed to suit the section, or a little beneath it, but all the same I knew at first glance that she wasn't used to craning at numbers on shabby, genteel rooming houses.

My second glance was a quickie, because she turned in. Then I had a hunch. I jumped up and closed the door into my cubbyhole kitchenette and the one into my bedroom, giving my limp, mouse-colored hair a slap before the dresser mirror first. Next I moved a chair over so that the light from the window hit it, and sat down at my desk across the room and began to shuffle through a handful of old bills.

Dear Mr. Albemarle:

Your account with the Cosmo Encyclopedia Co. has been turned over to us for collection, and while we are always reluctant to—

Heels tapped the worn carpet of the stairs, faltered on the landing, came on.

"*Br—rrr!*" The push bell on the door. I had seen a gray horse that day from a streetcar window and had stamped him. I stamped him again. Boy! Is this my lucky day?

Well, I already knew what she looked like, so I watched her face and saw that her first reaction was disappointment at my washed-out appearance. That was the impression I preferred to make.

"Are you Mr. Albemarle?" The gray-green eyes, wide-spaced, heavy-lidded, felt over me with invisible antennae.

"That's right."

"The private detective?"

A little hard to believe, no doubt.

"Yes, miss."

That made it harder. I opened the door for her and, indicating the chair, limped back and sat down behind my desk and made a pretense of sticking the duns in different compartments of a file.

"You always do that?" she asked. "I mean act busy?"

I looked up but held my glance in suspension. It was the amused quirk of her full-lipped but, somehow, irresolute mouth that stung me. My eyes went over the way she was dressed, the peppermint candy blouse, the black skirt with the go-to-hell side drape that ran in ruffles from knee to hip, the sheer hose and the little

inverted clamshell hat of magenta feathers, and I started to say, "Who do you think you're kidding?" But I didn't. I grinned and blushed and said:

"Well, a guy's got to try, hasn't he, Miss—"

"Milton," she supplied, and smiled, because I had let her have that trick. "I like you," she said, and the real thing behind the mask began to shine through; the patrician face that bore the incipient weaknesses of breeding, too, the short, too-fragile chin, the fine dark hair in the loose loop behind her ears, the thin, long, tremulous fingers, moving restlessly on the chair arm now, fingers that you knew were always touching things, feeling, searching, as if avid for life but fearful, too. "I like you," she said, "because you look like a man who can be trusted. I've got a simple job for you, but one that's awful important and confidential."

I didn't fail to note her hesitant search for the short and common word. Not a good actress; too young, not more than twenty, though tall and leggy, in the graceful way a thoroughbred colt is.

"I always protect my clients," I told her stuffily, "and I don't chisel, Miss Milton."

"Tillie," she smiled, "just call me Tillie." That was a dead give-away, because if her name had been Tillie Milton, and she had been, say, a hostess at Glamourland, she'd have wanted that "Miss." "What I've got," she went on, "is just a one-night job, an hour or so, really, playing Peeping-Tom on a couple of men making a business deal. How much would that cost, Mr. Tlbemarle?"

"Joe," I said, "or Joey, if you like it. That depends on who I'm listening to, Tillie."

"You mean how dangerous it would be?"

"That's right. And is it divorce?"

"Oh, no," she said. "It might be dangerous, I mean, if you got caught, but you won't be if you're careful. As to who it is—" She hesitated. "Well, the place is Scipio Axtell's cottage on Lake Luna—" She stopped as if that might be the end of it. "Does that let you out?"

"Not necessarily." The short hairs on my neck had moved a little, like a rookie Chicago flatfoot's might have once at mention of a chore connected with a fellow named Capone. "Not necessarily," I went on, "if the fee is right. But what's your angle?"

"I'm not telling you that," she said. "A part of your job is not to ask questions. All I want is a report on what you see and hear in a certain room. When you deliver that to me you get paid."

"And if I have to back my report up later?"

"That will be another job and another fee. But I don't think the evidence will ever be used that way or made public."

My eyes narrowed a little on that. I couldn't fit Scipio Axtell in with her. I couldn't fit blackmail in with her at all. I didn't get it. But was I hesitating? About like a man reeling in a ten-pound bass, only I didn't want to horse him in and lose him.

"How much?"

"A hundred and fifty dollars," she said, completely businesslike. "Fifty now."

My ticker kicked my ribs but I kept a straight face. "That would be plenty," I said. It was too much for any "simple job" as she called it. But that suited me, too. "It's a deal," I said. "Give us the layout."

She took a deep breath and the tension went out of her. She opened her purse and came over to my desk and handed me two small photographs that looked like snapshot enlargements. I instantly recognized Scipio Axtell's fat, warty face, with the mean little eyes which the light seemed to hurt like the eyes of a newborn puppy. The other face was lean, scholarly, worried. It seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it.

"I want you to study these pictures," she said, "so that you can describe in detail the men you will see, and also because I am not going to mention any names to you."

"So that later you could swear you never told me to spy on any particular person?"

"That's right." Her eyes seemed for a moment doubtful, as if I were being a little smarter than she wanted. "And here" she laid a half sheet of notepaper on the desk—"is a rough sketch of the bungalow, with an arrow marking the window through which you can listen. The men will be there at around eight-thirty tomorrow night. Stay there until they separate. Remember every word they say. Then come to Room 415 at the Surrey Arms Hotel and write it down and get your money." She dropped a fifty-dollar bill beside the paper. "Here's the first payment. All clear?"

"Clear as glass, my part of it." I grinned.

I went with her to the door, opened it for her and closed it behind her and then stood behind the cream-painted panel and followed her down the steps

in my mind. "Now," I told her, "you can go home and get that cheap make-up off and relax, and congratulate yourself on how you found the dumb but honest private eye you needed, and how he swallowed your little act hook, line and sinker."

Then I got busy because I had a lot to do.

You do things by degrees, I've found. You don't get everything at once. You take what you've got and go from there. Here I had been waiting like a modest little spider and along had come this gaudy mayfly. She had dazzled the little spider with her bright colors and got him all conditioned for her uses and now she was pretty well satisfied with herself. Only the little spider had some ideas, too.

I summed up what I had: First, the girl is definitely quality, society, money, probably. She comes to me dressed like a tart to hide her identity. She wants to put pressure on somebody, or she's in a jam. But she's not playing it on the level with me. Her immediate need is for evidence about a big-time gambling operator and another man. Love? Society girl in affair with racketeer? Well, there had been a certain screwy thrill-hunger in her eyes all right, but I didn't think it was that. I didn't think she was in love with anybody. Anyhow, the first question was: Who is she?

If she's three-star, or important society, I thought, she's likely had her picture in some of the local rags during the past year. I went to the city library and spent an hour in the newspaper file room, turning through the society pages. No soap. The woman in charge of the department, a pleasant old biddy, chirpy as a sparrow, had been watching me curiously, so I approached her with a disarming grin.

"I guess you wonder what I'm hunting for," I faltered. "The fact is, I saw a girl drop a purse today as she stepped into a taxi. It didn't have her name or address in it, but she looked like class, so I thought maybe I could find her picture in the society section."

The old biddy smiled with that coy and wolfish look of the good-hearted *femme sole* scenting romance in another and asked archly, "You'd like to deliver that purse to her, yourself, wouldn't you? Well, about how old do you think the girl is?"

"About twenty, I'd say."

"Then she's only been out of high school a few years. You might try the recent high school annuals, Section 5-B."

That was it! I thanked her and hurried to Section 5-B. The girl might have gone to a private school, of course. But she hadn't. I found her in the 1943 Bryan High "Kaleidoscope," senior class. She was Charlotte Blythe Pendryn. She was the daughter of City Zoning Commissioner Jerome (Jerry) Pendryn. She was rich and very hotcha and a member of one of the oldest families in the state.

"Pendryn, Pendryn," I muttered, frowning. Then I remembered the near-scandal in Pendryn's recent past. About a year ago, I recalled, Jerry Pendryn's second wife—Charlotte's stepmother—a bibulous ex-widow, who had followed the artist crowd like some women follow the horses, had been burned to death in the Pendryn cottage on Lake Luna, across from the country club. It had been a matter of congratulation among friends of popular, straitlaced Jerry Pendryn, because the woman, and her nymphomaniac daughter, Hazel Chaffey, had begun to seriously embarrass Pendryn politically, as they had been doing socially for some time.

I thought about that, watching a fat guy reading travel books scratch his ankle with his other foot under the table. Nancy Chaffey Pendryn's death had been put down as a tragic accident. The one ugly hint had been that she had been too drunk to escape when the fire started. There had been a routine autopsy. So if there had been any dirty work, any covering-up, police officials or the coroner's office would be involved.

I took out the photos Charlotte Pendryn had given me and looked at the lean, scholarly man. Not a cop's face. Not a high police official or I'd have recognized him. Lawyer? Doctor?

Suddenly, I had him. Dr. Rush P. Moseby, professor of pathology and toxicology in the City University, an expert frequently called by the police and coroner on poison autopsies. Wow!

I stared at the other picture again, the powerful pig face of Scipio Axtell, sour, disdainful, and wise, like a lion-killing javelinier. Where did he fit in?

The idea began to shape up. Pendryn was zoning commissioner, and Axtell's Glamourland night club was a stench in the nostrils of pious voters. But Glamourland was, at present, beyond the city limits, on Lake Luna, too, across from the country club. But that wasn't a country club, strictly speaking, anymore, because Luna Heights was reaching out to encircle the lake with jeweled fingers. And— Wait a minute! Hadn't there been

something about a petition to take the whole lake district into the city limits? If that happened, Scipio Axtell and his half-million dollar nuisance would be right under Commissioner Pendryn's thumb. And under the law of *eminent domain,* Scipio would have about as much chance appealing a ruling as a snowball in hell. Unless—

I got up and put the books away and glided out into the bright and noisy night-time traffic, and it all swarmed round me warm and friendly as a carnival. Because now I had it. Because this was it, the big chance I had been waiting for!

I began to mentally compute the Pendryn fortune and tab off a few grand at least that were already marked, "Joe Albemarle."

I went down to Archie's Grill on Roberta Street and got a tall, cone-shaped glass of ale and a ham sandwich, cut thick, and went and sat in a booth.

I sat and thought about the girl, watching the crowds pass under the neon glare outside, watching the drinkers, the eaters, thinking: "She's the real McCoy. I'll bet she really looks like something with that tawdry get-up tossed overboard and the red goo washed off her face."

I said: "Watch yourself, Joe boy. You know what you said: No woman is going to mess your emotions up. You got a path to follow, you got a way of life mapped out, and a dark dream. You just hew straight to your crooked line!"

I liked that last.

For a man of my appearance—on the short side of average, slouchy, with an incipient bay window, sedentary rear, and the slight limp which had been genuine when I was discharged from the navy, but wasn't anymore—I could move with considerable agility on occasion. I had already cased the place that afternoon, plodding around with a catalogue of canoes, but taking no orders, and I had learned that Axtell had a watchman, but no dog. The rock wall that enclosed his whole grounds had broken bottles cemented on the top, but I had played lizard on Pacific coral reefs, so this was duck soup.

I dropped down inside, in my dark clothes and sponge-soled sneakers, and crouched in the tangle of privet to the left of Axtel's cottage. There was a light in the room I had been told was his "study," but nobody was in it yet. It was a quarter past eight.

There was no wind and the air from the lake came up with a smell like wet burlap, and the sky was dusty with stars. I squateed on my hunkers and waited. After a while I edged nearer, to a clump of crape myrtle just this side of the graveled drive. I stopped when a spurt of light boiled up from the dark beyond the iron gates and a car stopped outside. There was a mutter of voices, the gate was opened, and the car crawled in, its headlights slicing over me like a swung sword as it came to a stop before the house. A tall man with a portfolio under one arm got out and went to the front door and was admitted. A moment later the door in the lighted room opened and two men came in.

I could see the room clearly now, the shelves of books in expensive bindings, mostly sets and with the pages probably uncut, the heavy furniture, unlittered desk and swank furnishings that made it a showroom rather than a workroom. Scipio Axtell came in first, followed by a lean, tight-lipped man who kept glancing from side to side as if he expected a chair to jump at him. Axtell, his short, stout body packed into two hundred dollars' worth of sports clothes, was smiling as he gestured with a pale fat Havana.

"Now, doc," he was saying, in his deep bass that was like the crunch of gravel under big soft tires, "we gotta be friendly about this. Me, I'm back to the wall, just a small business man, you might say, fighting for his financial life." He laughed.

The laugh was dry; the look on the bony, lugubrious face of Dr. Rush P. Moseby was drier; it was as dry as a dead corn shuck in a sun-basted field and about the same color. Dr. Moseby sat down and placed his thin portfolio on the table under his folded hands and poised himself like a man balanced on a stack of wine glasses. He wasn't nervous; he was scared to death.

"Drink?" the night-club owner asked, fishing a flashy pinch bottle from the desk and pouring with squint-eyed relish.

"Er, no, thanks," Dr. Moseby said. He didn't even look at the bottle. His haggard eyes were glued to Axtell's face like a man watching a sputtering dynamite fuse he can't step on. "Look here, Axtell"—his voice made a sudden, desperate lurch—"you can't force me into a thing like this. I mean, it's not just criminal, it's rotten! You're making me sell out a man who's not only been a friend, but who is in a position to ruin me if he strikes back!"

Axtell let the bubbles in the whisky glass just reach the brim, and then put

the bottles down. "All right," he said, "you go ahead and play ball with Pendryn. Maybe he's tougher than me. After all, it was pretty cold-blooded, the way he rubbed out that wife of his that had got to be such a pain in the neck."

Moseby tried to swallow, but couldn't quite make it. What little blood had been in his face went now. "Jerry Pendryn didn't murder his wife," he said tightly. "But Nancy Chaffey Pendryn had . . . has a daughter. Hazel Chaffey is a neurotic, if not an actual psychopath. She's in a mental home right now."

"You mean the screwball girl killed her mother?"

Moseby cleared his throat and tried to dodge behind the wreckage of his professional manner. "I made no such statement. I merely say that if certain autopsy findings were suppressed, it was an act which did not harm the dead woman, and saved the horror of a court trial a girl who was not mentally responsible for what she may have done."

Axtell down his drink and his pink lips quirked cynically. "You ain't talking to a grand jury yet, doc. I never questioned your motives. All I want is the actual autopsy findings which you kept and hid away in your safe. I think you've had the good sense to bring them."

"I can't imagine how you found that out," Moseby faltered.

"I find out a lot of things. I found out your home was mortgaged. I've found out various things about your family—"

Moseby flushed. "If you hadn't threatened my family,' he said, his voice edgy and bitter, "I'd have told you to go to hell."

"You should complain to the police," Scipio chuckled. "But let's cut the funny talk, doc. I've offered you a good deal. Ten grand for the goods. If the stuff is ever made public, I'll cover you with the story that I bought it from a guy who robbed your safe. But"—he winked and rolled a match between fat fingers—"the beauty of it is, it won't have to be made public. When Jerry Pendryn sees what I've got, he'll never slap a zoning restriction on my place, you can bet. He'll squawk to you, of course. But just give him the robbed safe story and if he don't like it he can lump it."

Moseby said stiffly, "This is extortion, but—" His shrug conceded defeat. He began to fumble the latches of the portfolio.

Scipio brought from a drawer of his desk a stack of bills with a rubber hand around them. He dropped them onto the desk as if they had been so many cigar coupons. He gave them a contemptuous back-hand shove. "You don't have to take the dough, doc, if you're so squeamish."

Moseby said hoarsely, "You go to hell."

With fluttering fingers, he handed over a couple of stapled sheets of typewritten onion skin paper. Scipio took them and settled back in his chair. Moseby scooped up the money and pocketed it. Then, having jumped through the hoop, he got the courage to bark a little.

"You may regret this some day," he muttered.

Scipio looked up. A slow smile had spread over his face, seemed to diffuse its warmth through his whole body; it even enfolded Moseby in its aura. "Eh? Regret it, doc? No, no, this is swell. You needn't wait. Thanks, and drop in any time."

Moesby got up sullenly and departed. Scipio looked up just once, as if to see that the door was closed softly. It was.

I started to turn away. My job was done, as far as the hundred and fifty dollars was concerned. But my eyeballs ached for a glimpse of that paper Scipio had just finished reading. I began to toy with a rash idea.

I ducked when Moseby's car lights flashed again, and watched Scipio pacing the floor. Suddenly, he opened the door and barked, "Nichols!"

A sallow, freckled young man with stiff reddish hair came into the room. He had a bored, superior look.

"Nichols," Scipio beamed, "I got it and it's the goods. Now how we gonna approach Pendryn, make him come to me about it?"

The red brain trust pulled at his long underlip. "How about a note asking him to meet you to discuss zoning restrictions? Then just add sort of casual, 'and suppressed autopsy reports.' "

"Not bad," Scipio said, "only I think you better phone him and say that. Get to him before old Moseby tries to do something, if he does. But give him time to stew awhile, too. Tell him to meet me tomorrow night here. No, wait, make it at that burned cottage of his across the lake where the woman died. That will help drive home my point, and also, if there's any trouble, we won't have any ketchup splashed around here. Make it ten o'clock. And, oh, yeah, if D.F. should answer the phone, just mention we got a little package for him."

Nichols nodded and went out. I melted back into the shadows. Scipio would bring that paper to the meeting place tomorrow night. That was all the break I could ask. I negotiated the wall again and struck out for the concrete drive that circled the lake. I walked to a bus stop and rode downtown.

I got off a block from the Surrey Arms. It was a small swank place, and I dusted my clothes and straightened my tie before I went into the lobby. It had a lot of plate glass and dull finished silver work and a vase of fresh roses on the reception desk where a prim, toothy young man with a crew haircut gave me a doubtful glance as I barged past him toward the elevators.

I rode up to the fourth floor and stepped out on a deep springy carpet that was almost as good as an escalator and quieter. My knock at the door numbered 415 sounded almost sacrilegious.

Alias Miss Milton wasn't being coy. The door came open so fast I almost fell in. She looked bad. Her make-up had been smeared by a handkerchief and her lips looked white. Crying hadn't softened her eyes, however; they had the bleak, cold look of wet steel.

"Got it?" she asked. "Everything go off all right?"

I nodded and she opened the door and I stepped into the living room of a suite. She closed the door and turned the burglar latch and led the way across to a drum table with a handsome leather top where some bond paper was already lying, weighed with a fountain pen.

The bedroom door was ajar and, as I passed, I got a quick glimpse of the back of a barrel chair with flowered upholstery and a long, well manicured hand holding a smoking cigarette. Some tweedy shoulders supported a head of black lacquered hair. Then the girl nodded to a chair and said, "Write it out, Joe, and make it snappy, will you?"

I took the fountain pen and started scribbling and watched the surface of a polished pewter vase on the table, in which I could see the cigarette smoke drifting up from the chair in the other room. The girl went in there. She was wearing the same clothes she'd had on before, but she had dropped her prim, starchy manner. Now she moved with the long natural stride of a leopardess. A mutter of voices came to me as I wrote. I wondered why the guy didn't want me to see him.

I set down the interview between Scipio and Dr. Moseby just as I had heard it. Then I stopped. "Miss Milton," I called, "there was a little talk between Axtell and a guy I guess was his secretary after the visitor had left. Do you want that, too?"

Before she could answer, the man in the chair spoke up:

"No, we don't need that."

The girl got up and came to the door. "You understand," she said, "that anything you may have heard about Jerry Pendryn was just a lie, a dirty blackmail attempt?"

"You mean about his killing his wife?" I asked blandly.

Her eyes blazed like torches. "Don't you dare repeat—" she began, then checked herself. She frowned at me accusingly. "But I suppose you've guessed who I am now, haven't you?"

The man in the chair sprang to his feet. I saw six feet of willowy frame in tailored tweeds and a longish, bony face. The muddy-brown eyes were slitted angrily as he caught her arm and pushed her behind him. Then he glowered at me. But the damage was already done. I just gawked innocently.

"I suppose there's no point in trying to keep things from you now," he said carefully. "I'm Dilworth Fitch, Jerry Pendryn's secretary, and Miss Pendryn's fiancé. We thought it would be more discreet not to tell you that, but I suppose you aren't the type to get the smart idea of cutting in on a little blackmail yourself?"

"Me?" I wagged my head and grinned. "I couldn't get by with that sort of stuff if I tried. But I ought to warn you that somebody else may, somebody besides Scipio Axtell, I mean."

Fitch stiffened. "You saw somebody else there?"

"Well, I did and I didn't. I mean he might have been one of Scipio's guards, only he didn't jump me. I got a glimpse of him as I was leaving, when Moseby's car lights struck him."

"What did he look like?"

"He looked like a devil," I said simply.

Fitch's eyebrows crawled together like two black centipedes. "You probably go to horror movies," he said. "Could you be a little more factual?"

"He was taller than I," I told him, "and slimmer. He was dressed all in black. He had a pale thin face and a gold tooth that gleamed in the light. He was sort of sneering."

"Hm-m-m," Fitch said, looking at me hard. He spoke to Charlotte Pendryn over his shoulder, "That doesn't sound so

good. But who in hell could he be?" He came over and picked up what I had written, read it and handed it to the girl and she read it, too. Neither of them seemed surprised.

"You understand," she told me, "that we knew this was coming. We wanted proof that Axtell terrorized Moseby to get this . . . this false evidence. We got an inside tip about their meeting. As for the rest, Mr. Fitch was at the house when Axtell's threat was telephoned."

"Right," Fitch said. He swiveled a thin wrist and looked at his watch. "I'll have to go," he told Charlotte. "You know where. Get this report signed and pay him off and meet me at the house later." He triggered a finger at me. "And you, fellow, mum's the word!"

"Sure, Mr. Fitch."

She walked to the door with him. He made a little tentative move as if to kiss her but she stepped back. Then she closed the door and stood with her back to it, her hands behind her. The tenseness of fear was in her, but there was something else, too, something that seemed to smolder like a banked fire. She looked dangerous and wonderful. "You can see what a jam we're in," she said.

"I wish I could help you, miss."

That didn't even register. Her glance slid off me as if I were just another piece of furniture. She lighted a cigarette and sat down opposite me. She crossed her sleek legs carelessly and blew smoke.

"I hate half measures." Her brow was creased and she spoke to the cigarette between her long white fingers. "I hate timid gestures. I hate defensive fighting." Her eyes came up and touched my face. "That man you saw spying on Scipio Axtell, too, that skull-faced pirate. What do you think about him?"

"You never know," I said. "Axtell is tough, but he's fat and prosperous. There are lean, lone, hungry wolves that will tackle even a guy like Scipion."

She nodded, her eyes steady on me. "I got an idea you had seen that man before," she said, "that you know who he is. I think he's the kind of man I need. This business of getting extortion evidence on Scipio was Dilly's . . . Mr. Fitch's idea. Dad doesn't know we're doing it. Dilly got word through a grapevine that Scipio was terrorizing Dr. Moseby, so we tried to beat Scipio to the punch. But it's a half measure. I like to fight fire with fire. I like lean, hungry wolves."

There was a sort of purr in her voice as she said it and her eyes got the dreamy look of a cat at a mousehole. It sent an atavistic tingle through my blood, like the far-off cry of a panther. I asked:

"You mean you'd deal with a . . . crook?"

"Crook?" Her lips curled disdainfully. "Aren't they all crooks? Not dad, but the rest of them, the politicians and grafters? But I like my pirates salty, and my bandits smelling of dust and sage rather than toilet water!"

She was talking my language. It caught me off guard and I went to her and laid a hand on her arm. "Look here, I'll help you—"

She looked up, awakening from a dream. "You?" She laughed in my face. Then she was sorry. "Thanks awfully, Joe, but you're not quite the type. You're honest and dependable, though, and if I ever have another job like this one, I'll remember you."

She got her purse from the other room and paid me the hundred. She thanked me again. At the door I said, "Well, you know where to find me if you need me."

"I sure do, Joe. I won't forget."

I walked toward the elevator, thinking, "She's got everything a man could want, ever. But she's not for you. The hell with her, the little gold-plated snob!"

As for that two-bit Fitch, with his phony Harvard accent and his Lord-to-vassal arrogance, well, the idea that he can handle Scipio with extortion evidence shows the caliber of his thinking.

But, wow, wait a minute! Another idea stopped me dead in my tracks. That explanation of how he had known in advance that Scipio was cracking down on Moseby, was meeting him at a certain time, was much too thin. It was a sort of explanation a man would give a girl who didn't know too much about guys like Scipio Axtell. But I knew that guys like Scipio didn't have their plans bandied around so that punks like Dilworth Fitch could learn them. The simplest explanation was that Fitch himself had sold his employer out, had told Scipio about the suppressed report that Dr. Moseby had. Then he had hired me to spy on Scipio to prove his loyalty to Pendryn. He was playing both ends against the middle. And the girl was in the middle.

Then I remembered something else, something in that conversation between Scipio and Nichols which Fitch hadn't wanted me to write down. Scipio had said: "If D.F. should answer the phone, just mention we got a little package for him."

I thought I had it. And if I were right,

I had something on all of them, on Pendryn and Moseby and Axtell, and Fitch himself. And I would use it.

Or Brother Gat would.

II.

THE room was in an old house on St. Ignatius Court, which is a short, narrow artery between semi-respectable Adams Street and the downright unapologetic slums. It was a large sub-basement room with a gas plate and lavatory in one corner, a bed, table, and two superannuated chairs. Its main door opened on a dingy hall that smelled like a mushroom pit, but it had a back door, too, which opened on sunken steps into a sheltered court, which, in turn, gave on an alley with high board fences. By way of the alley, it was a short and easy trip to the back door of my Adams Street apartment a block away.

The room had plaster walls stained in fantastic designs by seepage and smutted from the gas plate. Light from a bridge lamp with a torn, fly-specked shade smeared the walls with dim planes of gold and made an atmosphere like an ancient wine cellar.

A man stood in front of the flaked mirror on the dresser and looked at himself. He looked about an inch taller than I am and much slimmer. He had dark curly hair that came low on his forehead and ran down in peaked sideburns along his jaw. This dark edging narrowed the pallid face and gave it the bleak color of a gnawed bone. So did the eyebrows, black and heavy. A thin, pencil-line mustache lengthened to a knife gash what otherwise would have been a small mouth; it also set off the glitter of his single gold front tooth. He gave a quick dab at the dark pocket under his right eye and began to wipe brown stuff off his fingers.

"Be bold," he said, deep in his throat, but lipping the consonants out distinctly, "but be not too bold."

He swung about with the quick grace of a swordsman, his torso swiveling easily at the narrow hips, the wedge-shaped shoulders seeming to move on floating power. He moved on the balls of his feet with a noiseless, resilient step. At the table he stopped to stare at the newspaper. A small item toward the bottom of the page held his eye:

"VOTERS PROTEST ZONING DELAY"

It told about a petition being circulated by the Lake Heights Citizens Committee to force action on the proposal to take the district into the corporate municipality. It did not mention either the night club, Glamourland, or its owner, Scipio Axtell, by name; but it spoke of the numerous complaints of influential citizens about "nightspots and illegal gambling."

"Well, what do you think, Brother Gat?" I asked in my hesitant, apologetic voice.

"What do you mean, you jerk?" he snapped in a vibrant guttural that had the hiss of boiling acid. "I'm thinking first of how much of a bite I'll put on Jerry Pendryn. Then that dope Fitch—"

"You're gonna save the girl from Fitch?"

"Save her? Whadda ya mean? I'll squeeze Fitch all right; I'll squeeze him dry and limp. But not for her. I'll squeeze Moseby and Axtell himself; I'll jiggle the strings and play them against each other. I'll play the broad the same as the rest of them."

"Tough guy," I said. "But I know that black hair is a wig, and your pirate face is mostly greasepaint, and the gold tooth is a shell. I know about the shoes with the built-up heels that cost you thirty bucks, and the Prussian officer's corset, and the false mustache. I know the way you boned up on the simple disguise tricks of the French Sureté."

"That ain't all you know, either," he answered confidently. "You know what's inside me, the hate and hardness of a kicked-around slum kid that had no breaks till the navy got him and kicked him around some more, but made a man of him all the same. Taught him to shoot and fight and take what he wants and has a right to."

"And has a right to?"

"Sure. Why not? There never was but one law, despite the pretense and the smokescreens—what you can take and hold is yours."

From a dresser drawer, he took a custom-built shoulder holster, strapped it on, slipped a snub-nosed Colt automatic into it, put on a dark coat and patted it into shape. One pocket sagged heavily.

"Well, how do I look, Joey, my little pigeon?" he asked.

"You look just like I feel," I said, "if the dopes I deal with every day could just see inside me. Come on, let's go."

We went out the back door and up the alley, making only one shadow against the pavement, pitting one will against the world.

He didn't look like me, but he was

me; or, at any rate, I had made him. A part of him had been in me always, of course, in the daydreams of an undersized kid. Then he had been just the big tough brother who fought my fights. Later, I had added to him, when the world had kicked me around, just as they had at school. But he had only materialized physically after the war, when I had seen how neatly we could work together —Joe Albemarle, the meek little private dick, drawing the suckers in; and Brother Gat, tough, competent and ruthless, bleeding them. And the beauty of it was he could wipe himself out of existence at will.

I walked past the front of my Adams Street apartment, but none of the neighbors on the steps recognized me now. At the corner I stopped and waited for a Lake Heights bus.

Lake Luna nestles in a fold of the foothills where the big wave of the Rockies ebbs down to the outskirts of Mountain City in gentle pine-furred swells. On the west, or town side, stands the country club, and a lot of of swanky estate and cottages like Scipio Axtell's. The other shoreline is wilder, with hunting and fishing lodges where the city folk can still make a pretense of roughing it. Pendryn's burned cottage had been a sprawling cabin of creosoted logs, with a basement playroom, double garage and boathouse. The latter was still standing, and a part of the cabin, its half-burned logs fallen like a roof over the cellar space. I had looked the place over that afternoon, posing as Joey, the canoe-peddler again.

The bus didn't go to the far side of the lake, so I got off at a point across from the Pendryn cabin, and watched its tail-lights bob off into the darkness. Then I went down to the lakeshore to the boathouse of a cottage I had made sure was vacant. Its lock yielded to my kit of passkeys and presently I was in a light, custom-built canoe with a powerful outboard motor on its stern. But I didn't use the motor. I paddled quietly in the shadows of the shoreline for a hundred yards and then struck out across the still lake water.

There wasn't any moon yet. When I nosed up to the Pendryn boathouse pier it was exactly nine-thirty. I had a half-hour to get set. I shoved the boat under the pier and tied it loosely to a pile near the ladder. Then I crept through the boathouse, circled the burned cabin, and looked at the big oak tree in the front yard near the road.

It was a whopper of a tree, with a thick slanted bole and big writhing branches like the arms of an octopus. I had spotted it for my purpose that afternoon. I had to figure out just where the meeting between Pendryn and Axtell would take place.

Well, the tree was in a clearing, where eavesdroppers couldn't get close. Also, it was a place where neither party could be backed into a corner. Ever notice how many "treaty trees" there are? "Under this tree was signed the treaty of—" You get the idea. I climbed up easily and found a nice horizontal limb where I could lie flattened out like my friend, the squirrel. Then I climbed down and began to poke about the wreckage of the house.

Nancy Chaffey Pendryn had died here a year ago, presumably burned to death. Would there be anything a man could learn this long after the tragedy? I poked around through charred timbers and packed ashes and came to the sunken steps leading to what had been the basement playroom. Fallen timbers and débris made a cave of one end of it, but the door seemed clear. I pushed it open, and in the damp ratty dark I detected a different smell. Maybe the ghost of the dipsomaniac Nancy Pendryn was back looking for a drink. I snapped on my small flash.

Nancy Pendryn wasn't there, but somebody else was, and he was just as dead as she was. It was Dr. Rush Moseby, late toxicologist for the police and erstwhile suppressor of autopsy records. He lay in a corner of the damp basement like a stuffed doll flung there in a careless sprawl. He was not simply dead, he was stiff, and as cold as the concrete floor. His face was a mottled bluish color; his throat, yellow as a frog's belly, bore the livid encircling mark of the rope, cord or wire which had strangled him.

I didn't have much time. I snapped off my flash. Rigor mortis had set in; he was killed the night before. He may never have got home after his meeting with Axtell. His family, if he had one, didn't sound the alarm because they knew he was in a jam, and maybe think he is hiding out. Now, who benefits by this?

Well, Pendryn benefited, of course. With Moseby dead, he could claim the autopsy report was a forgery. But Moseby's being out of the way might help Axtell, too. For instance, if Moseby had the courage to repudiate the report —well, he couldn't now. So you could

take that either way. But one thing was certain, Moseby's death made that typewritten report doubly, triply important. The man who had made it was dead; it was the whole of his testimony, his guilty knowledge. If it could be gotten hold of and destroyed, Pendryn would be safe forever.

I had spent five minutes on that. I had to hurry. There's one thing about a strangling. There's usually a struggle. Unless a body is burned afterward, there's always a chance that the victim's clawing hands may have got hold of his attacker, may have retained some clue.

I squatted and flashed the light on Moseby's taloned fingers that looked like a boiled chicken's feet. I took a penknife and began to clean his nails. They were fairly long and one had been broken. I cut off the hanging shred and let it drop into the envelope, too. Then I doused the light and got out of there.

I had just got back on my tree limb when away down the winding drive, white ribbons of light whipped up and began to lash the foliage like wind-driven banners. A motor purred, a car drew up and stopped.

It was Pendryn's big green sedan. It stopped about ten feet from the tree and its lights went off. Behind its windshield, eyes were sizing the scene up. Then both front doors opened and three men got out. One was Dilworth Fitch, another was Pendryn. The third was a thick-set man in a chauffeur's uniform, whose solid stance suggested he might have other uses, too. They came and stood leaning on the front fenders, waiting.

Nothing was said for several moments and I studied Pendryn. I couldn't see him plainly, but I had seen him before and I pictured the squarish head, set on the squarish shoulders of a short, stout body. He was the sort of man who wears a Hoover collar even in hot weather, and the same kind of double-breasted suits, and an inconspicuous Homburg set squarely on his head. When he spoke his voice seemed frayed at the edges. "I'd never have let you and Lotte do what you did, Dilly," he said, "but since it's done, it helps. I feel better about things."

From his tone, he still didn't feel so good. And when a second set of headlamps burned through the green umbrage, from the other direction, I saw the light strike the lenses of his pince nez and his eyes looked like some frightened sea-creature's, seen through the glass of an aquarium. Then the car pulled to a stop on the other side of the oak and Scipio Axtell, flanked by the red-haired Nichols and a gaunt, hunched buzzard of a man, got out and walked toward Pendryn's party.

"Hello, Jerry," Scipio said, easily. "I see you're prompt. Now, even though we are a bit at odds, I see no use wasting time making faces at each other. I've got something you want. You know all about it by now, and you know what I can do with it. What I want from you is a guarantee, in writing, that my Glamourland will not be molested."

Jerry Pendryn cleared his throat; his voice shook slightly. "How can I do that, Scipio? I don't run the town. Even if I did, it's too late to stop this move to take the district into the city. And if that happens, it will have to be a restricted zone."

"Why? You're the zoning commissioner."

"I've got to do what the public demands."

"To hell with the public. You got to protect me."

"But how?" Pendryn asked. "Even if the zoning law isn't enforced, there's still the gambling angle. Everybody knows the layout you've got upstairs there. I couldn't stop the city police from raiding you."

"You better, Jerry." There was suddenly a flutter of white papers in his hands. He slapped them and they crackled.

Even in the dark you could see Pendryn wince. "Do I get that back if I agree?" he asked in a low tone.

"You do not," Scipio said. "You do as I say and I just won't use it."

"Damn you, Scipio!" Pendryn suddenly grated. "You've pushed me too far. I didn't kill my wife. Nobody can hang that on me. But I can hang a charge of extortion on you for terrorizing Moseby. Then that extorted stuff will do you no good."

"Where's your proof?"

"I've got it," Pendryn said. "There was a witness to your transaction last night."

"Who?"

"I'd be a sap to tell you, wouldn't I?"

Scipio mulled that. "Look here," he asked abruptly. "What have you done with Moseby? Chased him off to Mexico?"

"I was going to ask what you'd done with him."

Scipio said, "Nuts! Did you kill him? He's damned sure disappeared, and that might have seemed the best out for you."

"Or for you," Pendryn growled.

The silence bristled. Pendryn's chauffeur and Scipio's tall bodyguard faced each other like gamecocks. Nobody noticed the grayish figure moving out from the shadows of the burned house until a flashlight blazed and a woman's voice spoke: "Scipio Axtell, don't move. I've got you covered, and I'll kill you. I want those papers."

Sheer astonishment held them for a moment. Then Pendryn gasped, "Lotte! What in God's name—"

She was up near them now and she had not been wolfing. Reflected light from the flash showed the big army .45 which looked like a Howitzer in her small fist.

"Give me the papers," she repeated steadily.

"Lotte, please," Pendryn quavered.

Then Fitch did it. He was the nearest to her and she wasn't watching him. He kicked out a long leg against her shin bone and tripped her. As she lurched forward, Axtell grabbed her gun and Nichols grabbed her arms. The gaunt bodyguard swung his gun on Pendryn.

"Don't hurt her," Fitch snarled at Nichols. "I did it just to keep her from getting killed, but if you get rough—"

It was as far as he got. I had dropped down silently from my tree limb. I had my automatic in my left hand and my right hand in my coat pocket and I spoke unhurriedly:

"Just hold the pose, folks. I'm taking a hand."

They whirled to face me, startled into rigidity. I let my right hand come out of my coat pocket and I tossed a hand grenade into the air and caught it playfully. The flash had fallen from Lotte's hand to the ground, but it gave them enough light to see what I had.

"Turn the girl loose, Rusty," I told Nichols. He did and when she drew away, I said, "Beat it," and she backed off toward the house.

"Now," I told the rest of them, "I wouldn't try any fancy-pants stuff. Even smart guys get hurt when these pineapples go off. You just stoop over, Scipio, and lay those papers on the ground. Then throw your gun on them. The rest of you can throw your guns there, too. Afterward, you can all reach up in the air and march toward the house. And don't forget to look in the basement."

They obeyed. Guns hit the papers like coins in a crap game. Straightening up, Scipio snarled at Pendryn, "Outfoxed me, didn't you, Jerry? But it won't get you anywhere."

"I never saw this fellow before," Pendryn swore.

"I do this for fun," I told them. "I just got out of the bughouse, and I'm celebrating."

They were moving toward the burned house. When they got halfway there, I flung the grenade. When it hit the timbers the whole bunch went flat on the ground like ninepins. The grenade was a dud, of course, but they found it out too late. I scooped up the guns, flung them left and right, stuffed the typewritten papers into my pocket and headed for the boathouse.

I climbed into the boat and eased it out, and was starting back toward the motor when the girl rose up out of the boat's bottom.

It startled me and I swore. Then I saw that her eyes were shining like stars. "Golly!" she breathed. "Golly, were you grand! What's your name, big boy?"

"Call me Brother Gat," I said. "And get out of the way."

I shoved her aside and reached the motor and jerked the starter cord. The boat shot away from the shore with motor popping and churned foam creaming her stern. I let it get a little past the middle and then, in the dark, I cut off the motor. The girl had been watching me in a silent crouch.

"Why did you do it?" she asked in a whisper. "Did dad hire you? I can't believe he'd have the nerve—"

"He hasn't," I said. "You've got all the nerve in the family. You got too much." I took hold of her left wrist and swung it around behind her and gave it a twist.

"Now," I grated, "why in hell did you kill Moseby?"

It must have hurt, but she didn't whimper. A sort of hiss came from between her clenched teeth and formed the words:

"Moseby killed?"

"Sure. Strangled. In the basement of that burned house. You knew he had sold your dad out. You could have done it easy by getting him there in the dark, working from behind. Then you could have claimed those papers were a forgery and your dad would have been safe."

"You think that I . . . that I could kill a man?" she asked. Her tone was not entirely an injured one. I didn't think she'd killed Moseby, but I wanted to find out for sure.

"You could try. You might just accidentally succeed. Amateurs sometimes do. You're a fool, but you've got nerve."

"Thanks," she breathed. I had let up on her arm, but she didn't mean that.

"Thanks for saying you could be a killer?"

"Well, that's better than being a molly-coddle, isn't it?"

"It is from my angle," I admitted.

She was looking at me intently. I moved back.

"What are you going to do with the papers?"

"Give them to you because you got pretty eyes," I sneered.

"Oh, I knew you wouldn't do that. But would you sell them to me?"

"I got to eat. I eat expensive."

"How much?"

"Why, I could let your old man off for fifty grand, I guess, just because you're such a sweet, timid little number."

"What are you so bitter about?" she asked. Then, thoughtfully, "Fifty thousand. No, you couldn't get it."

"Why not? Your old man's got plenty sugar?"

"Oh, but not that much, not in cash."

"Let him sell something."

"Oh, but you see," she said, "it isn't as if he were really guilty of murder."

"Like hell he's not. He's guilty and he'll pay through the nose. But he can buy me with money. He couldn't buy Scipio without wrecking his political career. Now I want you to tell him that. Tell him my price. Tell him if he wants to do business, to run an ad in the personals, in tomorrow's *Express*, saying: 'B.G. All is settled. Come home—Edgar.' Then I'll contact him about details. Can you remember that?"

"Sure," she nodded. She was silent a moment. Then she asked: "Would you include killing Scipio at that price, too?"

I had to catch my breath on that one. "You mean your dad would hire me to do that?"

"He wouldn't," she said softly, "but I would."

I picked up the paddle and moved to the back of the boat and began to paddle. I had heard about all I wanted to of that. I said, "The answer is no. You talk like killing was a kind of game."

"Aren't you a killer?" she asked. It sounded disappointed.

"Shut up," I said. "We're getting close to shore."

We were. I had shut the motor off in the middle of the lake so that they would know it hadn't run long enough to get me across, and would figure I had landed on the other shore. Now I pushed the boat into a tree-shaded inlet and told her, "Get out."

She did and I followed her. But she didn't go away. She just stood there waiting for me. "All right," I said, "what are you waiting for? Thumb yourself a ride and get back to town."

"When will I see you again?" she asked.

"You won't. Just tell your old man what I said, and I'll deal with him."

She stood still a moment and stared at me. "I think you're perfectly horrid!" she said, and slapped me. She moved on, but stopped again. "Look here, how did you learn about all this? Did Joe Albemarle tell you?"

"Who's he?"

"A private detective. A weak sister. You might have scared him into telling."

"I never heard of the jerk," I said. "Beat it, will you? I want to change clothes."

I did, but not there. I let her get out of sight in the trees toward the road, then I followed the dark shoreline to the place where I had hidden the cardboard box in some brush that afternoon. I stripped off my dark clothes, wig, corset, built-up shoes, and rid myself of the mustache and the gold tooth shell. I went to the water's edge and washed, then packed all the stuff I had taken off in the box. I wrapped it in a paper I had already stamped and addressed to Joe Albemarle at a suburban post-office.

I then dressed in the clothes I had taken out of the box, tan linen suit, oxfords and panama. I kept my gun. I followed bridle paths around the lake to the country club. There was a dance going on and nobody noticed me. I didn't think there had been time yet for a real force of cops to answer Pendryn's telephoned alarm, if he had telephoned one. Just past the country club there was a big package-type mail box. I dropped my package into it and strolled on toward the bus stop, lipping a cigarette.

When I reached the bus stop, a prowl car had pulled up there and the cops were talking to the club watchman.

"Hey, Joe," one of them asked me, "have you seen a slim guy dressed in black, with a gold tooth and a little mustache?"

"How'd you know my name?" I asked.

The cop laughed unflatteringly. "Holy cripes! Answer the question, fellow."

"Well," I hesitated, "I wouldn't want to get in dutch with any gangsters, but there was a guy sorta like that who come up from the lake behind the club a few minutes ago and got into a parked car and drove off fast."

"You wouldn't have thought to get the license?"

"No. Should I? It was a gray coupe. What's happened?"

They didn't bother to answer. "Dumb cluck!" I heard one of them mutter as they drove off.

Next morning the papers were full of the Moseby killing. Both the Pendryn and the Axtell factions had ganged up nicely on the story that was served up to John Q. Public. Axtell, it seemed, had been driving from his cottage to his night club when the gold-toothed hijacker had held him up. Just then Pendryn and Fitch had happened along. Pendryn's chauffeur had pulled a gun and the hijacker had fled toward the burned house. It was while searching for him that the party had found Dr. Moseby's body. Later, they had heard a motor boat start, and it was assumed that the hijacker had escaped that way. It was assumed, too, that he had killed Moseby. Why he should have hung around the place a day after killing him wasn't explained. But a lot of things don't get explained in newspaper reports of murder cases.

What surprised me more than this ingenious dish of hash was the item I found in the personal column of the *Express*. It seemed that somebody named Edgar wanted somebody called "B.G." to come home.

That was a lot quicker action than I had expected. It indicated that Jerry Pendryn was plenty anxious to talk business.

I glanced idly down the column and my eye stopped at another curious item, It said: "Goldie: Don't let J.P. kid you. I got the cash. Call me. Ashby 6298."

I frowned at it thoughtfully. "Goldie," and the initials "J.P.," made something of a coincidence. That "Goldie" could be to catch the eye of a gold-toothed bandit, and "J.P." could be Jerry Pendryn. And the gist of the thing could be that somebody was ready to outbid Pendryn for the stuff I had.

Who? Well, Scipio Axtell wouldn't be a bad bet. If so, things were certainly shaping up for me. I jotted the number down, poured myself a fresh cup of coffee, and started re-reading the two sheets of onion-skin paper I had risked my neck to get.

It was worth it. I had puzzled my head in advance to figure what sort of guilty evidence Moseby had found and suppressed. Naturally, I had thought of poisons, since Moseby was a toxicologist. But the thing was a little more subtle than that. What made the report dangerous to Jerry Pendryn was something Moseby *hadn't* found.

He hadn't found any excessive quantities of carbon monoxide in the blood of the corpse. And he had not found any small carbon granules in the bronchial passages and lungs. Finally, he had found fat globules in the lungs.

Now that may not sound like much, but what it meant was plenty. Nancy Chaffey Pendryn had been so badly burned that any surface wound would have been obliterated. There hadn't been any fractured bones. But she had been killed before the house was burned, and she had been killed by physical violence, and here is why:

Any fire creates excessive carbon monoxide, for which the red cells of the blood have a peculiar affinity. If she had been alive at the time of the fire, excessive carbon monoxide would certainly have got into her blood. The same thing went for the absent carbon granules which would have been present if she had breathed smoke. She hadn't, so she had already been dead. And the fat globules proved she had been killed by violence, because when any of the soft tissues of the body have been injured, fat is taken up by the blood, carried to the heart, then to the lungs, where small blood vessels strain it out, and where it can later be identified by special stains. There was one other thing—there hadn't been enough alcohol found to indicate that she was dead drunk.

This didn't prove that Jerry Pendryn had killed her, of course. But Jerry had benefited most, as far as anyone knew. And Jerry, undoubtedly, must have had the opportunity.

And how had she been killed? That had to be a guess. No bullets. No fractured bones. No flesh wounds severe enough to show on the burned remains. No poisons. Strangulation forced itself on you. Quite a lot of carbon dioxide in the blood added weight to this. Also, you couldn't help thinking of the way Dr. Moseby had died. Killers tend to be creatures of habit, like everybody else.

I put the papers away, poured another cup of coffee, and got my laboratory ready. I mean my cheap microscope and the fingerprint equipment, and a few simple chemicals for making *leuco malachite* blood tests.

I got out the envelope in which I had placed the cleanings from Dr. Moseby's nails and began to examine them. The

most interesting thing I found right off was a short fragment of hair, caught in the broken nail I had cut away. Under the microscope it looked like a section of stovepipe with ragged ends. It was much too thick for human hair. But I was able to see that it had an interrupted rather than a continuous medulla. This is more characteristic of human than of animal hairs, but the hair of monkeys and horses is often like that, too. I am not enough of an expert to determine the medullary index, so I let it go at that. Horsehair, I guessed. Which didn't tell me a lot.

My doorbell rang. I jumped up, gathered my stuff together, locked it in the cabinet, and went to answer the call, limping.

I was not surprised to see Lotte Pendryn, nor to see her pale and distraught and quietly dressed this time in a blue tailored suit. But I was surprised to see the haggard, embarrassed man behind her—Jerry Pendryn, her father.

"Joe," she said, "this is my father. I'm sure you've read all the horrible news in the paper. I thought . . . we thought we ought to talk to you—"

"Sure," I said. I nodded to Pendryn, since he didn't offer to shake hands. "Come in."

She came eagerly, Pendryn stiffly. He sat down on the edge of the divan and placed his hat carefully on his knees, as if he were afraid of germs. His face looked older; the gray jowls dragged the jaws down despite his tight-clamped mouth: His deep eyes looked haunted, but they had a certain cold opacity, too, which suggested a stubburn man pushed almost too far.

I sat down at my desk and waited politely.

"Joe," Lotte said, "we're in a terrible jam. You may have guessed that the newspaper story of the holdup wasn't all of it. Briefly, Scipio was blackmailing father with those papers he got from Dr. Moseby, and this gold-toothed gangster appeared and took them away from Scipio. And now he's blackmailing us."

"Is that any worse than Scipio?" I asked.

She frowned. "We don't know yet. But it's probably just as bad. You see, I talked to the man quite a while. He, well, he sort of held me up, too. And he seems utterly ruthless—"

"He tried to hurt you?"

She dropped her eyes. "No, no. I mean he wants fifty thousand dollars, and he means to get it. He said for dad to put an ad in the paper if he agrees, and dad has done that."

"Then you mean to pay it?"

"No," she said. "That is, we can't. Dad simply can't raise that much, even if he were willing to pay that much. We thought maybe you could—"

"Could trick the gangster?" I shook my head. "Miss Pendryn, I don't want to get shot."

"Well, but maybe the man would take less. I mean, suppose you met him with two or even five thousand dollars. Wouldn't he take that?"

"Sure, he'd take it. But would he give me the papers?"

She seemed disappointed. "Of course, he is tough. And you— Well, Joey, what can we do? Father hasn't been guilty of anything, but those papers will ruin him."

I looked at Pendryn. He hadn't said a word. "Could you," I asked, "get maybe half of what he asks?"

Pendryn scowled. "That's still a hell of a lot of money."

"Sure. So maybe it's not worth it. Let him crack down. After all, you're innocent." I watched him with a bland, steady gaze.

He winced at the words, colored. "Certainly, I'm innocent. But I can't afford—"

"Looks like you got to afford one thing or the other," I pointed out. "I'm not advising you. But if you could raise half of what he asks, I'd try, with some hope of success, to get him down to that."

Pendryn got up. "Well, if that's all you can suggest—" He looked at his watch. "I have an appointment. After all, the man hasn't sent me any instructions yet. So until then—"

"We'll think it over, Joe," Lotte said, "and see you again." They started for the door.

I thought it over, standing in the center of the room, hearing their footsteps on the stairs. Sure, I'd take the twenty-five grand. I'd take the dough from that other party, too, if I could manage it. I went back to the kitchen. But I hadn't been there ten minutes when the bell rang again.

It was Lotte. She had come back, alone. She pushed impatiently into the room, flung her bag on the divan and flopped down beside it. "I had to come back, Joey," she said, "after I got rid of him, because I didn't tell you all of it. You see, I got pretty well acquainted with that fellow last night. I intend to meet him again. But I couldn't tell dad. What I want is for you to contact him

and arrange for me to meet him and deal with him."

"You?" I looked startled. "But how could you—"

"Handle him?" she asked. She got up and paced the room with quick, tigerish steps. She stopped and smiled and that yellow cat look was in her eyes. "He's tough all right," she said. "But I can handle him. You know why? Because I like him!"

"What?" I sat up. It made me mad the way this girl got under my skin. "Look here," I said sternly, "you've got a lot of silly schoolgirl notions. Robin Hood, and that sort of thing. Men like this fellow aren't Robin Hoods; they're predatory beasts. After he'd got what he wanted from you, he might even kill you to get you out of the way."

It didn't faze her. She stood there with that dreamy grin. "He's that kind all right. Still, I like him, Brother Gat."

"You'll get no help from me," I said and meant it.

She eyed me slyly. "No?" She sat down, lighted a cigarette. "All right, Joey, then I'll have to do it alone. You see, I've got some evidence which I think might clear dad completely of any suspicion in Nancy's death. I haven't told anyone. I haven't been able to get anything from the evidence, but I think somebody else might—"

"Now you're up my alley," I said. "Let's have it."

She shook her head. "Nope. I made up my mind there's only one person I'll show it to, Brother Gat. You know why? He's the kind of man who will act on what he finds, act beyond the law if necessary."

"If he does, you'll pay plenty."

"All right," she said, "so I'll pay plenty."

It was my turn to get up and pace the room. I began to lash at her irritably. I lectured her, argued with her, threatened to tell her father. None of it did any good. Finally, in a sweat, I said, "All right. Call me as soon as he phones your father. Let me know what he says and I'll try to contact him and arrange the meeting for you."

She went out, looking as if she had just won my shirt and shoes. Actually, it was a little worse than that.

There was only one hopeful angle. This time, when I met her as Brother Gat, I would give her a cure for her romanticism.

I began to work the details of the meeting arrangement out. First, I call Pendryn, as Gat. I take a chance and leave him a number to call. Lotte will then tell me, Joe Albemarle, what the number is. I will simply pretend I called Brother Gat there. If Jerry Pendryn tries to trace the number he won't get anywhere. Then I'll tell her the meeting is arranged, and where to come.

While I was still thinking, the phone rang violently. I raised the receiver and a voice, muffled and gruff, asked, "Joe Albemarle?"

"That's right."

"Listen. I know the Pendryns have just been to see you. They want you to contact this Brother Gat for them. Are they going to pay the fifty grand he's asking?"

"You want that information," I asked sweetly, "for nothing?"

"No," he said. "I know Jerry Pendryn is too tight to pay. But I'm not. Here's what I'll do: I'll give you fifty grand for those papers. If you can get them cheaper, you can keep the difference."

"Why don't you make the deal with Brother Gat yourself?"

"I'm trying. I put an ad in the *Express*, addressed to 'Goldie.' But I haven't got a bite on it. But he's sure to contact Pendryn."

"If he does, where can I get in touch with you?"

"Ashby 6298," he said and hung up.

I thought about running that number down, but didn't figure it would do any good. It would be some place rented under an assumed name. Especially, if it was Scipio's crowd, they wouldn't leave any loose ends hanging. And I had heard that voice somewhere.

I went back to my job in the kitchen. The débris from under Dr. Moseby's nails seemed to be mostly charcoal from the burned timbers of the place where he had died. The piece of horsehair was about all I got. I thought of horsehair sofas, and of the horsehair padding used in the shoulders of men's suits. Maybe Moseby's own. But no, I recalled his round, sagging shoulders and the light summerweight fabric of his gray coat. I didn't think it had come from there.

I went back to the problem of arranging the meeting between Lotte and Brother Gat. I asked myself: "Why do you have to do it?" Well, to see what that evidence was, of course. Maybe a new blackmail angle.

Brother Gat's sneering voice answered, "Don't kid me. You want to help the girl. Didn't I tell you to watch that stuff?"

He had. And it had me worried.

III.

THE room I rented for the meeting was near Brother Gat's place on St. Ignatius Court. That was risky, but I wanted it close enough for a quick change of identity to be made. It was a hall bedroom in a dingy rooming house. It had a dim light, but I changed it for an even dimmer one. I couldn't risk her seeing me too well.

The first thing she said when I let her in was, "Why, you're right here close to Joe Albemarle's place."

"Sure," I growled, "but I just rented the dump a couple hours ago. You got the money?"

I had propelled her into the room and closed the door, and now she turned. "Well, I like that! You start talking about money as soon as I come in."

"What else about you would I be interested in? I don't go for hothouse frails that think they're tough. Go on over to the table there and lay the dough out."

She went to the table and I stayed where I was, near the door and at a safe distance. She didn't seem nervous at all. She opened her purse and began to count out bills. It made quite a pile. When she got to ten thousand she stopped.

"Where's the rest of it?"

She smiled sweetly. "That's all. Honest, that's every cent we could get together in cash."

"That's just too bad then, ain't it?"

"You mean you won't—"

"You do catch on fast," I sneered. "Just because I offered to take half, you think you can chisel me down to peanuts?"

"That wasn't it at all. We simply couldn't— But, of course, if you won't accept this—" She began gathering the money up.

"Hold on, sweetheart," I said. "It costs money just to waste my time."

I started toward her. She didn't look scared; but she clutched at the bills. "I'll scream!"

"You scream," I said, "and I'll strangle you—like Moseby."

"You didn't strangle him. And you won't strangle me. But I won't scream either."

"That's better." I stopped by the bed.

"I won't scream," she went on, "because I was going to give you the money for another job, anyhow. You may be a killer, but you've got some sporting blood. Or have you?"

"What's the deal?"

"Something," she said, "that might make you more money in the long run. My father didn't kill Nancy Chaffey Pendryn. But somebody did; they say Dr. Moseby's report proves that. Well, suppose you could find out who did kill her? Suppose it's somebody with money? Couldn't you blackmail them?"

I leered at her. "You sure got a nice little criminal mind all right. But you're doing a lot of supposing."

"Maybe not," she said. "Nancy wasn't robbed. She had on a diamond ring when they found her. An ordinary burglar would have taken that or anybody who was small fry. That's why I say somebody with money may have done it."

"But why?"

"Nancy was a tramp," she said. "She ran around with a crowd of rich idlers who played at being artists and writers. She made a play for all the men. Maybe she got in somebody's way."

I nodded slowly. It was an angle. "All right. What else you got?"

"This," she said, and reached into her purse and took out a folded piece of paper.

It was scorched and dirty, and had been wadded up and later straightened out and folded. She spread it on the table and I stepped near enough to see the typewritten words:

THE MURDER OF A SLUT
by $—(—Lé—Lé—é&

That was all. I looked at her in astonishment. "It looks," I said, "like some drunk started to write a story, and then gave up and decided just to play with the keys."

She nodded. "It does. And it could be. It was the last thing Nancy Chaffey Pendryn wrote, I think. I found it in the bushes outside the house after the fire. I know she had been drinking that night. And she did write stories. The title was characteristic of her. She always tried to be shocking. And she had her portable typewriter here; it was found in the ruins. But suppose this paper means more than that?"

"I don't follow you."

"Well, consider the situation. There had been a party there that night for her crowd. They were all able to alibi themselves, I mean that they left her here alone, except for her daughter Hazel, my stepsister, who had passed out in a car in the garage. The last witnesses say Nancy was sitting at her typewriter, drunkenly boasting that she would write a story.

"Well, there she is, we'll say, and her killer comes in. Some talk takes place,

and suddenly Nancy realizes that this person is going to kill her. Nobody's near enough to hear her scream for help. But she decides that anyhow she'll leave a clue, to trap her killer. She taps out the title, 'The Murder of a Slut, by—' Then she pretends to be so drunk she just hits the keys at random, but really—"

"But really she's tapping out a code word?"

"That's it. And it would be like Nancy. She was a screwball, but she was clever. And referring to herself as a slut would have appealed to her twisted sense of humor."

"Still," I said, "that code business is far-fetched. You do some thinking to work out a code. Have you tried to decipher it?"

She nodded. "Every way I could think of, the simple ones, like having numbers stand for letters, then numbering from one end of the keyboard. But I couldn't work anything out."

I stared at the scrambled symbols: "$—(—Lé—Lé—é&." I said, "You didn't show this to the police. I'll tell you why. One thing stands out at a glance, the repetition of the symbol Lé. If we consider the repeated dashes as separating letters, we've got a five-letter word with the two letters next to the last one doubled, just as they would be if the word were 'Jerry.' "

She paled, but nodded. "You're right. That's why I didn't show it to anyone. But actually, it could fit a lot of people. It could be 'Dilly.' It could be 'Lotte.' Or," she added slowly, "it could be the nickname of Nancy's own daughter, Hazel. She called her Zelly. Nancy was great on nicknaming everyone."

"Wouldn't she have thought of that confusion in deciphering her code?"

"But, as you said, she wouldn't have had much time to think. Anyhow"—she handed the paper to me—"maybe you can figure the thing out. If so, I won't begrudge you the money. Will you try?"

I took the paper and thrust it into my pocket. I gathered up the money, too, and stepped back. She didn't try to stop me. "For a girl with a criminal mind," I said, "you're pretty trusting. Why didn't you give this stuff to the little jerk of a detective who arranged this meeting for you?"

"Oh, Joe Albemarle." She frowned.

"You don't think much of him?"

"He's all right, a cautious little plugger, but"—she looked up at me, her face flushed, her eyes filled with a crazy thrill—"but he's not exciting, like you."

I thought maybe I'd better teach her a lesson. I reached back and snapped off the light. She didn't move. I went over and pulled her roughly to me and folded her in my arms. I snapped her head back and kissed her hard on the mouth.

She didn't struggle. She lay against me and kissed back. I was out of breath and quivering. I pushed her away at arm's length and gripped her shoulders. "You damned little fool!" I grated.

"You . . . you don't like me?"

"You've got no brains," my words were a gruff mutter. "Don't you know I'm going to keep your money and do nothing? Do you think you can buy me off with kisses?" I laughed.

I felt her stiffen in my grasp. "No," she said, "no, I didn't think at all. I just know I like you, that you're the kind of lean, hungry wolf I've always wanted. Look, you think I'm dumb. I'm not. I know what I'm doing. I just don't care—"

"One of these disillusioned wenches?"

"If you want to call it that. I was reared to be that silly monstrosity that's called a lady, stuffed with a lot of nonsense I later found was false and hypocritical." Her voice caught, dropped to a throaty purr, spilling all her bitterness out there in the darkness. "I found the principles they talked were lies, their tin gods and angels nothing but hollow shells and four-flushers, their statesmen nothing but racketeers, their civic and social leaders cheap pharisees—"

"Hold on," I checked her. "I think I can simplify it. I think you got disillusioned about the time your stepmother was killed, didn't you? You knew she had it coming, but you couldn't quite square the idea that your father might have done it—you still can't, quite."

She drew in her breath sharply; she began to shake. "No, no, he didn't—" Her voice broke on a sob. "I won't believe it!"

"You've as good as admitted you do," I said.

"No," she said, "because I know who did kill her. Her own daughter, Hazel Chaffey. Dad has been trying to shield her. He's got her in an asylum now."

"Why didn't you tell the cops Hazel did it?"

"Well, I . . . I'll be honest. Hazel is a tramp, worse even than Nancy was about men. There's really something wrong with her. But she never pretended to be anything but what she is; she's more honest. I never could hate her like I hated Nancy. And anyhow, she was probably too crazy drunk to know what she was

doing." She paused, rigid, breathing hard. "Help me, will you?"

I stood there in the darkness and my thoughts gnawed at me like rats. On the one hand, I felt a gloating sense of power, such as I had never felt before. It was like liquor or a drug. Here was a girl who represented wealth and society and all the things I hated. She was at my feet, she was putty in my hands. And I wanted her and yet I didn't want her. I was Brother Gat now, physically and mentally. But I was still Joe Albemarle, too. And we both couldn't have her.

To hell with Joe. I'll take her and I'll kill Joe off. She wouldn't have Joe, anyhow. She wants me, Brother Gat, because she's like me. I'm something that boiled up from the bottom; she's something that was sucked down from the top. But by the same currents of disillusion. And we have got to the same place, the borderland, the melting pot, where driftage from the two worlds fuse—crime. Crime, which is, after all, a kingdom of the mind.

"Look here," I said hoarsely, "you want to take the jump? I mean, for good?"

She understood. "Yes!" she breathed without a moment's hesitation. "Yes, with you!"

I let my hands slide down along her arms. My fingers tingled and trembled. I gripped her wrists and drew her toward the bed. I turned her loose and slapped her hard on both cheeks and shoved her off her feet. She fell backward onto the bed and the cheap springs rattled like broken clock parts.

"Sober up, you little dope," I snarled, and I headed for the door.

My heart was pounding; I heard her harsh breathing behind me, but not a word. I got to the door and my hand was on the knob before my head cleared enough to register impressions. Then the danger signal got through to my brain like a whirring traffic light. Nothing but a faint scrape of feet in the hall. But I was suddenly cold, alert, my gun jumping into my grip.

I ripped the door open. Feet beat the carpet at the back of the dim hall. A door opened there and a scuttling figure showed for a moment against the alley light.

"See?" I snarled at myself. "You almost played hell, didn't you? Messing with a woman. And maybe that woman framed it. Maybe this snooper at the door was her accomplice."

I started to turn back, but changed my mind. I went out and closed the door firmly. What the hell? I was covered. There wasn't a thing in that room back there to identify me in any way. There wouldn't be anything in Brother Gat's room to identify me either after tonight. Tonight I would make a quick cleanup of all the chips in sight, and Brother Gat would just fade out. For a time at least. Maybe for good.

I went by the basement room, just to see that everything was all right there. It was, and I headed for a telephone booth in a drugstore two blocks away. I closed the door and called Ashby 6298, the number my anonymous caller had given me, and the same one that had been in the newspaper ad for "Goldie." A voice answered right off. He had been waiting.

"This is Gat," I said. "I seen your ad in the *Express*. If it's the Moseby-Pendryn papers you're after, what's your offer?"

"Joe Albemarle contact you?"

"No."

"O.K. I'll give you fifty grand for the papers. Where can I meet you and when?"

"You seem pretty anxious. Better not try any tricks."

"I won't. It's on the level."

It *was* like hell. "All right," I said. "Can you get to the sunken rose garden in Temple Plaza in ten minutes, alone?"

"Right. I'll be there on the dot."

"Hold on," I said. "Let's make it in about three hours, say at twelve o'clock sharp."

"Well— Oh, all right. Whatever you say."

I hung up, frowning. That ten-minute question had been to find out how close he was. Temple Plaza was only a block from where I was phoning. He couldn't be far away either.

I didn't like that much. Had he rented some place close to Joe Albemarle's apartment? Or did he connect Joe with Brother Gat? If he belonged to Scipio Axtell's outfit, it was possible. I thought he did. That bunch weren't punks. I wasn't dealing with a romantic girl any longer.

I left the phone booth, circled a block, and headed for Brother Gat's place. I went in the back way and down the dim, smelly hall, and stopped with a key in my hand. A stair ran up along one wall of the corridor, and it had a closet under it. The door to that closet had moved.

I swiveled noiselessly, my hand on the gun inside my coat. The door came open

and a figure swayed out. There was a loud reek of perfume and gin and a lush, painted face swam in it. It steadied itself with an effort. "Hello, sugar," a low voice crooned.

"Who in hell are you?" I grated.

"Shhh! An unsteady finger wavered to her lips. *"Shhh!* It's little Miss Chaffey, sugar. Just Hazel, to you."

I didn't say anything at all to that. There didn't seem to be anything to say. I just took her arm and firmly but gently steered her to my door, opened it and shoved her in. I went in after her and piloted her to a chair in the dark. She sank into it with a cozy sigh and said, like something you've dropped a coin into:

"Gotta drink?"

"You sure need one," I told her. I got a bottle and a tumbler and poured it a fourth full and she downed it without batting an eye. "Thanks, sugar, I'm going to return the favor all right."

I let that one pass. I kept my hand on my gun.

"I thought they had you in a . . . a hospital," I said.

She laughed. "Thanks for being so delicate. Asylum is a little more exact, a private asylum. They don't beat you. They even give you drinks. They want you to like them. They want you to stay. They get lots of money if you stay."

"You're crazy like a fox," I said.

"Could I have another little snifter, sugar?"

I poured it and this time she was able to hold it briefly in her hand. "I'm a screwball, right enough," she chuckled, "but even a screwball don't like to have a murder rap hung on them, huh?"

"Somebody was going to do that to you?"

"What do you think? What else can Jerry Pendryn do, now that he's got his back to the wall?"

"You've evidently got some friends," I told her. "You keep up pretty well with what goes on in the world."

"Oh, I've got Dilly," she giggled. "We understand each other, Dilly and I, up to a point, anyhow. Do you think I couldn't have kept them from putting me in a nut house? But Dilly is Jerry's little fixer; Dilly handled that. He said he'd fix me up with an easy life and plenty to drink. So why shouldn't I do a friend a favor? Especially, a friend of mother's. Naughty Nancy, bless her heart. She really went overboard for Dilly in a big way. She was plenty upset when Dilly decided he wanted to marry little Lotte, the lily-fingered maid of—"

"This is all interesting as hell," I cut her short, "but just where is it getting us? I mean, if you don't mind my asking, what in hell do you want with me?"

"Why, Brother Gat," she giggled, "arent' you ashamed to talk that way to a lady?" She took the second drink, and it seemed to sober her, as it sometimes does at the stage of the game. "Look here," she said, "I haven't been following you around just on account of your sex appeal. Though I do like you, especially after what I heard in that room where little Lotte was making passes at you."

"That was you at the door?"

"Now, now. Why not? I followed Lotte in a taxi when she left home and I stuck to her heels afterward. And didn't I hear just what I expected? Didn't she tell you that I killed my mother?"

"Did Dilworth Fitch get you out of the asylum?" I asked.

"Oh, heavens, no. If he did a thing like that, Jerry would never let him marry Lotte."

"He's going to marry Lotte?"

"He thinks he is. And Lotte promised. But she keeps putting him off. Poor Dilly's nearly crazy. He's been a poor slave all his life, and he wants the position, even more than he wants her, or even her money. I feel sorry for Dilly if Lotte's fallen for you as hard as she seems to have."

"Never mind that. Who got you out?"

"Why, bless your heart, Scipio Axtell, of course. Who else? Good old Scipio. 'Hazel,' he says, 'are you going to let that stuffed shirt, Jerry, make a scapegoat of you? If not, you'd better get back there and tell the newspapers who really killed your mother.' "

"The newspapers! So that's the angle! After he lost those papers, Scipio really went for Jerry's scalp. Well, have you unloaded the dirt yet?"

"No, not yet. Scipio had me hidden out there at Glamourland, a harder place to get away from than the asylum, by the way. I told him I was going to the papers this afternoon, so he let me go."

"And you gave him the slip and followed Lotte instead. And what now?"

"Now," she said slowly, "after listening to you and Lotte, I've decided you're the man I want—as a business partner, I mean. Between us, we hold all the cards. So let's give them a ride for their money, sugar. What say?"

I laughed. "What do you think I'm doing?"

"Peanuts," she sniffed. "Look, Jerry Pendryn owes me something, doesn't he? Well, we can make him pay, and Scipio, too, and even Dilly, the little schemer—"

"Dilly hasn't got any dough, has he?"

"Like hell he hasn't. He's been stealing from Jerry for fifteen years. But what Dilly wants is Lotte and the Pendryn family prestige. Didn't you know he sold Jerry out to Scipio?"

"I guessed it."

"Why do you think he did it?"

"For dough."

"Partly. But mainly to get Jerry in a bind, where nobody but Dilly can pull him out. Then he can put the pressure on Jerry to make Lotte quit stalling and marry him."

"She wouldn't otherwise?"

"You should ask after tonight." She laughed. "But you still don't know Lotte. It's on account of Lotte that we'll bleed Jerry and Dilly, too."

"What do you mean?"

She didn't answer at once. Her eyes, not nearly so bleary-looking now in the dimness, measured me shrewdly.

"Jerry didn't kill my mother," she said. "I told you that just to feel you out. Want to know who did kill her?"

My skin crept. "You're nuts," I growled.

"No," she said, "no. I act like a nut. I act too much like a nut. Do you know how a real psychopath acts? Like Lotte."

I stood perfectly still and the dark quivered around me like gray jelly. I could have strangled her. I had to hold the impulse back. She went on softly:

"You don't believe me. You fell for the little neurotic, after all. Look here, are you afraid to be convinced? If you're not, bring her here and I'll face her with it."

My throat was dry, my skin felt tight, like a stretched hide in the sun. "I wouldn't be able to find her now—"

Hazel laughed. "I'll bet you Lotte's still there in that room. Know why? She thinks you'll come back to her. Psychopaths get that way, egotistical in the face of all reason. Go and see."

"By God, I'll take you up on that. Will you wait here?"

"Cross my heart. But let me have that bottle."

A fool's errand, I told myself, as I hurried back toward that other room. The sort of fool errand a man goes on when he's slipping. Then, for no reason, I thought of something else, one of those silly little things you think of in a crisis.

I mean the squirrel. The squirrel that I had watched day after day for so long, leaping down and defying the traffic, just for the hell of it. The squirrel whose crazy anti-social impulse had been like a secret understanding between us. This afternoon the squirrel had slipped. A car had got him. And for a moment I had ground my teeth, seeing him there, thinking of it in crazy panic as an omen.

I had dismissed it then. But now it came back. The squirrel had followed something wild in his nature. But he had done it once too often

I went into the old house by the back way. Nobody seemed to be around. I went upstairs and pushed into the room. It was empty.

I had wanted to see her. But I was glad she wasn't there. Probably she had gone on home like a sensible girl, telling herself that the man she knew as Brother Gat was nothing but a heel after all.

I closed the door and hurried out and back along the alley to the other place. I went in quietly and opened my door and saw that Hazel Chaffey was still in the chair. Light filtered through dirty curtains from the street level, glistened on the whisky bottle on the table beside her.

"You were wrong as hell," I said to her.

She didn't answer. She didn't move.

I turned and snapped the door latch. I went to her in three swift strides. I saw her face then and I didn't have to touch her. Her head was resting against the chair back and her tongue was caught between her teeth. Her eyes looked like wet malaga grapes about to pop out and roll to the floor. She was as dead as a canned salmon. She had been strangled neatly, quietly, and probably from behind.

I straightened and stood silent, listening to the darkness, listening to the scrape of feet on the pavement outside the basement windows, remembering that I hadn't locked the door going out. There was room in my mind for only one intention now—to get the hell out of that place. To get out and never come back. To burn or destroy every trace of Brother Gat and wipe him out like a scrawl on a blackboard.

Thank God, I could do it!

I started throwing a few things I wanted removed into a bag. I whirled, but I stopped like a pirouetting dancer turned to stone. A figure stood between me and the window that opened on the

court, a slender figure in a dark tailored dress. There was a gun in her hand and it was leveled at me.

"Lotte!" It came in an involuntary gasp.

Her voice was a steady, steely whisper. "Don't move. Just stand where you are. I want to talk to you."

I don't know if I could have done anything else even if I had wanted to. As for talking, what was there to say?

She came toward me slowly. Then she stopped again and just looked at me, and suddenly I got my voice. "So," I said, "she was right."

It seemed to startle her. My hands were at my sides. She took another step toward me. I levered a foot out and kicked her shin and grabbed the gun. I twisted it from her hand and pinned her arms behind her. She didn't speak. Her breath hissed sharply through her teeth and suddenly she was shaking all over. "Go ahead, go ahead and kill me," she gasped. "I didn't care if you had killed her. I didn't care who you'd killed. I'd have gone with you anyhow—"

I spun her face toward me and tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes. They were swimming in tears now. "I still will," she sobbed, "if you'll let me!"

It hit me like a sunstroke and I was sick all over. I was so sick I just let her go, and she slumped down into an old chair, and I stood there, trying to keep my balance. It wasn't the shock of suddenly knowing she hadn't done it. It wasn't even the shock of realizing she thought I had. It was the shock of understanding that even though she thought I was a cold-blooded murderer, she would want to go with me, anyhow.

I said, "Do you mean you'd go off with me if I had strangled this woman?"

She looked at me, her lips set tight, and nodded. "I know it's wrong. But I don't care. It's how I feel—" Suddenly, she was up, throwing herself into my arms.

I held her for a drunken moment and the world swam. I wanted to stroke her hair and cover her face with kisses. But I didn't. Somehow, I managed not to. I pushed her away. "Look here," I said, "I didn't kill her. But I've got to get out. We've both got to get out. We've both got to right now."

"Will I see you again?"

"No."

"Then I won't go."

I knew she meant it. I had to make a quick decision. "All right," I said, "we'll go together. You go first and get a taxi at the corner of the Adams Street and hold it there for me. I want to take one quick look at this woman. Then I'll join you."

"Swear it?"

"If it's humanly possible."

She went. I acted fast. I swept into a bag the few things in the room which might have given the police clues, and snapped it shut. Then, with my small flash, I risked one swift look at Hazel Pendryn's throat. I wanted to see those marks while they were fresh.

They weren't finger marks. I hadn't thought they would be. They were continuous; they formed a sort of bluish chain or ropy pattern, around the entire throat. Here and there were tiny scratches or pinpricks which proved it hadn't been a soft rope or silk cord. I was still looking at the marks when a scrape of feet outside the window sounded a little too slow, a little too furtive. I snapped off the flash. A shadow moved at the window to my left. I knew then that I had waited too long.

Suddenly, there was a hard hammering on the hall door and a gruff cop voice said, "Open up, it's the law."

IV.

"It's come," I told myself. It had to come sometime. And there was that squirrel today. And now I wouldn't have to decide what to do about Lotte.

My gun was out and I was up, moving by mindless reflexes toward the sunken door at the back. They would be there, too, of course. And I had long ago thought of the time they would be there, or might be. But what I had figured gave me, at best, only a fifty-fifty chance, even with good shooting.

I left the bag. I made it to the door that gave on the sunken steps by the time they were ready to force the hall door. I rattled the back door, heard steps outside, then swiveled noiselessly toward the inner hall. A dresser stood against the wall, just a homemade frame with curtains tacked around it and a cheap mirror. On the other side of the wall, in the corridor, was the closet under the stairs, and a big box full of mops, brushes and dust rags that hadn't been moved in years. I had spent two nights quietly cutting a hole through the wall behind it.

I shoved my head and shoulders under the dresser and began to push the box aside. Just then a cop threw his weight against the hall door and it crashed in.

I gave the box a shove and went through like a rat. I opened the closet door and the hall was empty except for a cop guarding the front steps. The others were stomping in the room.

I ran for it. The cop out front came at me with hunched shoulders and drawn gun. I shot at his legs, missed, lunged at him, aiming low with my shoulder. His gun banged deafeningly and he slashed at my head with its barrel. But my shoulder gouged his groin and forced him backward down the steps. I jumped over him and ran.

Another cop stepped from a parked prowl car and began to pump shots at me as I scuttled into the yard next door and headed for the alley. I reached the back fence, vaulted it, dropped in the alley shadows and ran doubled up like a monkey. I stayed like that until I was inside the back gate at the Adams Street apartment.

There was a light in the janitor's basement window at the corner, and his radio was playing an opera. He was a quiet little man who looked like a seedy scholar. I made it to a basement window at the opposite corner, which I managed to keep unlocked most of the time. I opened it, dropped into the furnace room, and began to peel off my clothes, wig, and the rest of it.

I had practiced, and could do it in two minutes flat. I balled the disguise stuff up and hid it in the furnace, and took out a cotton bathrobe I had hidden there. I went to the sink in the mop closet and turned on a gentle trickle and washed carefully. Then I stepped out into the basement hall.

The janitor's door opened. He peered out owlishly, his greasy pipe trickling smoke. "Oh, you, Mr. Albemarle—"

"Yeah. A police siren woke me up and I thought I saw somebody run across the yard. But they didn't come in here. I looked."

"Well, thanks, Mr. Albemarle. Nice night."

"Swell."

He closed the door.

I went on up the stairs and toward my door. Somebody was there in front of it, white-faced, shivering. "Joe, Joe!"

"Why, Miss Pendryn, what's wrong?"

"Plenty, Joe," she breathed between chattering teeth. "Let me in. But don't put on the light."

I hadn't intended to. When I had closed the door, she slumped down on the divan. "Lord, I'm thankful. At first I thought you weren't at home."

"I was down listening to the janitor's radio. What's wrong?" I sat down beside her and took her hand timidly.

"Oh, Joe, it's awful. Briefly, Hazel Chaffey has been murdered, in that room where Brother Gat lives. I had followed him there and waited until he left and then I walked in and found her. But he didn't kill her. Anyhow, I left before the cops got there, but they passed me. They recognized me; one of them spoke. They didn't stop me then, but after what they find they'll figure where I came from—"

"You were there with her alone?"

She looked at me. "No, he came back. He sent me away to get a taxi. He said he'd meet me at the corner, but he didn't come. I'm afraid they caught him."

"Afraid?" I frowned. "Good riddance, I'd say. You haven't been yourself, Lott . . . Miss Charlotte. You got to come to your senses, forget about that rat. Now brace up, I'm going to fix things."

"Do you think you could, Joe? I mean, now, after this jam I've got into?"

"Why not? You didn't kill Hazel Chaffey. You're innocent. I'd rather have that than a million dollars and the smartest lawyer on earth, no matter what the wiseacres say."

"You really believe that, Joe?"

"Absolutely. Now, I'm going to get you a drink and you're going to answer some questions, and we're going to figure some things out."

She didn't have any faith in me, and she showed it, but it was comforting to sit there in the dark and let me talk, so she did.

"Are you going to marry Dilworth Fitch?" I asked.

"Why, I—" She seemed startled. "Why do you ask that?"

"It's important."

"All right. But I don't know. I mean, I didn't intend to, not until today. Then something came up that forced me, I mean, for Dad's sake, I promised— But even so, if Brother Gat had let me go with him, I'd never have married Dilly anyhow!"

"Please clear that up."

She dabbed at her wet eyes and straightened. "It's just this: I really have stalled Dilly along. I once promised to marry him, just to please dad. But I didn't want to. My stalling wasn't fair to Dilly, so I don't blame him for being impatient, mad even. Anyhow, today, when dad had reached the end of his rope, couldn't raise more than ten thousand in cash and was faced with certain ruin, Dilly made him a proposi-

tion. Dilly's got some oil holdings that his mother left him that have become valuable. He said he'd sell them to raise the fifty thousand. He said he'd sacrifice them to save dad. But he said that if he did I would have to quit making excuses and marry him at once."

"That sounds like outright extortion."

"Not if you understand the situation. Dilly has a grievance."

I thought I understood. Because it bore out what Hazel Chaffey had said about Dilly. And I didn't believe he had any oil property. I didn't believe he had fifty thousand. What I believed now was that he was the guy who had inserted the ad in the personal column addressed to "Goldie," the guy I was to meet and sell the papers to at twelve o'clock. What he was going to do was try to outfox me.

But had he also killed Hazel Chaffey, Moseby, Nancy Chaffey Pendryn? That was still an open question. Scipio Axtell was in this game, too, and better equipped for killing than Fitch. He had good reason to want Hazel rubbed out after she had double-crossed him. Also there was still Jerry Pendryn to consider. I hadn't forgotten the pale desperation of his cold fish eyes that morning.

I said, "I think we can turn the lights on now. If the cops had tailed you, they'd have been here by now. They'll get you sooner or later, of course, but we've got a little time yet."

I snapped on the desk light and got out the sheet of paper which she had given to me, as Brother Gat, that sheet of paper which was probably the last thing Nancy Pendryn had written:

I heard a gasp over my shoulder. "Where did you get that?"

"Brother Gat gave it to me," I said, casually.

"He was here after I saw him?"

I nodded. "He was here just before you came. He learned where I lived when I contacted him today. I lied about being down listening to the radio. Gat came here and called me out and tried to put the bite on me for some money."

"You refused him? Weren't you afraid?"

"Why should I be afraid of a rat? When I wouldn't give him the money, he gave me this paper anyhow."

Color flamed in her cheeks. "He had my money. Yet he tried to get more, to sell me out. And he escaped the police, but he didn't meet me as he promised, even after I took a chance waiting with the taxi."

I grinned. "Sure. What did you expect of him?"

I thought that would do it. But it didn't. Suddenly her features relaxed. "I'm glad he got away, anyhow," she said.

I bit my lip and looked away. I studied the paper.

"That code word," I said, "could be Jerry. It could be Lotte. It could be Dilly. It could be anything at all. None of those names have any letters repeated, except the two next to the last. But this thing was not written on a standard keyboard."

"It was a Diadem portable."

"Not a standard one. Notice the accented French é. Also the elongated dash mark—"

"That's right. It was a writers' model," she said.

"And we haven't got a writers' model to look at."

"Do we need to?"

"I don't know." I scratched my head. "But another point strikes me. The whole series of symbols seems to have been written with the shift lock on."

Lotte stood up. "If it would help," she offered, "I'll get a writers' model Diadem."

"It's after eleven o'clock."

"I don't care. I know a man at a typewriter agency. Dad buys a lot of typewriters in his department. I'll call this man up and bully him into sending one here."

I thought it over. I didn't see that it would hurt to try. The man might have heard some police broadcast and report, but I figured the police would be here before long, anyhow. I said, "All right. You can wait here and get it. I've got to go out for about an hour. But I'll be back."

"Where are you going, Joe?" There was an anxious gleam in her eye that warmed me briefly. "You wouldn't do anything rash?"

"Would that worry you?"

"If you were going to find him, betray him to the law."

My shoulders sagged. I turned away to hide my face and walked into the bedroom and closed the door.

I stood in the dark, feeling numb. I had made him, Brother Gat. He was my creation. But he was better than I had intended. He had taken from me the only girl I ever really wanted. I had punished him for that; I had killed him. But it had done no good. She'd go on loving him, anyhow. And the hell of it was that he wasn't really dead after all. I was going to have to bring him to life again, just once more. And when I did that, it was

possible that he might destroy me, Joe Albemarle.

But I had no choice. I had no choice at all. I had to do it to save Lotte. And there was no use kidding myself any longer. Whether she ever loved Joe Albemarle or not, Joe Albemarle loved her past any choosing. I had to save her. She didn't know what a jam she was in, but I did. I hadn't let her know, because she was scared enough already. But when the cops got hold of her, when they found she had hidden evidence about Nancy's death, and that she had unquestionably been in that room with Hazel Chaffey just dead, it would be a cinch to pin that murder, at least, on her.

If I could have saved her, as Joe Albemarle, without bringing Gat into the picture again, that would have been swell. But I couldn't. The irony of it was that the job of dealing with the man I was to meet in the park was a job that only Brother Gat could do.

When I had dressed, lightly, I went back into the office room and called a taxi. Lotte had telephoned her typewriter man. She said he had acted puzzled, but had promised to send a machine up. I called a taxi and went out.

I carried an empty briefcase. I went down to the basement and got the bundle I had left in the furnace and crammed it into the case. Then I went to the front door and waited for the taxi to come. I gave the driver an address about six blocks away, changed my mind when we got there and had him drive me back to Temple Plaza.

It was an old, sprawling park in what was now a poor section. The sunken rose garden was between a high hedge and an old bandstand, rarely used. Underneath it was a men's rest room. I was taking fool chances now, and I knew it, but I had to go there to make my quick change. I managed it, doing a sketchy job, and came out again with the briefcase at just five minutes to twelve.

The park was almost deserted. On the Temple Street side, a patrolman paced boredly. A few tramps slept on newspapers. I slid around the bandstand in the shadows to watch the sunken garden where my man was to appear. I had just stepped past the chipped concrete lion crouched to one side of the wide bandstand steps when a gentle voice said, almost in my ear:

"Hello, Joe."

I turned and saw a fat man with his hat tilted back, chewing gum. He had a ruddy, squint-eyed, good humored face, and the .38 police revolver in his hand might have been a chocolate cigar, for all the importance he seemed to attach to it.

"Just take it easy now, Joe," he went on, chewing his gum and seeming to look everywhere but at me. "No use getting yourself hurt, kid. You just stand still and I'm gonna reach in right gentlelike and lift that gun there that's worrying you."

I just let out a deep breath and said, "O.K., sarge. But how in hell did you know me?"

"Know you, Joe?" He took the gun and pocketed it. "Ain't we been friends? I mean, you hanging around the precinct station and me givin' you pointers? How come you want to high-hat me?"

"Don't talk double-talk to me, Dave Tatum," I told him. "You got me. I'm not resisting. I'm in disguise. But I got a private-eye license. I'm on business. What do you think you got on me?"

He lifted his eyebrows in a mocking gesture. "Now, Joe, easy, son. You mean you ain't the gold-tooth bandit, after all?"

"Bandit!" I sneered. "Do you know what it was I took away from Scipio Axtell? Blackmail papers. Can't I protect my clients? You know damned well Moseby had been dead a whole day. I didn't kill him."

"You didn't try to blackmail Pendryn either?"

"Can you prove I did?"

"Not yet, Joe. Fact is, it's the girl we want. I mean, we want the goods on her. We know where she is. I just came from there. Followed you to have a little private talk. You're in plenty deep, kid."

He let that soak in. He was right. And I didn't think he knew quite how deep either. "You might have killed that Chaffey broad," he went on. "You certainly resisted arrest, shot at a cop, knocked him down. God knows what else we'll drag up on you, before it's over. But"—he let it drag out like dangled bait—"if you ain't got too much heat on you, we might square minor charges, like operating in this disguise, and so on—I mean, providing we can prove the Pendryn girl killed that Chaffey woman."

"You mean, providing I rat on her?" I growled. "Put that gun down, Dave, and I'll sock you."

"Tsk, tsk," he said. "Still playing cops-and-robbers?" Then his face got grim, his tone changed. "All right, dumbo,

we'll just take you along to headquarters to see the goldfish."

His left hand gripped my arm like a vise.

"Hold on a minute, Dave," I said. "You haven't asked me what I'm doing here?"

"We'll ask. We'll ask plenty, under the white light."

"But, look, I'm meeting a guy. If you listened in, it might be educational."

"Hah!" He laughed. "No doubt. I turn you loose and you make a smarter cop out of me."

"You got my gun," I said. "If we act fast, you maybe can hide a few yards away. Anyhow, within shooting range. I know you can shoot. Would I take a chance, unless I've really got something?"

"What you got?"

"Maybe a killer. If I have, I can make him talk in front of you, clear the girl of the murder rap, clear myself. If I can do that, would you square the rest of it for me?"

He chewed his gum hard. "You know I came out second at the last pistol matches?"

"Didn't I say I know it?"

"All right, what's your setup?"

I gave him enough of the picture for him to see possibilities, and he agreed.

I didn't know if it was too late or not. I hadn't seen any sign of my man. He might have been hiding, observing all the time. The detective and I moved along the curving, shadowed walk, and came to a bench flanked by shrubs. Tatum sank down behind it. "Remember, I got you between my sights all the time," he reminded me.

I nodded, left him, and stepped down into the rose garden. Moonlight lay white as milk on the concrete terraces, and the rose shone on the dark vines like pandas' eyes. I stood near a trellis and tried to enjoy the smell, but without much luck.

He didn't come until ten after. He evidently thought it was the smart thing to be late. He walked toward me idly, looking at the roses like a casual stroller who was gripping, maybe a bag of peanuts, in the right-hand pocket of his jacket. He wore gray slacks and a tan hat was pulled low over his eyes, but it did not hide the longish, weak, handsome face of Dilworth Fitch.

As he came near, I stepped out, just casually, and with my hands in the clear. I didn't have a gun, anyhow, so the disarming gesture cost me nothing. I saw now that his left jacket pocket bulged, too, and figured that the package of cut newspaper, or soap coupons, or whatever he had, was there.

"Hello," he said, easily, unhurriedly; then he started to bring the gun out.

He was slow, much too slow. He thought it would be a surprise move, or that I would expect a parley first. But I was already moving. I grabbed his right wrist with my left hand, and dug my right fist into his teeth.

It threw him back, and I kept the hold on his wrist and fell on him. I held his gun flat against the ground and put a knee on his lower ribs. After his first move, he quit even resisting.

"Hey," he panted in an undertone, "hey, what's the idea? Can't we do business quietly? I got the dough here—"

"Like hell you have. You figured to outsmart me. Now, when I see that package of phonies, I'm going to pound you into the dirt."

"Now wait," he gulped. "Let me explain. I had to be sure you were on the level before I brought all that dough out here. You know I couldn't risk carrying it. It's at my hotel room and we'll go—"

"You ain't going anywhere," I leered at him. "They're gonna find you in the bushes tomorrow morning, cold as Moseby was, cold as that woman you killed tonight, cold as poor Nancy Pendryn—"

"You're crazy. I didn't—"

"Hold on, and let me talk." I took his gun from his hand and poked it against him. "Sit up now, lean against the trellis, like were just resting here. I had this all figured out ahead, you dope. I knew what you'd try. I first figured to kill you for the trick; then I decided to make you a proposition."

"Yeah?" His muddy eyes were darting around now like frightened mice.

"Yeah. It's this: I'm plenty hot myself. So I don't give a damn who you killed. But with what you know, and with what I can do, we can clean up plenty, if we work together. You did kill them, didn't you?"

"No," he said. "Why should I have?"

"That much is simple," I told him. "You had been playing Pendryn's wife, Nancy. Then you decided you wanted to marry Lotte. But Nancy had fallen for you hard. She threatened to blow her top unless you gave Lotte up. So you strangled her."

"Strangled?"

"Yeah. Surprised I knew? Never mind. But afterward, Lotte wouldn't marry you, anyhow. It dragged along and you got desperate. But you knew Lotte was de-

voted to her father. You decided that if he were in a pinch, where only you could save him, you could pressure him into making Lotte marry you. That wasn't all. You could make some easy dough, too. So you sold him out to Scipio Axtell. Then, using Lotte as your agent, you hired me to spy on the transaction between Scipio and Moseby. Thus you had something on Scipio, too, and something to make Pendryn think you were still loyal to him.

"But Moseby wasn't so dumb. Moseby wondered how Scipio had found out about his keeping that suppressed autopsy report in his safe. Moseby knew that only you and he and Pendryn knew about that. Moseby knew you had ratted. It was you who met Moseby that night, after the sell-out. Probably he threatened to squawk to Jerry Pendryn. So you had to strangle him. How'm I doin'?"

"Rotten. It's all lies."

"Nope. Now we come to Hazel Chaffey. You had sold her on the idea of letting herself be made a protected scapegoat, that is, one who couldn't be called to account, because she was supposed to be insane. You put her in a luxury mental-home. But after Scipio bought that suppressed autopsy report, and lost it, and figured he had been double-crossed, he went straight to Hazel. He got her out, and she made him think she was going to smear Jerry Pendryn in the newspapers. But Hazel was playing her own game. You've got some hideout around this neighborhood, from which you made the telephone call to me. Well, you saw Hazel when she showed up around here and you followed her. You heard her spill the goods to me in that room, heard her make the proposal that we join forces and victimize you all. Hazel knew too much; she had to be silenced, too. You waited until I left and then you silenced her, strangled her, too."

"You can't prove it."

"Why should I prove it? What do I care? If you're going to work with me, I want to be sure you're on the level with me. If you aren't going to, I'm going to break your neck and leave you here for the morgue boys."

He gritted his teeth, shook his head. "I'm not talking."

I scowled and tried to hide the hollow feeling under my ribs. That was my hole card; it hadn't been enough. That was why I had had to play it as Brother Gat, thinking he wouldn't mind so much, admitting it to another criminal. But he wasn't tumbling.

I said, "Look here, there's something you don't know. Nancy Pendryn did some talking that night she died, after the others had left the party—"

"She didn't—" he snapped quickly. Then he caught himself up—too late.

"Oh, didn't she? Then you know? You were there?"

He gnawed at his lip. "I was there, but I didn't kill her."

"What was she doing when you saw her?"

"Sittting at her typewriter."

He had to say that; he knew the others had said it.

"Was she writing?"

"She tried, but she was too drunk. She wrote a few words, then couldn't seem to hit the keys straight, just made a jumble."

"That's what you think," I told him. I raised my voice just a little. "Oh, Dave. Come and get him."

Sergeant Dave Tatum came lumbering out. He had his gun in his hand, but he was scowling. I left Fitch sitting there and went to meet him.

"You ain't got nothin', you chump," Dave whispered.

"You think not? Wait and see."

"Wait till when?"

"Till we get him up to my room. Now, look, Dave. You got to trust me a little. This is our man. I'll prove it. You take him on up there and Lotte Pendryn will be there. She'll show you a piece of typewritten paper and explain about it, and you'll see how it fits in. Only don't let Fitch hear that. Lotte will have a typewriter, just like the one Nancy Chaffey Pendryn had that night. And when I get there I am going to take that typewriter and prove that Dilworth killed her."

"Yeah? And where you going to now."

I grinned. "I want to change my clothes. Look, Dave, if this case is cracked, you'll get all the credit, not for solving just one murder, but three. I ask only one thing: Forget you've seen me like this and let the gold-toothed bandit, Brother Gat, be dead. Don't let that girl know who he really was."

"Well, you poor dope!" Dave wiped his brow and laughed. "So you're in love with the Pendryn brat! You must be kidding."

"Kidding myself, maybe," I admitted. "But I want it that way. Is it a deal?"

Dave spat. "I don't reckon you'd try anything funny now. It wouldn't do no good. We'd get you. Well, if you can

swing it, it's a deal, only I got my doubts."

He shrugged past me and went toward Dilworth Fitch.

When I limped into the Adams Street apartment twenty minutes later, I was Joe Albemarle again. Joe Albemarle for good. Brother Gat had been flung down a sewer manhole. One way or another, he was going to stay there.

I looked first, frightenedly, at Lotte's face. She hadn't guessed anything yet. I wasn't so sure about Fitch. But Fitch had troubles of his own. And was going to have more. Or I hoped he was.

I prayed so. Because I didn't know how I was going to do it all. But I couldn't let Dave Tatum know I didn't. And I had to deliver the goods this time or else—

"Hello, Joe," Lotte said. "This is Sergeant Tatum. But I think you know him. Anyhow, it seems he followed Brother Gat and caught him talking to Dilly. It seems"—she looked coldly at Fitch, smoking a cigarette on the divan and trying to look nonchalant—"it seems Dilly was up to a little double-cross and some embarrassing things were said. Brother Gat, in fact, accused Dilly of all these murders, and said that you could prove it by this paper. Anyhow, the Sergeant says that if the charge is proved, Brother Gat will go free, since he was only guilty of hijacking blackmail evidence, anyhow."

There it was, her face lighting up when she spoke of Gat.

"He can't prove anything," Fitch snarled. He looked reproachfully at Lotte. "You act as if you wanted him to!"

"Am I supposed to be grateful to you for blackmailing dad into making me marry you?" she snapped.

Tatum said, "Let that go. This ain't a personal relations court." He looked at me. "This guy who calls himself Brother Gat made Fitch admit in my hearing that he was in the room with Nancy Pendryn on the night she died, and after the others had left. Now Miss Pendryn has a paper here, which she found next day, and which seems to be the title of the story Nancy was starting to write. It's got a puzzling series of symbols on it, following the words: 'The Murder of a Slut, by—'" He picked the paper off the desk. "Look at it, Fitch. Was that the paper she was writing on?"

Dilly wet his lips, hesitated. He didn't know what to say. He'd already admitted being there and that she'd written a "jumble of words." If he said this wasn't it, it would seem queer that there had been two "jumbles of words" around that night. It would seem that he was lying. On the other hand, he believed what he said: that Nancy had been too drunk for the symbols to mean anything.

He said, "I couldn't swear, but it looks like it."

"Then," Tatum said, "it does seem that the woman may have been trying to leave a message. I mean that silly title for a story, 'The Murder of a Slut.'" He turned to me. "What you got on it, Joe?"

I was frowning at the keyboard of the neat portable. I knew the key must be there, but so far I didn't have anything. I was trying to think, but the sweat was getting in my eyes. I was trying to put myself in Nancy Pendryn's place. But the only idea I could get was that childish cipher scheme of substituting numbers for the letters of the alphabet.

All the same, I had to say something. I said, "Come over here to the desk, Fitch, and write down the numerical equivalents for the letters in your nickname, Dilly."

Fitch shrugged and got up. He came and leaned over the desk and picked up a pencil and wrote on a piece of paper, slowly, counting on his fingers: "4-9-12-12-25." Then he looked at me.

I looked at the sheet, looked at the keyboard. I rolled the sheet of paper into the machine. What now? Well, Nancy Pendryn's series of symbols had all been made with the shift key on. That much was plain. Then I began to see the rest.

"Now," I told Fitch, "I want you to just peck those numerals that stand for your name out on the paper, spacing between them with dashes, just as you've done. No, wait a minute—" I reached down and quickly pressed the shift lock.

He looked at me and blinked. "But with the shift lock on it won't write numerals at all."

"I know it. Go ahead and see what it does write."

He started to peck the numerals out. He wrote: "$—(—Lé—Lé—."

When he got that far, making the same symbols that were on Nancy's paper, making that repeated symbol for the double-l, his fingers seemed to freeze.

They froze taloned like a striking hawk's, as he whirled and lunged at Lotte. "You little tramp, you framed this on me!"

I made a wild grab at him, but missed his arm and dug my fingers into his belt instead. I yanked him back and flung him sprawling to the floor. At the same time a queer thing happened. I was aware of a tingling in my fingertips, as if they had reached to touch a familiar material and had touched something else. They had.

Fitch was sitting up, his face purple, his lips fighting to form words. His jacket was pulled away from his middle, and I could see his black belt, the narrow belt which looked at first like stamped black glass, but which I now knew wasn't.

Suddenly, I swooped on him, flicked loose the silver buckle prong, and ripped the belt from its loops. I held it in my hands like a whippy black snake, and Fitch's eyes began to bug from his head. Then I stuck the end of the belt through the silver buckle and made a sliding loop. I dangled it before Dave Tatum's eyes.

"I don't know what your laboratory men found on that woman's throat tonight," I said, "but I noticed a very distinctive pattern of bruises. I think this will match them. And I know that under one of Moseby's fingernails I found a piece of horsehair. Now look at this belt."

Tatum took the belt of braided horsehair and his lips puckered for a low whistle. It died aborning.

Dilworth Fitch came off the floor like frog legs off a hot skillet. He dived straight for a window, and almost made it. But the screen caught him around the shoulders and then Tatum had him by the legs. He dragged him back so fast that Fitch's head hit the window sill and he was knocked out cold.

Lotte hid her face and went into the bathroom and closed the door. Tatum and I revived Fitch and the steel bracelets were snapped on him. Tatum led him out, but turned back at the door.

"Joey," he whispered, "come here."

I did, and he gripped my hand. Then a queer twinkle came into his eye. "Joey," he said softly, "I ain't quite sold on some angles of your explanation. But, if you've learned your lesson—"

"If I haven't, Dave, I'll never learn anything."

He nodded and closed the door, and that was that.

I lighted a cigarette and waited for Lotte to come back into the room. When she did her eyes were red, but tearless. She smiled.

"Dave said they'd let Brother Gat go," I told her. "So probably he'll drop around here."

She sat down at the desk and fiddled with a pencil.

"I . . . I'm not so sure I want to see him," she said. "I sort of feel different since all this business has been cleared up—about my father, I mean."

"You don't feel so bitter at the world?"

"Not now."

"Brother Gat will probably send your money back," I went on. "I mean that ten thousand you let him take. He'll be afraid you'll complain about it and then they wouldn't let him go."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking about that especially. I just don't feel the same about him though, somehow."

"Maybe you don't admire the tough and rugged type so much anymore?"

"Oh, but I do, Joey," she said. "I'll always be that way. I'll always like strong men. But, well, Joey, he wasn't so strong, after all, was he?"

"You mean Brother Gat wasn't?"

"Yes. But don't you see? In a crisis he cracked up. He even got himself in a jam. And it was you who had to pull him out of it, Joey."

I grinned. "I hadn't thought of that angle."

"So you, Joey, are the stronger."

Damn me, if I didn't blush. "Well, I guess, in a way—I mean, that's one way of looking at it." I looked up at her along my nose.

"Joey, I like you. I like you a lot—"

She was smiling wickedly. I went over and raised her up and kissed her good and proper. She looked at me queerly for a moment and then laid her head quickly on my shoulder.

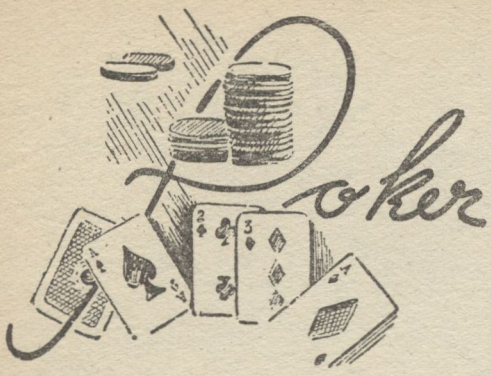
"Faker," she whispered in my ear.

I gave a start. "What—"

She was chuckling softly. "You'll never be a good detective, Joe. Don't you know a woman can tell who's kissing her? But it's all right, just so you don't ever try fooling me again."

I never did.

Even with a Royal flush, the kid couldn't win at Camelot.



A Novelette

at Camelot

By ARTHUR H. HOOD

I.

THE woman who shoved the office door open and came nervously toward my desk was shabbily dressed. She looked weary. Her hands were red, as if they had known lots of hard work. Maybe a new clean-up woman looking for a chance for some extra money, I thought. She did not seem at all sure of herself as she asked:

"Are you Mr. Steele?"

That was the name on the door. I said, "Yes."

"Are you a private detective?" she went on.

The door gave me away on that one, too. I nodded.

As I said, she was a dull-looking kind of woman and did not seem to know what to say next. She rubbed one hand nervously over her mouth and looked around the office.

"What can I do for you?" I asked when she kept silent.

"I . . . I don't know."

That wasn't even funny. I locked my desk and stood up.

"It's like this lady," I began. "I'm all ready to leave. Either you want me to help you, or you don't. Make up your mind."

"It's about Mary Lathrop!" she began desperately.

I'm not in business for my health. What I usually charge is not chicken feed. Poorly dressed women can seldom pay my price. Just to make it easier, I told her I was on a case.

"But Mary shouldn't stay in that hospital!" my visitor said as if it had been forced out of her.

"Let her leave," was the best I could think of.

"She can't. They won't let her!"

"Who won't?"

"The doctor. She's a mental patient."

That settled it for me. Getting customers out of an asylum was out of my line. I gave it to her straight.

"Look," I said ,"not being a doctor sort of cramps me this time. Try the probate judge. Maybe he can help."

"But she shouldn't be in the Mayer Sanitarium!" It sounded like a last, desperate effort.

I sat down and told my visitor to have a chair. I didn't know who she was, I didn't know who Mary Lathrop was, but I did know who H. Preston Mayer was. Knew him so well that pinning his ears back entirely at my own expense would be a pleasure and time well spent. I'm a good hater. Mayer had made me look like a fool, a liar and a crook at a trial where I was testifying. It hadn't been necessary, but Mayer was that sort of baby. I told the woman to take her time and give me the dirt.

Her name was Mrs. Kean and she did the cleaning at the Mayer Sanitarium. That's how she'd met Mary Lathrop. For no reason at all, she had become convinced that Mary was not crazy.

"If she's not crazy why don't her folks get her out?" I asked.

"She only has a father and he's drunk most of the time," Mrs. Kean told me. "Mary said that."

"As long as he has plenty of money, his drinking doesn't make any difference," I explained.

"Oh, he hasn't any money. Mary told me that, too." Mrs. Kean was positive about that. "He works on a section gang in Arden."

That was a queer one. I knew the Mayer Sanitarium would not let you in the front door unless you were carrying a peck basket of lettuce—and I don't mean the garden variety. Why would a

section hand's daughter rate a bed there? I determined to find out. I owed H. Preston Mayer a bill and intended to pay. I told Mrs. Kean:

"What you told me doesn't help much. But I'll look around and find out what I can."

"But . . . but I don't have much money." Mrs. Kean was nervous again.

"How about fifteen cents," I grinned.

I don't know, but maybe she thought I belonged in Mayer's place. Anyway, she dug up a thin dime and five pennies. I took them carefully and gave her a receipt in full.

"Fifteen cents will buy a cigar," I explained.

Arden turned out to be a small place. Switching yards, a roundhouse and railroad shops. It wasn't any trouble getting a line on Tom Lathrop. His main occupation was drinking. Working on the railroad was only a sideline. Anyway, Tom was never known to have any money. His daughter washed dishes in the Camelot Inn, a swanky night club some three miles out of town. All of which didn't add up to a room in the Meyer Sanitarium.

The Camelot Inn was on my way home. I decided to stop there and eat. Not because Mary had washed dishes there, but I was hungry. I drove up to the inn and eyed the doorman. It was my old friend, Cricket Morgan. Good old Cricket. I hadn't seen him since the night he tried to blackjack me while I was having an argument in the Red Lion Inn.

Cricket recognized me and started to swear. I grinned, got out and pointed to the car.

"She's all yours, Cricket. Treat her nice or I'll find that husky who threw you over the table the night you tried to slug me."

That was a funny one. Me and a bird named Sled Braxton were trying to see which one was the toughest, and Cricket started to sneak up behind me with a blackjack. Just to be sociable, I guess, the husky I spoke of dealt himself in. Cricket made a three-point landing in the lap of a blonde. It was all good, clean fun, but Cricket got mad.

At that, he had to take my car, and I headed for the front door of the inn. Just to play safe, I checked the gun in my shoulder holster. If Cricket was around, Sled Braxton was not far away. He and Cricket ran in the same mob.

A swanky place, this Camelot Inn. Plenty of chrome plating, red leather upholstery, snakey-hipped waitresses and a big dance floor. It was early and some twenty people were eating and dancing. I sat down where I could watch the entrance door. When Sled showed up, I wanted to see him first. I gave my order to snakey hips and waited.

Sled showed up inside of five minutes. He came into the dining room, slow and flat-footed as usual, and started checking up on the diners. Just to beat him to it, I threw up my hand and called:

"Hi-ya, Sled!"

He turned, looked for my table, then started over. Thick shoulders hunched, heavy eyebrows pulled down, he sort of slid along the floor. It was Sled's way of scaring people. I didn't scare so good, but I pushed back my chair for plenty of leg room. Slad had promised to beat my head off with his fists. He stopped a couple of feet away.

"What'cha doin' here?" he growled.

"Waiting for breaded veal chops and trimmings," I told him.

"Sure you're not snoopin'?" he growled again.

"Only snooping for a bite to eat."

"Huh!" Sled called me a liar with that one. "See you don't start anythin' funny, Blue," he went on. "If you do—out!"

It wasn't worth an argument, so I suggested to Sled that he hustle my veal chops. He walked away grumbling and I lighted a cigarette. Out of a side window, I saw Cricket climbing into a station wagon.

"Maybe he is going for my veal chops," I thought, but he wasn't. They came along in ten minutes. Cricket didn't get back until after I had finished my chops and was waiting for dessert.

Sled sure charged plenty for his meals, but the cute, little trick in the cashier's cage was worth almost half the money to look at. Slanting, come-hither eyes and a uniform that started your imagination working on high. I told her so and left.

It was dark and starting to rain when I left the Camelot. Plenty of wind and the hint of more to follow. I was drifting along, digesting my dinner, when a siren screeched back of me. I glanced in the rear view mirror and could make out the single light of a motorcycle coming up fast. I pulled over to my side of the road and kept on moving. But the motorcycle did not pass. Instead, it slid alongside and I could hear the rider yell for me to pull over. I did, stopped, and let down the window. I could see that the rider wore a uniform cap and coat. It was his party, so I kept mum.

"Git out of that car, and don't try any funny business," was the order I had barked at me.

That didn't sound like a state trooper, but it did sound like a bird who wouldn't stand much fooling. I got out of the car and stood with my hands in sight. I studied the rider of the motorcycle. He wore what looked like a dark uniform cap and coat. Then I saw he was wearing pants. No trooper on duty would wear anything but leg spirals. A fast one and a gun were being pulled on me, if I saw what I thought. The next order I got was to open my raincoat, my inside coat, then put up my hands. Somehow, this hood knew I wore a shoulder holster. He slid out my rod, then gave more orders.

"Git in the car an' turn on the dome light. Drive to Marsh Road, then turn to your right. I'll be ridin' right back of you. One fool move means a slug through the back window. Git it?"

I got it, and a lot more as I climbed into my car. Marsh Road ran through a marsh. Not a house on it. Fishermen used it in nice weather, but on a night like this, maybe a few muskrats would be around. All that started my brain working. It was three miles to the road and a slug in the back for me.

A notion started buzzing in my head. I stepped on the accelerator a little and the needle went up to forty. Then I tried forty-five. That motorcycle stuck like a poor relative. Then I took a strangle hold on the steering wheel. Brake and clutch pedal went down hard to the floor boards. *Wham!* The motorcycle rammed my rear bumper, skidded to one side, and crashed. I went out the far door and into a ditch. There was only a foot of water and mud where I landed.

I lay there and listened to the rain pattering on the cement pavement. Then I took a chance and lifted my head and took a look. When the motorcycle crashed it broke one of my tail-lights. The open bulb threw a beam on the pavement. I could see the motorcycle and its rider tangled up in the frame. I climbed out and looked him over. He was completely dead. I took my gun out of his pocket and lighted a smoke.

It wasn't more than a few minutes when a car came along, going in my direction. I flagged it down, and the driver, a fat, bilious-faced pilgrim, goggled at what was showing in his headlights. Then he got out and retched a little.

"Have you had an accident?" he sort of gulped.

"He did." I pointed to the hood mixed up in the motorcycle.

"Wha-aa-at can I do?" Bilious-face hung onto his front fender.

I helped him into his car and closed the door. The headquarters of the state police were a mile down the road.

"Stop there and tell them what you saw," I told him.

He started away, zigzagging like a drunk. I went back to the car and sat on the running board. I was soaking wet so there was no sense in getting inside. Pretty soon two lights grew bigger and bigger and slid to a stop opposite where I was waiting. One of the troopers stood by his motorcycle and I bet it wasn't a candy bar he was holding. The other came over to where I was sitting. He snapped a flash on me.

"What's the trouble?"

I pointed behind the car. "Take a look. Then I'll tell you what happened."

He went back, swinging his flash. Then I heard him swear. It was an ugly, man-sized oath. I was glad he would find out there was no call for it. Troopers don't like things to happen to one of their own bunch. Suddenly I heard him bark:

"This ain't one of our boys! What the hell comes off here!" In a few minutes he came back to where I was waiting.

"What sort of screwy mess is this?" he shot at me. "Who is this fake trooper and why did he try to ride over you?" Without waiting for an answer, he called to his companion across the road: "Come on over, Ben. This is a new one on me!"

Ben said, "O.K., Pete, be right with you."

"Sure, Ben, bring along a deck of cards and we'll have a three-handed game of gin rummy." That was where I cut in. I know Ben's voice.

Ben pounded over and looked at me hard. The mud on me didn't make it any eazier for him to recognize me. Finally, Ben grinned. "You big lug! Always in some kind of trouble!"

Pete looked at Ben. "You know him?"

Ben nodded. "Sure. Known him for ten years, and haven't won a game of gin rummy yet. But what's all the excitement?"

The two of them walked back to the motorcycle. I stayed where I was and watched. After a time, they untangled the rider from the motorcycle and laid him beside the road. Ben came back to me.

"Not a lick of sense in us talkin' out here in the rain," he said cheerfully. "Let's go back to the station and talk this over where it's comfortable."

We went. Ben and a lieutenant listened

to my story. The lieutenant took Ben's word that I was all right and we got along fine. They didn't doubt my story, screwy as it was. Ben had a wallet he'd taken from the dead man, but it didn't help much. Thirty-seven dollars in cash, a card from a tourist camp in Michigan City, and a book of matches from a beer garden in Jackson. Oh, yes. There was a rain check for a Cubs' ball game dated July 17th.

"Jackson, Michigan City, Chicago. Looks like this bird came from Chicago," the lieutenant grumbled.

Ben nodded. "Might be a punk from over there."

That was all for me. Ben promised to bring me back any time the lieutenant wanted me. I left and went back to my apartment, had a bath and changed my clothes. Then I went to Uncle Dan's for something to eat. The meat was tough at Uncle Dan's, and most of the patrons were tougher. But the corn beef was good. It tasted swell and stuck to your ribs. I filled my tray at the counter and went looking for a seat. I found a booth with a man in it. I slid in on the vacant side and asked:

"Is it all right if I sit down, brother?"

The man across was capable and well-dressed and he fought his steak grimly. When I spoke, he looked up and nodded.

"Dan tans 'em before serving," I said when the stranger's knife blade bent like a watch spring.

"Tans 'em, heli!" The man put his knife down and took a drink of coffee. "This thing on my plate was cut off a doormat!"

I knew Dan's steaks and laughed. Then I took a bite of corn beef.

"You don't look as if you belonged here," I suggested casually, as I looked at the man's good clothes.

"No?" I got a hard look for that one. "Are you giving me a tip where I should eat?'

"Our best families don't dine here," I sort of explained. "Dan doesn't pick his patrons."

"So it's a tough place, eh." The stranger looked over the crowd indifferently. "Maybe that's why I'm here."

It was all right with me. I went back to my dinner and the man across started another round with his steak. Finally, he swore and shoved his plate away as if he had given up.

"How's the liquor here?" he asked.

"Better let me order," I suggested. "Unless they know you, you get year-old rotgut for bonded stock."

"Just like Chi," he grinned, then added quickly, "Make it two and you can order."

I called a bus girl and she brought something good. We drank and talked for a while. I was starting to like this stranger. He was all right and knew his way around. Finally, he took a card from his pocket and shoved it across the table. I read it, sort of grinned, and gave him one of mine. He studied it for a moment, said, "Huh!" and consulted a note book. Then he gave me a real once-over.

"That's a queer number," he began. "I had your name and was going to look you up tomorrow. Now, I meet you like this."

It was my turn to do a little looking. "I don't know why you were going to look me up, but if it's important, we can go to my office and talk it over," I told him.

He shook his head. "It's not that important. Tomorrow will do. I'm from the Zenda Agency in Chicago. Sam Breadon's the name. Come to find a boy and take him home. Some young punk his dad can't handle."

I understood and chuckled. "Chasin' a dame, maybe?"

"Naw." Breadon bit off the end of a cigar. "Booze and pasteboards are his foolishness. Got any idea where I can find a stiff game where they trim suckers?"

That was a laugh. I could have told him of twenty places where they would take your money, and make it almost painless. I gave him the addresses of four or five. It would be something to help him pass the evening. I suggested he use my office while he was in town and arranged to see him the next afternoon.

The next morning I decided to check up on Mary Lathrop at the Mayer Sanitarium. I wanted to see her and decide if she really were off her top. If so, I'd drop the whole business, no matter who was paying her bills at the sanitarium. I reached the place and a cold-eyed dame dressed in white was sitting at a slick mahogany desk just inside the front door.

"Have you a patient named Mary Lathrop?" I asked.

"Who is asking?" was the icy come-back.

"Just a friend," I told her.

"Just a friend?" That dame sure could call you a liar and still keep clear of the libel laws.

All of which got me nowhere, so I

asked to see Doc Mayer. That started another waltz between me and frozen face. She would not let me see him unless I had an appointment and, seeing I did not have one, I could roll my hoop out of there. Finally, we got real noisy, which was what I was playing for. It made H. Preston Mayer, himself, show up. Doc was plenty mad, and when he saw me he got purple.

"If you cannot be more quiet, you will have to leave!" he snapped.

"All right, doc, all right," I soothed him. "All I wanted to find out is whether Mary Lathrop is a patient here."

"He says he's a friend of hers," the nurse cut in. It sounded like a tipoff to me.

Meyer swaggered over and stood as close to me as the railing would permit. He had a mean mouth and tiny pig eyes. I picked out the second button on his white coat and waited.

"I can't permit any cheap detective—" he began, and then I tagged him on that second button. It was a swell poke and the floor was nice and waxy. Doc did a Maypole dance, a swan dive, then a side slip. It was an oak partition that stopped him. I winked at the goggle-eyed nurse and left.

Well, that pretty much took care of the morning. In the afternoon, I decided to play cozy with the state police and Ben. He might have some dope on the guy who rode the motorcycle.

Ben wasn't there, but the lieutenant was; and he didn't have a thing to offer. They had sent the dead man's prints to Chicago on the strength of the rain check, but Chicago hadn't answered. Outside of the fact that the motorcycle had been stolen in Arden, they didn't know a thing.

Back in town, I found Sam Breadon in my office, chewing a cigar, as usual, and staring out the window. He grinned a little crookedly when I sat down, and said:

"What do you know that's new?"

"Not a damn thing," I told him. "How about you?"

"Nothing." He scowled as if disgusted with himself. "All I got is the notion someone is tailing me. Can't put my finger on it, but a sawed-off little runt happened to be in the same place I was, a lot."

"Could be nothing," I offered.

Breadon let it go at that. He asked if I knew of a game at Sully Martin's. Of course, I knew about it.

"I think my boy was there last week," Breadon explained.

This was Friday. A cold lead. Still, it wasn't my business to throw ice water on the parade. Breadon looked and acted as if he knew his business. There was nothing more said about it, but we talked for a while. Then Breadon went to a show and I turned on the radio. I wanted to learn why crime does not pay. Being a private dick never did teach me for sure.

Saturday and Sunday are lousy days in the detecting line. I decided to do a little fishing and didn't get back until Sunday night. I hadn't been home more than ten minutes when the phone jingled and Inspector Graham was on the other end. He wanted to see me right away so I hot-footed it over.

"You knew a man named Sam Breadon!" he barked, even before I could snitch one of his good cigars.

"Sure," I told him. "He's a private operator from Chicago."

Graham moved the cigars to the far side of his desk. "What else do you know about him? We found your name when we searched him."

Which almost added up to the fact that Breadon was dead. I put all my cards on the table and told the inspector what I knew. He made notes while I talked. Breadon's body had been found on Marsh Road early Sunday morning. He had a fractured skull. Slugged from behind. A big man must have done it. The fracture was more on the top of the head, not the back. The body had been dumped from a car. That was all Graham could tell me. It wasn't much, and I left.

Just to start blue Monday right, I rode out to see about the lad who rode the motorcycle. This time the state police had something for me. My pal had been a small-time gunman from Chicago, with plenty of police record. There happened to be a little feud going on in Chicago and he had left for the good of his health. The Chicago police didn't know where he had gone, and didn't care.

Seeing I was well on the way to Arden, I decided to go there and see what I could pick up. After the way Doc Mayer acted when I went to see Mary Lathrop, I was really getting interested.

In Arden, I dug up a girl friend of Mary's. All I could find out from this corn-fed husky was that she knew Mary Lathrop and that Mary had been. "Jus' terrible worrit," for a few days before she left town so "suddint." She didn't know

where Mary had gone. I couldn't find anybody in town who did. Something else for me to think about.

Starting home, I decided to call on Sled Braxton. If he was behind my troubles, I might as well lay down the law to him. Sicking outside gunmen on me was something I could do without. The local bad boys made me enough trouble.

Sled was standing behind the bar when I arrived. There were no customers in sight, so I went right to bat. At first, I thought Sled would come over the bar at me. Then he got a grip on himself and used a lot of bad language. Finally, he ended up by whacking what he calls a hand on the bar, and giving it to me straight.

"Blue," he growled, "some day I'm goin' to take you apart with my two hands, and do it plenty! So you can lay off sayin' I sent anyone to get you. I'm takin' care of you myself when I get ready. See?"

And there it was. Sled had a reputation of being mighty careless with the truth, so I let it go at that. I'd had my say and the next move was for me to beat it. I did, and went looking for more info.

Clam Carter was the one I thought might give it to me. Clam was a queer sort of a duck. I don't mean crazy. He didn't just figure out. He minded his own business plenty and was a fancy Dan with a six-gun. He mixed mostly with the shady crowd and there was mighty little going on that he didn't know about. Just the same, Clam didn't belong. You could tell by the go-to-hell look he wore. It was only his knack of shooting spots off playing cards that kept him out of trouble. We both liked fishing and in that way were good friends. That's why I took a chance in cornering him in the Belmont bar and asking what I wanted to know. Clam looked me over with those frosty eyes of his.

"You, a dick, and coming to me for information. Hell!"

"You claim to know all about fish, but you come to me asking where is a good place to go," I shot back.

"Huh!" Clam said.

"Sure," I grinned back.

He looked at me for a moment. "So you want to know if I've seen any strange hoods in town, do you? I've seen one a couple of times. He's as big as you, and half as ugly. Always bragging he comes from a real town and can lick any so-and-so around."

"Any hook-up?" I asked.

Clam shook his head "Not that I noticed. He seemed to mix with anybody that would listen. The hammer-head made me tired. I had a notion to clip his vest buttons and let some of the wind out."

"How about giving me a chance to look him over first," I suggested.

"I'll play you a hand of poker for it," Clam said sourly.

The poker suggestion made me think of Sam Breadon. Not that it was any of my business now, but those things sometimes run into money. I figured the Zenda Agency wouldn't drop their case now. I might do myself some good by finding out things.

"Another thing, Clam," I began. "It's about a young squirt from out of town. Has more money than sense, and thinks he can play poker. I might pick up some change if I can find him."

Clam lighted a cigarette and puffed for a moment. His eyes were closed and his thin, high-nosed faced looked tired.

"Whitey Farrel had something like that in tow about a week ago," he said finally. "They were sitting in the next booth at Uncle Dan's while I was having supper. Whitey was telling this kid of a straight game he knew about. A good player could win plenty."

It was a long speech for Clam to make. At the end he told me that he was tired and to get the hell out. I didn't want Clam to clip any of my vest buttons off, so I got. Then I decided it might be a little money in my pocket if I saw Whitey. Not that I thought he would want to talk, but I might persuade him.

Whitey lived in a trailer camp just outside of town, so I headed for there. It was a neat arrangement. The city cops could not come busting in any time they felt like it, and the sheriff wouldn't bother if Whitey behaved himself.

When I got there, Whitey was sitting in his trailer with another imitation bad boy. I didn't bother to knock. Just took a good grip on the door handle and yanked. The door came open and I slid inside, as somebody's head hit me in the stomach. I don't like being butted in the stomach, so I picked up the owner of the head and heaved him into a corner. About then Whitey came at me with the handle of a tire jack. He started to alter my face with the handle. It ended up by my slapping him over a folding trailer chair. He came back, still swinging.

The play seemed to be getting too rough. I took Whitey—the other bird was still dozing in his corner—and shook him until his eyes rolled. That cooled him down. He stood there like a red-eyed

sewer rat with buck teeth. Whitey must have been full of dope not to recognize me sooner, but finally he yelped:

"What's the big idea of bustin' in this way, Steele? I'll have the bulls on you for it!"

I told him to stow it and picked up the jack handle.

"What do you want, wise guy?" Whitey mumbled finally.

I knew from Whitey's tone he was through being tough. I asked him about the kid he had picked up a week ago, and where he was.

"You're nuts!" Whitey started putting on his act. "I didn't pick up any kid. Don't know what you're talking about."

"Whitey, you punk, you're not even a good liar," I told him. "Don't even know when to tell the truth. Come on, give!"

I don't know what Whitey intended to say, as right then the lad in the corner sat up and his hand went inside his coat. I wonder why he thought I was holding that jack handle. Anyway, it was a nice three-carom shot. Head to chair leg to side wall. The poor fish lay down and back to sleep. That seemed to make up Whitey's mind.

"I'll get killed if I talk," he whined.

"That's in the future," I cracked back. "Right now you'll get the worst beating of your life if you play dumb."

Whitey wilted and started in a sort of jerky fashion:

"I picked the kid up when he was lookin' for a big game. Then I turned him over to Cricket Morgan an' some big guy. I don't know who he was. They were to split with me after they trimmed the kid."

And that was about all Whitey knew. He beefed a lot because Cricket had not split as promised. That was my cue to scram. Whitey might have a rod where it was handy.

II.

THE next morning I decided to do a little scouting. The Mayer Sanitarium was a five-story building with a yellow brick front. There was a fire escape in the back, running from the roof to the ground. I figured it would touch a hall window on every floor. But taking a girl down that way was out. The lower part of the fire escape was in a bright light.

Built flush against the sanitarium was the Ruthven Arms. A moderate-priced apartment house where some of the nurses and doctors from the sanitarium lived. The Ruthven was five stories high and had a big electric sign on the front. That sign gave me a brain storm. I found out from the janitor that the Barber Electric Co. had put it up. It took me the best part of two hours to get hold of a roll of wire, a metal tool box and a bunch of blueprints. It was about five o'clock when I strolled into the Ruthven Arms. I ambled over to the clerk, told her I was from the Barber Electric and had come to check the sign.

I must have looked the part. She nodded carelessly and told me to take the elevator. I got off at the fifth floor and the elevator boy showed me a ladder leading to the roof. I went up and made myself comfortable behind an elevator. When a nearby clock struck ten, I started out. First, I crawled over onto the sanitarium roof, found the fire escape and went down. Mary Lathrop's room was 417, so I stopped at the fourth floor and peeked in. It was just as I thought. The escape was at the end of a long hall. It looked deserted, so I opened the window and eased myself in.

417 was the third door on the right. Now I'd found it, what? There I was, expecting a nurse or a doctor to pop out of one of the rooms any moment, and I was still afraid to go into 417. The chances were ten-to-one that Mary would let out a yelp as soon as my head popped in. I turned the handle of 417 as easily as I could, and decided on amnesia for an alibi if I got caught. The door opened without a squeak. I stuck my head inside, whispering as low as I could:

"Mary . . . Mary, are you there?"

A sleepy voice answered:

"Who is it? What do you want?"

"Mrs. Kean sent me." That was a humdinger of an answer to give anyone.

There was a noise in the hall and I almost fell through the half opened door I was holding. But it was only the wind blowing through the window I had left open. Now that I was inside, I closed the door. Judging from what I could hear, Mary was sitting up in bed, her breath coming in little gasps. I guess it was my mentioning Mrs. Kean that kept Mary from screaming. At that, there was plenty of cold sweat running down my back.

There was enough light coming into 417 so I could get a sketchy idea of what it was like inside. Mary was breathing easier now, with both arms around her knees, and looking toward where I was. She didn't act half as scared as I was. I got the idea Mary was no shrinking violet. When I told her why I was there, she was all for slipping on some duds and getting out. It was a swell idea, but the

sanitarium never left enough clothes with a patient for him to go outside without creating a riot.

We were whispering together when the commotion started. A sharp female voice in the hall demanded, "Who opened that window?" and footsteps hustled along the hall. Then there was a slam. One of the nurses had spotted the window I had left open. After the slam, there was the sound of doors being opened and closed. That nurse was checking up. It wouldn't be long before she got to 417 and found me. I could think of only one thing. Get that nurse bedded down long enough for Mary and me to make a getaway.

I told Mary to get back of the bed where she couldn't be seen. That would bring the nurse in for a search. That was where I came in. Standing behind the door, with an open blanket, all I had to do was wrap up that uniformed dame and keep her quiet. The door handle of 417 rattled, the door opened and nursey turned on the light. A quick gander and in she popped, saying: "Mary, where—" My arms and the blanket went around her so she couldn't scream. But how that gal could kick. I hung on because I couldn't let go, and she quieted down. I told her to take off her uniform. She just wouldn't and that was that. I called to Mary. While I held her, Mary did the disrobing act. Only it was on the nurse and not on herself. Finally, she got the uniform off. I told her to put it on while I gagged the nurse. Then we took it on the run.

Out of the window, up the fire escape and over onto the Ruthven Arms roof. Wearing the uniform, Mary had no trouble getting downstairs. In a few minutes, I came down, with my roll of wire, metal box and blueprints. The night clerk hardly noticed me. I found Mary outside and we went to my car. I took her to Mrs. Kean's.

Sitting in my office the next day, trying to think of a three letter word for obese. the neatest little guy I ever saw walked in. He wore a neat suit, a neat tie and a neat, hard hat. Even his face seemed neat. I pointed to a chair and asked him what he wanted. Just as I expected, he got right down to business.

"You are Willliam H. Steele?" he clipped.

"Right," I told him.

"My name is Brant Wheeler. I'm from the Zenda Agency. Came to find out what happened to Sam Breadon. After that, I'll finish the job he was on."

This Wheeler person sure talked breezy, but he wasn't. Had confidence in himself and rated it, I guess.

"What's your plan?" I asked when Wheeler snapped off his last word.

"Get whoever killed Breadon first, then find the boy."

"It's a big order," I told him.

My visitor placed two neat hands flat on my desk. "I'm playing my hand wide open with you, Steele," he began. "Sam wrote you were all right and knew your way around. That's good enough for me. I'll need some help. Zenda pays what a job is worth."

The same as it had been with Breadon, I was starting to like this little rooster. I nodded and said:

"Count me in. And here's a hunch I'll give you. Find out who killed Breadon and you'll be on the track of the boy."

"You mean—" he began.

"Right," I cut in when he hesitated. "There's a hook-up somewhere."

Wheeler gave me that hard, cold stare of his. "You have a reason for telling me that."

I started to tell him when a rap came on the door. Wheeler looked at me with his eyebrows raised. I nodded toward a rear door. Wheeler got up and started for it.

"Most likely a client," I whispered as he passed.

It wasn't exactly a client. Just Doc Mayer and a big goon with a face like a gargoyle. The two of them stalked in, doc leading.

"Where is Mary Lathrop?" he yapped before I could speak.

"I'll bite. Where is she?" I grinned.

"Will you tell me where she is?" doc sputtered.

All this was getting under my skin. "Nuts!" I yapped back at him. "Go find her and take this totem pole with you!"

Right then doc pulled a quickie on me. He slipped out a gun and pointed it between my mind and my manners.

"Go to work on him, Rusty," he said to the gargoyle.

Rusty started around the desk, then decided not to. Brant Wheeler was standing in the doorway of the back room. He was looking for a chance to use the gun he was holding. It covered Mayer and didn't waver.

"Easy does it with that gun," he was saying, like a man asking for a match. "Put it on the desk and step back."

Doc put and doc stepped back. He wasn't too mad to understand an order like that. I stood up, winked at Wheeler and threw the gun in a desk drawer.

After that, I walked to where the gargoyle was standing. He made a pass at me. I ducked. Next I started a right from the floor. The under part of the gargoyle's chin got in the way. His feet came off the floor a full six inches, his eyes crossed and the birdies started to sing for him. Mayer turned a sickly green, as if he expected to be next. But he was too soft to really hit. I chased him into the hall, dragged out the gargoyle and locked the door. I didn't want any more people butting into our talk

Wheeler was watching when I came back. "Nice, friendly clients you have," he said dryly.

"Can you remember those two?" I asked, side-stepping the sarcasm.

"I been using my eyes," Wheeler snorted.

"Good! The short guy is Doc Mayer of the Mayer Sanitarium. I never saw the big mug before. Anyhow, I'd be willing to make a little bet that you and me bump into Doc Mayer again before we're through."

Wheeler bit off the end of a thin, neat cigar and leaned back. "You do the talking. I'm a good listener. But, before you start, did you notice anything about Rusty's left hand?"

"Third finger missing to the second joint," I told him.

"Check." Wheeler seemed pleased. "Now I have him tagged. Rusty Burger from home. Another bad egg I know about."

I started talking and told Wheeler things that interested him plenty. We chewed the fat for a couple of hours. Wheeler decided he wanted to ask the home office some questions and went to his hotel to phone. We agreed to meet at Uncle Dan's for supper.

At six o'clock I headed for Uncle Dan's and Brant Wheeler. He wasn't there, but the place was buzzing about some man who had been slugged in front of the place next door. Acting on a hunch, I tried to find out who it was. No dice. I did find out, though, what hospital he had been taken to.

I hustled over, and, sure enough, it was Wheeler. When I got there he was all steamed up and ready to leave. The tough, curled brim of his neat, hard hat had taken most of the blow. There wasn't anything funny about the look he gave me when I walked in.

"Any idea who jumped you?" I asked.

"There were two of them, one a big lug," Wheeler began. "Jumped me from behind a lumber pile." He was silent for a moment and seemed to be trying to recall something. "Do you know of any place called the Camel?" he asked finally.

I nailed that one quick. "There is the Camelot," I told him.

It didn't really register with Wheeler until I had given him the full story about Mary Lathrop, Mrs. Kean, Doc Mayer, Braxton and all the rest; including the monkey on the motorcycle. Wheeler thought it all over carefully. I could see he was matching one thing up with another. Finally, he said:

"My idea is that Sled Braxton is the best one to start on. Suppose we go out to Camelot and really get tough, if we have to."

"Sled will meet us halfway," I told him plainly.

"I can play the game alone if you have any reason for not wanting to see Braxton," that little bantam snapped at me. Hinting I might be afraid made me sore.

"Look here, you sawed-off stick of dynamite!" I told him. "I beat the living hell out of Braxton once, and I can do it again if I have to. If you're wishful to go out to the Camelot and get our heads broken, it's all right with me. I'll show you how a real man works and take the place apart!" It sounded like a movie script, but I was sore.

Believe it or not, I think Wheeler almost grinned. Right then he paid his hospital bill, slicked himself up and was ready to go. After we started, I began to figure out what we'd do after we got there. There wasn't a thing we could pin on Sled, or anybody else. All we could do was make our bluff and see what happened. If it didn't work, Sled would most likely have us beaten up and thrown out. And that idea I did not like. Getting tossed out of night clubs is not a habit of mine. Even if it has happened.

At the Camelot, I headed for the cashier's cage and the little bundle of curves that sat inside. She gave me the come-hither smile and said there were no vacant tables.

"It's Sled we're looking for," I told her.

"Sled?" She turned on the sympathy stop. "I'm so sorry. He is out of town. Tampa for a little sunshine."

It might have been on the level. Then, again, Sled might have the idea things were getting a little hot and wanted to be out of town if anything popped. I told Wheeler how things stood. He acted like a man who had missed a friendly poker game. His next suggestion was that we find Cricket and make him chirp.

Cricket looked like small potatoes, but

he might do for a workout, so I agreed. I braced the bundle of curves again and asked if Cricket might be on the lot.

She did not know, but if he was, he would most likely be in Cabin 26-A. The Camelot housed all their help in individual cabins. So 26-A was the next stop.

The cabin was set well back from the inn, in a clump of trees. The place was lighted and the front shade up. The two of us were sneaking toward 26-A, when a voice that could have sounded a lot pleasanter told us to keep moving toward the cabin, and to keep our hands up. When we got there the voice called out, "Cricket!" and made us stop.

Cricket came out and saw us standing in the light from the door. At first, I thought he was going to take it on the lam. Then he saw the bird who had caught us flat-footed, and came out to look us over. Even when he saw we were helpless, Cricket didn't look any too happy. Finally, he frisked us and motioned us inside.

We went. Wheeler was not saying a word, but I could see those sharp eyes of his taking in everything. I'll bet there wasn't a match stub on the floor he couldn't have told about. Like me, he was waiting for only half a chance to make a break. When we got inside, I let out a grunt. The guy that had nailed us was the big bruiser with the gargoyle face. Wheeler gave me a quick look. He had spotted Rusty, too.

About then Cricket got to work. He pulled down the shade, herded us into a corner and asked a few questions of Rusty. Then he started in on us. I could tell by the questions he asked, he was not sure why we were there. More like fishing for information. The three of us batted the breeze back and forth, getting nowhere. Finally, Cricket started in on me about Mary Lathrop; where she was and what she had told me. I played dumb.

While all this talk was going on, Wheeler seemed to be getting nervous. Shuffling his feet, moving his hands and wetting his lips. It was a good imitation of a man turning yellow, but I knew it was only an act. So I pulled in my belly and was ready for anything. Suddenly, the lights went out. Wheeler snapped, "Move!" and we both made a leap for the door.

We sailed through into the darkness outside, landed running and took out for the trees. There was a crash of shots from the cabin that didn't mean a thing. Neither Cricket nor Rusty had any idea of the direction in which we were headed. We didn't, either, until we got there. We ducked behind a pile of cordwood and peeked over the top. There was plenty of excitement going on around the inn and the cabins. Flood-lights were on, people ran around swinging flashes and having lots of fun. We watched for a while until the excitement died down. Then I asked Wheeler:

"How come those lights went out so lucky?"

Wheeler grunted his disgust. "Some people are so damned careless how they plug in wall sockets." Then:

"Where do we go from here?"

"To find my car," I told him.

"I suppose we might as well go back," he grumbled.

"We're not going back right now," I shot back. "We find my car and then I'll tell you what happens next."

We circled wide and came into the inn parking lot from the far side and got to the car. I opened the back compartment and felt around until I dug up a spare gun that was always there. It was a nice gun. Too big to carry in a holster, but a pip if the going got rough. Those .45 slugs would stop a horse. I slipped the gun in my pocket, closed the compartment and gave Wheeler the lowdown.

I was going back after Cricket and the gargoyle, if they were still in A-26. Cricket and Rusty had made me look like a sap, and I can't afford that in my game. Back we went to the woodpile and came up to the cabin from that side. The cabin was lighted, the same as before. We could see Cricket talking with the gargoyle. We braced the front door, me wavering my gun cowboy fashion. It was Cricket who started all the fun.

That nervy, little fool took one look, made a dash for the door and Wheeler tackled him. They went down mauling and punching. Rusty acted as if he didn't know what to do. He was the one I wanted, so I started for him. He knew enough to swing, seeing my hands were up. The big ape was muscle-bound and almost got in his own way. I was waiting to get in one good punch so he would know this wasn't a waltz we were doing. After that, I wanted to talk with him. But Rusty wouldn't have it that way. He landed a swing on my ribs that made my mouth open, and I had to clinch until my breath came back. Then I really cut one loose. A nice, clean tap on the right side of Rusty's chin. He went down slowly and lay on the floor. I waited, hoping he would have some sense when he got up. But when the gar-

goyle came to his feet, he was holding a knife and started a round house swing with it. I am no gazelle, but right then I moved fast. I ducked under the swing, grabbed Rusty's free left arm, pulled back and twisted, all in the same motion. It wasn't pleasant, the cracking sound that followed. But the damn fool had asked for it. Rusty went down moaning and I stepped back, reaching for my gun. I wasn't fooling any more.

Standing there, I looked around for Wheeler and Cricket. They were not in the room. When Rusty and I were putting on our act, I got the idea they went out the door in a hurry, with Cricket in the lead. I must have been right. Cricket came in with Wheeler right behind him. Wheeler had lost most of his neatness, while Cricket looked like the breaking up of a hard winter.

I looked them over and started to laugh. Honest, they were a pair to draw to. Wheeler glared at me out of the one eye that was open and shoved Cricket into a chair.

"Sit still or I'll work you over again," he puffed. Then he looked at Rusty still groaning on the floor. "Breadon said he thought you could get tough," was his only remark.

"He pulled a knife," I explained.

Wheeler nodded. "His kind always do something like that. You should have broken his neck."

About then Rusty sat up, grabbed his left arm and made growling noises deep in his throat. I let Cricket watch him for a while. Then I went over and planted myself in front of the little weasel.

"All right, Cricket, give," I told him.

He did and in a hurry. It was clear, precise directions as to where we could go. I knew it would do no good to beat Cricket up. He was too tough for that, so I tried another tack.

"Doc Mayer looks like a weak sister if he was pushed around a little," I said as if speaking to Wheeler.

Cricket didn't bat an eye.

"What did you do with the kid from Chicago?" I asked next.

Rusty swore at that one. Cricket looked as if he would like to shoot the poor boob. It wasn't any answer, though.

"Who was the big thug that killed Breadon?" I spoke to Cricket, but I was watching Rusty. The dumb cluck had forgotten his arm and was staring at me. His eyes bugged plenty.

Then Wheeler took a hand. "You might get somewhere if you worked on the big one," he suggested.

The idea didn't sound so hot. Rusty was only good for rough work. He didn't have brains enough to know what was going on. I explained this to Wheeler, and he came up with another.

"You spoke of Doc Mayer being a weak sister," he began. "Why not call on him and see if you're right."

"Plenty of risk," I objected. "We might go to jail."

"We may go, anyway, after what's happened here." Wheeler was a cheerful guy who didn't care who went to jail.

It ended by our tying up Cricket and Rusty, locking them in the cabin and heading for Doc Mayer's place. If we didn't make the grade this time, I knew the Steele Agency would be among the missing. I had practically wrecked the gargoyle, whammed Doc Mayer where he put his food and abducted Mary Lathrop from the sanitarium.

The Mayer Sanitarium was pretty much dark when we got there. A pasty-faced, yellow-haired lad was sitting under a lamp reading a paper. He had on a nice, white uniform and peered over his reading lamp when we came in the door.

"Is the doctor in?" I asked.

The lad looked at Wheeler's black eye and cut face. "There are no doctors on duty now. Anyway, we don't take accident cases."

It didn't seem like any time for fooling, so I sort of lifted the gun out of my pocket and bit off my words like I hated to use them.

"We're here on business. Where's Doc Mayer's room?"

Yellow hair would have been a lot of use in an emergency. His eyes popped and his mouth opened at the sight of my gun.

"D-d-r. Mayer's room is down the hall. T-t-the third one on the l-l-left."

Just to play safe we locked the lad in a closet and set out to find Doc Mayer. He was in the third room, all right, snoring like a man with a good digestion. I opened the door carefully, walked over to the bed and told Wheeler to snap on the light. Mayer blinked awake, recognized me and started to shrink like a retread on a hot day.

"You have no business here," he managed to say when I only stood and looked down at him.

"Try thinking up a better one, doc," I told him.

That fat crook sounded as if he was going to cry. He jumbled a lot of words. At last he was able to say:

"I lost my head in your office, I guess. I was so worried over Mary Lathrop's disappearing."

"Forget what happened in my office," I told him. "You have a hell of a lot more to worry about than that."

Doc must have grasped the idea he was not going to die right away. "I have nothing to worry about," he said loudly.

"Cricket Morgan don't tell that kind of a fairy tale," I shot back at Mayer, as if I knew plenty.

"Cricket Morgan! Who is he?" That two-bit nerve specialist was sure quick on the comeback. So quick I was getting fed-up.

"Look, doc," I growled, "it's late and I'm tired. I have Cricket and Rusty Burger where I want them. And Mary Lathrop, too. Do you blab or let someone else beat you to it? I might be able to make it a little easier for you if you're ready to help."

Being what he was, the doc blabbed, and Mary Lathrop confirmed a lot later. It all started during a card game in A-26. There was the kid from Chicago. Cricket, Rusty and my friend who rode the motorcycle playing. Cricket started cheating, the kid spotted it. A fight started and the kid from Chicago got a knife where it didn't do him any good. During the fight, Mary Lathrop blundered in to see what all the noise was about. That brought Doc Mayer into the picture. Cricket had known him when the doc was not strictly on the up-and-up. Cricket gave Mayer the tip he had better take care of Mary, or else.

The first time I showed up at the Camelot, Cricket thought I was riding his tail for what had happened. Naturally, he wanted to cover and sicked the motorcycle thug on me. Cricket had got next to Sam Breadon, too, and made Rusty use a blackjack on him. A nice mess, but I got square with Doc Mayer.

But I ought to apologize to Sled Braxton.

PALE HANDS I LOATHED.—*continued from page* 17.

Cavanaugh said, "Editor, Johnny. For more money than you'll ever need. A job for life, Johnny."

A job for life, with the biggest paper in town. Why not? What had June Drexel ever meant to me, except trouble? I thought of Norah and Junior. I said, "You can go to hell. That's where you're going eventually, anyway."

Amateurs shouldn't commit murder. He hadn't even got rid of the gun. They didn't need his confession, to burn him. Once they had the pointing finger, they tied evidence to him like ornaments to a Christmas tree. His old pal, Gargan, the D.A., couldn't handle it, so an assistant D.A. took over and did a fine, clean job.

The *Courier* has changed plenty, just as Peckham promised me. It's a clean, family paper, and getting to be the biggest in town. We call 'em as we see 'em, and I'm proud to be city editor of a sheet like that. Norah is proud of me, too, and even Junior gives me a little, grudging respect from time to time.

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