

STREET & SMITH'S

DETECTIVE

STORY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER

BRITISH
1/-
EDITION



**MURDER
PLAYS CUPID**
BY FRANK R. READ

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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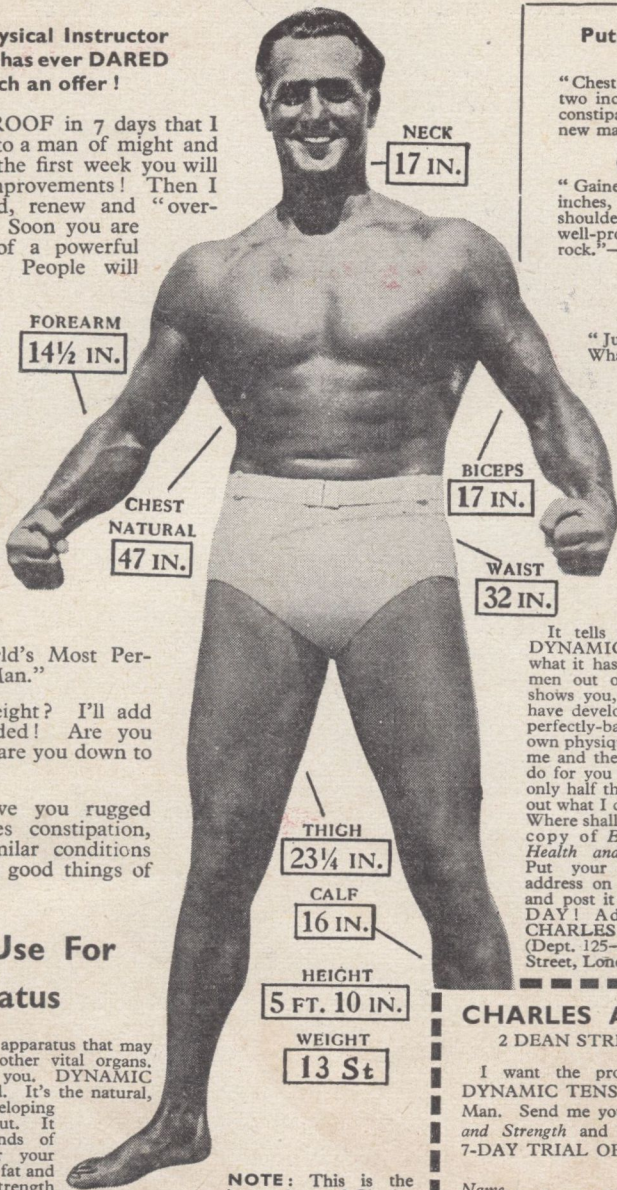
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STREET & SMITH'S

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.



Double suicide

By NORMAN ANTHONY

*It was fantastic—two people planning
deliberately to murder each other!*

I.

THE headline said DOUBLE SUICIDE IN GREENWICH VILLAGE and when I saw the name Jerry Brown under the man's photograph I whistled. He was Helen's ex-husband and this was going to be tough on her. The alimony had helped a lot, even if it had been irregular. Maybe it would be a break for me, though. Maybe she'd give in now and consent to be a detective's wife.

New York: Charles Muller, superintendent at 13 Bank Street, smelled gas last evening and traced it to an apartment on the second floor where he found the dead bodies of Jerry Brown and his wife, Janet, clasped in each others' arms. All six burners of the gas stove were turned on and, in addition, Brown had shot his wife and himself with his own service revolver.

A war veteran, Brown was the author of several mystery novels, and his latest, "Red Bullets" had been recently published. Janet Brown was an actress and last appeared in "The Vipers" which ran for over a year at the Hudson Theater. A suicide note, written by her, was not made public.

It was an early edition and that's all there was to the story. I looked at the two photos and remembered what Helen had told me about her ex. Not a bad guy, but screwy. Greenwich Village stuff. Played around a lot and was no bargain when he was drunk. She'd stood it for two years and then divorced him. He'd turned around and married this babe. Not a bad looker.

I wondered if Helen had seen the paper yet. And what her reaction would be. She must have loved the guy once. And sometimes, when she'd talk about him, I'd seen

a faraway look in her eyes and the old green-eyed monster would nudge me in the ribs. After all, he was a fancy pants and I was nothing but a flatfoot. Well, there was no sense being jealous of a dead guy. Even if there had been a little leftover love there, she'd get over it in time.

I walked into the boss' office and asked him if I could take a look at the Brown file.

"Friend of yours?" he wanted to know.

"I think he is." I grinned and told him about Helen. "She might marry me now that her alimony's dead."

He started laughing. "You always were a lucky guy!"

"What do you mean?"

He went through the mess on his desk and finally found the file. "Your future wife is going to get a nice little present of twenty-five grand from her ex-husband!"

"Life insurance?"

"Yeah. His present wife was the beneficiary, but in case of her death the dough goes to the ex-wife."

"How old was the policy?"

"Five years. Your girl friend was the original beneficiary and Brown changed it when he married again."

He must have been a pretty decent guy at that, I had to admit, and my spirits began skidding. Helen would feel nice and independent now with twenty-five grand in her kick.

"Maybe she won't take it," I said hopefully. "She divorced the guy a year ago."

He shrugged and tossed me the file. "She's crazy if she doesn't. She's entitled to it. The insurance company's got the policy. There's nothing much else there but the gun and the suicide note."

"Autopsies?"

He shook his head. "Wasn't necessary. Open and shut." He pointed a stubby finger. "The report's in there."

I sat down on the edge of the desk and read it. Brown had been shot in the left lung, the wife in the stomach. Death hadn't been instantaneous; the gas had killed them. The man's arms had been around the woman; her right hand had been bandaged, evidently from a burn. There was evidence of drinking. The gun was a Colt .38 and looked as if it hadn't been used before. The chamber showed two shells had been fired. I looked at the boss. "His fingerprints on it?"

He grunted. "The gun was in his hand."

I took out the liquor-splotched paper. There'd been drinking, all right. The writing was a drunken scrawl covered with ink blots.

"Did they check on the handwriting?"

He grinned at me. "Yeah, it's hers. You've got too much imagination, Bill. There's nothing phony about this case. It's just simple suicide."

I stuck the note back in the file and said, "Yeah, I thought the girl friend would be interested in the real story. The tabloids will turn this into a clambake."

The boss winked. "Maybe you can turn it into something, too. Don't forget to invite me to the wedding."

On the way downtown I read the account in a later edition. It was a natural for sensationalism. Famous actress and author, wild Greenwich Village drinking parties, ending in double suicide. They had pictures of Janet Brown in the different shows she'd been in, and had even dug up one from a musical which showed her in a postage-stamp bathing suit. She was a looker all right.

Fortunately, they hadn't dragged Helen into it and there was no mention of the insurance policy. I wondered if she knew about it yet. Probably not; insurance companies move slow.

I knew the minute she opened the door of her apartment that she'd seen the papers. She looked as if she'd been crying and her face, usually so full of color, was drawn and white.

"What a horrible way for Jerry to go," she said in a husky voice. "I just can't believe it, Bill. I saw him only last week."

"Yeah?" This was the first time she'd told me.

"I ran into him on Sixth Avenue and we had a drink together. He seemed all right then." Her hands trembled as she lit a cigarette.

I could feel that old twinge of jealousy. "Maybe you were thinking of getting together again."

She shook her head. "I had no illusions about Jerry, but I did feel sorry for him. I even wanted to help him."

"Did he strike you as the kind to commit suicide?"

"No. That's what makes it so tragic. He must have been drunk or out of his mind." She hesitated. "He was terribly unhappy with his wife."

"Did you ever meet her?"

"Once at a cocktail party. It wasn't very pleasant. She was tight and made some nasty cracks about my trying to get Jerry back."

"How do you think Jerry felt about it?"

Helen stared out the window and the sunlight caught her yellow hair. It caught me, too. She had on the black blouse I liked and it made a vivid contrast. I missed the Bambi brooch she usually wore with it. Somehow, it just fitted her; she had the soft brown eyes of a deer. She was silent for a few moments, then she said, "I think Jerry thought he was still in love with me." She turned with a wan smile. "But then he thought he was in love with every woman he was having a romance with." She had that far away look in her eyes again. "It's funny how I used to worry about him when he was overseas, for fear he'd get killed. Even though I knew he was interested in another girl at the time. I think that was Jerry's appeal to women. He brought out the mother instinct in them and then before they realized it he was making love to someone else."

"What did he talk about when you saw him?"

"He apologized for being late with his check and said he was just starting a new book." Helen frowned. "That's what makes this thing so tragic. He seemed optimistic about his work and was only upset about Janet and her drinking and her being unable to get a job."

"Do you think he was in love with her?"

"I think he was in love with the actress. I was with him the night he saw her in *The Vipers*. She'd made a big hit in the part. She played a dipsomaniac, and what Jerry didn't realize at the time was that she was just playing herself." Helen smiled. "That sounds catty, but I'm afraid it's true."

"Did she seem like the suicidal type?"

"Yes, I'd say she was. She was a terribly tense person and very emotional." She gave me a funny look. "Why? Do you think there's anything suspicious about it?"

"Probably not," I said, "but there are some peculiar angles to it. It isn't in character for people like that to wind up in a suicide pact. They'd be more apt to just walk out on each other."

"They couldn't," Helen reminded me. "They were trapped. Janet couldn't get a job and Jerry couldn't afford to run separate establishments."

I saw what she meant. Lock a couple of screwballs together in a small apartment, give them enough liquor, and anything is

liable to happen. "I guess that's the answer," I agreed.

"It's a horrible answer to life," Helen said sadly.

I didn't mention the insurance policy. It would only make her feel worse and I didn't want her to think I was poking my nose into something that wasn't my business. I told her about the police report as gently as I could and advised her not to read any more newspapers. She smiled softly and kissed me on the cheek as I was leaving. "I understand, Bill. You were sweet to come down."

I wasn't feeling very sweet as I walked over to Bank Street. It's tough work trying to cut out a ghost even if he was a two-timing rat. Helen had taken it a lot harder than I'd expected and it was going to take time to make her forget. Well, I had plenty of time, and a swell gal like that was worth it.

The janitor at No. 13 gave me the keys and I walked up to Brown's apartment. Nothing had been touched and a faint odor of gas still hung in the air. Or maybe it was my imagination and yesterday's onions.

The front door opened into a small foyer and this led down two steps into a large studio with windows facing Bank Street. There were two closets in the foyer, one of which faced the kitchen door and next to that was the door to the bathroom. The kitchen was a small one with the refrigerator, sink and stove all in a row. The compartment in the left side of the stove was full of empty gin bottles. There was only one small window and it made a nice cozy gas chamber. Whoever had engineered the double debacle had had sense enough to turn off the pilot lights in both the refrigerator and the stove. I wondered if they'd taken fingerprints on the gas burner handles. That would show who did the dirty work. It probably had been Brown. Women don't think of those things. I poked around in the garbage can, but there wasn't anything but a lot of cigarette butts and a couple more empty gin bottles. The sink was full of dirty dishes that looked as if they'd been that way for days. There were more empty bottles on top of the refrigerator and one lying on the floor. The cop who'd made out that report was certainly a master of understatement when he said there were evidences of drinking.

I lit a cigarette and stepped down into the studio. The pictures on the walls hung crookedly and some had no glass. Jagged edges still stuck up from the frames and there were scars on the walls where things had hit. Brown and his wife sure had put on some battles, with the female of the species probably doing most of the throwing. A studio bed, still unmade, stood in the center of the west wall with bedside tables on either side. There were piles of books on

each one, mostly paper-backed mysteries, and ash trays crammed full of butts. The edge of the table on the right side of the bed was corrugated from countless cigarette burns. A compact showed that it was the woman's side. Next to the compact was an empty glass that had once contained milk. I smelled it and it smelled queer. Could have been the milk souring, though.

There was a big antique secretary by the window. It was crammed with miscellaneous junk and scrambled papers. On top was a notice of a meeting of the Authors' League and a statement from Brown's publishers. He'd sold eighty-seven thousand copies of an earlier book and had made thirty-eight hundred dollars. No wonder Helen's alimony checks had been irregular.

There was a letter from his literary agent, informing him of a writers' dinner in Boston and arranging for him to autograph copies of his new book in Filene's department store. I wrote down the agent's name along with his address.

There was a telephone bill that included a lot of calls to Mt. Vernon, so I jotted down the number. There was an unpaid notice from a finance company and a lot of other unpaid bills; also a bill, addressed to Mrs. Brown from a Dr. Hoffman who had an office at 980 Park Avenue. It looked like the Browns had been having financial as well as domestic troubles.

In the desk drawer there was a pile of manuscript of the new book Brown had just started. The title of it was "No Murder to Guide Her." Brown had a sense of humor, anyway. In the corner of the drawer there was a flannel case, the kind you keep a gun in, and next to it a box of .38 cartridges. I poked around in the waste basket next to the desk and the bottom of it was full of torn bits of paper, most of them very small bits. I fished out all the pieces and put them in an envelope and stuck it in my pocket.

The bathroom had the usual medicine cabinet above the washbowl and it contained the usual junk, but there's no surer way of getting an insight on the character of the users. The toothpaste tube was a twisted mess with no cap on it, used razor blades were scattered all over the shelves, covered with dirt and dust and face powder, and a small cold-cream jar had no top on it. There was a long bottle of triple bromides, with half of them gone; a half-used box of aspirin, and a small box of sleeping tablets with four missing. The label on the box showed that it had been obtained on a prescription from Dr. Hoffman. The four missing tablets didn't mean much, as they could have been taken on different nights, but the sedative setup certainly showed that one or both of the Browns were nice little neurotics.

I gave both the hall closets a good going-over, but they didn't reveal much until I

got to Mrs. Brown. Brown didn't have many clothes and what he did have were in pretty bad shape. Most of the space in his closet was taken up with piles of old magazines. His wife, though, had plenty and the row of them, hung on hangers, was the only sign of neatness in the place. It was also a pretty good sign of the lady's character. Above the row of clothes there was a shelf which contained piles of bed linen and towels, and in between two folded bed-sheets I found a small red book. It had "Diary" on it in gilt letters and the handwriting was the same as that in the suicide note.

I took it into the studio and lit a cigarette and sat down to read it. The writing was sloppy and blotted on nearly every page, and many of the pages were stained with what might have been gin, from the odor. Mrs. B. had been a tidy drinker. Some of the days were blank, and some of the entries just ended incoherently in mid-air:

Monday: Another round of the offices, still no job. Hopkins promised me a part in a new show going into rehearsal soon, but later, when I ran into Frank Conroy in the Algonquin, he told me that Claire Dane had been signed up already. Got stinko and Jerry was nasty as usual. He's a terrible crab when he's on the wagon and can't seem to understand that an artist needs sympathy and understanding, especially between shows. Why did I ever marry him? Here I am, trapped in a Greenwich Village rathole with an lingo! And to think I gave up a nice fat alimony check for *this*! All he does is sit on his can all day and peck at a typewriter, and he doesn't make enough to keep me in Chanel No. 5! What a sucker I was!

Wednesday: Damn young snips getting all the jobs these days. Still no luck. And after I made such a hit in *The Vipers*. One agent had the unmitigated nerve to tell me it was because I was drinking too much, that managers didn't dare take a chance on me any more. Jerry tells me the same thing. The idiots! They can't understand the emotional crisis a woman goes through when she's out of work and that she needs liquor to keep her spirits up. I can act rings around Claire Dane and yet she gets a part that was just made for me!

Friday: Another fight. Jerry is getting impossible to live with. Oh, if I could only get out! He can have his dear, precious Helen back. I know he's still in love with her. I could tell that at the Grant's party today, the way he looked at her. I told her off and she had the nerve to insinuate that I was ruining Jerry's future! I'll bet I could write better than he can. His stuff stinks and I told him so. If he had any talent, he'd be in Hollywood where the big money is and support me decently. He says if I don't like it to get out. That's a laugh. How can I get out when I have no money and he won't give me

any? God, if I only *could* get out! My clothes are getting terribly shabby. No wonder I can't get a job!

Tuesday: Jerry was simply terrible to Fay today. And after I brought her all the way downtown! We'd been making the rounds of the offices, with no luck as usual, so why shouldn't we have had a few drinks? After she left, we had a terrible battle and he hit me. Just because I threw a few pictures at him! He had the nerve to tell me that he'd have me committed if I didn't stop drinking! I'd like to see him try it. Living with him is enough to drive anybody to drink. To think that I gave up a good alimony check for him! We can't go on this way much longer.

Friday: Went to see Dr. Hoffman this morning for my nerves. I'm a wreck. He gave me some more sleeping tablets, but does them out in such dribbles they don't help me at all. Still no luck. All I get is promises. Dane is making a big hit and I should have had the part! Think that woman was here today while I was gone. Found some butts with lipstick on them. Jerry claimed they were mine, but I don't use that color and I told him so. He said I was so drunk I wouldn't know the difference! I know! I'll bet she comes around every time I'm out! Well, he can have her and welcome. If I could only get a job! Everyone seems to be against me. If I had enough pills I'd take them and end the whole business!

Friday: (She evidently skipped a whole week here.) Wonder if I could make any money writing? They say you can't write until you have lived and, God knows, I've lived! Jerry put the idea in my head. He knew I'd had a tooth pulled with gas and he asked me to write down my sensations for a short story he was working on. I tried it and it wasn't bad at all. Even he admitted it was good. He showed me the story and it was the corniest thing I ever read. No wonder he can't make a decent living writing!

Tuesday: Don't think I can stand this existence much longer. Have given up going around to the offices; it's only a waste of time. Jerry is getting worse every day. He won't even let me play our records any more, not even his favorite Spike Jones. And I can remember the time when we were first married, when we used to roll around on the floor laughing at them. I actually think he's losing his mind. He looks at me so funny. I must find a way of getting out of this mess. If I could only get to the coast I might get started in pictures. But I'd have to have new clothes and enough money to last until I landed something. I guess it's hopeless—

I didn't bother to read any more. All the entries were the same: rambling, incoherent, growing steadily worse day by day. It was a tragic picture of a once talented actress

trying to forget her troubles and frustrations in drink. And drugs. A picture of a selfish, self-centered woman who undoubtedly got just what was coming to her.

The significant thing that the diary revealed was that Brown had not been drinking. I looked at the date of the last entry. It was two weeks before the double suicide. Of course, Brown may have fallen off the wagon during that period, and the suicide idea been born in the drinking bout that followed.

Another item that disturbed me was the reference to Helen. Could she have been seeing Brown all this time and stopped in at the house? She'd admitted that she felt terribly sorry for him, that she wanted to help him. I felt a sudden sinking emptiness at the thought of her being here in the room with him. Then I realized that I was basing my uneasiness on a drunken woman's suspicions, and shoved the diary in my pocket. There was no sense letting anyone see it. I'd throw it down the incinerator when I got home.

As I started out, I noticed the radio-phonograph and opened the cover. There was a record-changing gadget inside and a half dozen records. The top one was a Spike Jones. It was called "You Always Hurt the One You Love," and I switched it on. It was a wild, ribald burlesque of a torch song, sung by a whining nasal voice, and at the end of each whine there was a bedlam of noise, consisting of loud whacks, revolver shots, and a woman's piercing scream. It was a very funny record, but it hadn't been very funny to Jerry Brown. You always hurt the one you love. Jerry Brown had done just that.

The janitor was sitting on the front steps when I left. He grinned at me. "I heard ya' playing them Spike Jones records. They're a riot, ain't they?"

I agreed with him that they were a riot. "Were they playing them the night of the suicide?"

He jerked his bald head up and down. "Yeah. They played 'em all the time."

I decided not to call Helen that night. It was better to leave her alone for a while. After dinner I got out the torn pieces of paper I'd found in the waste basket and started putting them together. It took me four hours and when I'd finished I saw it was a short story called "The Mask of Courage." I read it and it was pretty bad. I'd read one or two of Brown's books and he was a clever writer. This one was obvious corn and was all about a poor guy in Germany who worked in a chemical factory and who, along with everybody else, had to wear a gas mask. This fellow was a very sentimental fellow though, and saw himself as a knight in shining armor and he got to like the mask so much that he swiped one and took it home with him. Then, when the war

started, he was put in a concentration camp and when he packed up his little belongings he slipped in the mask. When he got to the camp, he was afraid they'd search his baggage, so he hid the mask in his clothes and the next thing he knew he was herded into a gas chamber with a lot of other unfortunate people. There was a pregnant woman next to him and he made her put on the mask so her son could live to fight for freedom!

If Jerry Brown had written that drivel, his wife had been right; he was certainly losing his mind. And yet she couldn't have written it. As bad as it was, it was the work of a professional. And there was something very familiar about it!

I took a cab over to headquarters and got out the Brown file and read the suicide note again:

"I feel a curious drowsiness . . . a silly drowsiness . . . I feel like laughing . . . laughing hysterically . . . everything seems far away . . . and peaceful . . . it's getting hard to breathe and my head feels light and there's a crazy ringing in my ears . . . I'm floating, floating in the air . . . but sinking . . . sinking into oblivion—"

I put the note back in the file and returned the file to the cabinet. I was glad the boss wasn't there; he'd kid the life out of me for wasting my time on a closed case. Closed case, my eye! That suicide note was identically the same, word for word, as the last paragraph of "The Mask of Courage" story!

When I got back home I looked at the fitted pieces of paper on my desk. They fitted all right. Fitted into murder! Brown had deliberately written that story, and had induced his wife to write her sensations from taking gas. Not being a writer, she'd naturally write it in long hand and he'd have a perfect suicide note!

I remembered the empty glass on the bedside table, and the funny smell it had. Brown had given his wife an extra dose of sleeping tablets in milk, then, when she'd lost consciousness, he'd carried her into the kitchen and turned on the burners. Obvious suicide. But why the double ending? Why the gun? Perhaps, in his drunken stupor, he had repented at what he'd done, and decided to join his wife in death. Men do curious things under stress of terrific emotion.

II.

DR. HOFFMAN was a sleek gentleman in a blue double-breasted coat, who was a psychiatrist as well as a general practitioner. He fairly oozed with unction and I could understand why most of the patients waiting in the outer office were women. Women with plenty of nerves and plenty of money to sooth them. Yes, he knew the Browns and had seen them both in the last few days. It was, indeed, a tragedy. He'd had

a long talk with Jerry Brown, saw he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown and had suggested his having his wife committed to an institution. A beautiful, charming woman, but a manic-depressive of the worst sort and a dipso. Brown had refused to have her committed; said he couldn't afford a private sanitarium and that he would not put her in a public ward.

"Did you give him any sedatives or sleeping pills?"

The doctor shook his handsome profile. "I suggested them to calm his nerves, but he refused to take them."

"How about Mrs. Brown?"

He'd been prescribing sleeping tablets for her for a long time, but had kept the amount down purposely for fear she'd take an overdose.

"When did she get her last prescription?"

He referred to a costly leather-bound book on his black walnut desk. "The day before yesterday. The prescription was for twelve tablets only."

I remembered that there had been four pills missing from the box in the medicine cabinet. It didn't make sense. Four pills aren't enough to knock a person out, especially one who is accustomed to drinking a lot. "Think she could have got hold of some extra ones anywhere?"

He looked at me with a funny expression. "Now that you speak of it, I discovered a bottle of phenol-barbital missing from my office the day after the Browns were here."

"Did you have either of them alone in your office when they were here?"

Dr. Hoffman thought a moment, then nodded. "Yes, while Mr. Brown was here my nurse called me out for a few minutes."

Brown's literary agent was pretty upset, too. "It's a damn shame," he said. "Brown had a lot of talent. I could have made a lot of money for him if he hadn't been tied up to that dizzy dame. She was enough to drive anybody nuts."

"Did you handle everything he wrote?"

"Sure. We had a ten-year contract."

"Did he send you a story called 'The Mask of Courage'?"

He looked puzzled. "Never heard of it. Why?"

I figured it was better not to explain. "I saw some scribbled notes on his desk. It was probably a story he intended writing."

"He hadn't been turning in much work lately, but I suppose you can't blame the guy. If I had had that dame on my neck I'd have joined the Foreign Legion."

"Did you know her?"

He nodded jerkily. "Sure. She used to come up here all the time, trying to get money out of me without his knowing. She used to pretend he'd sent her."

"Did you ever give her any?"

"Not on your life. I knew she'd only spend it for liquor."

"Did Brown make that trip to Boston?"

He nodded, then he stared at me. "Say, that's a funny thing. He wired me from Boston to meet him at the Grand Central Station; he was coming in on the ten o'clock train." He fished around in his desk and brought out the wire. "I went to the station, but he never showed up." He shrugged. "He was that kind of guy, so I didn't think anything about it until just this minute."

"Where did he stay in Boston?"

"At the Copley Plaza."

"And you have no idea what train he took back?"

"Not the slightest. Outside of that wire, I haven't seen or heard from him in a month."

On the trip to Boston, I looked at the scenery, but I didn't see it. I was reviewing the events leading up to the crime, as we detectives say. This Brown had been one smart apple, and it wasn't so strange when you came to think about it. He was a clever mystery writer and when he'd reached the end of his rope he had tried to use his art to get himself out of a bad jam. And he'd almost succeeded—as far as working up a perfect alibi. After sending the wire to his agent, he'd evidently taken an earlier train back, then all he'd had to do, after he'd murdered his wife, was to go back to the Grand Central Station, sneak through an open gate, and come out the Boston train exit and meet his agent. Some strange fate had kept him from keeping that appointment, however.

At the Copley Plaza a sandy-haired clerk remembered Mr. Brown well and just loved his books. And he'd been so considerate, too. He'd given up his room at two o'clock in the afternoon, although he wasn't leaving for New York until six, because he thought someone might need it. It was seldom you found hotel guests as thoughtful as that.

Yes, Mr. Brown had made one phone call, long distance to New York, the night he arrived. He'd called his house. Mr. Brown was one thoughtful guy, all right. He wanted to make sure his wife was home and would be home the next day when he got back. The doorman at the Copley Plaza, who was a mystery fan, remembered Mr. Brown, and remembered his getting into a cab around two o'clock that afternoon and telling the driver to take him to the station. Mr. Brown had taken the two o'clock train back to New York.

I took the same one but before I left I phoned Helen and asked her if she'd like to have dinner with me. She sounded pretty cheerful and said she would, so I told her to meet me at a favorite hangout of ours. I let her have a cocktail first before I broke the news. I hated to do it, but she was going to find out sometime. "Helen, I'm afraid Jerry murdered his wife."

She stared at me, her face as white as the linen collar around her neck. Her lips were parted as if someone had just knocked the wind out of her, and she didn't speak for a long time. "Jerry wouldn't . . . couldn't do such a thing," she whispered, her eyes dark with shock. "What makes you think he did?"

I told her what I'd discovered, at least enough to make her realize that Jerry's guilt was bound to come out. I didn't mention the diary or Janet's suspicion that she'd visited Brown. She'd had enough shock as it was. She just kept staring at me.

"But why would he kill himself then?"

I ordered another drink. "Remorse probably, a temporary moment of insanity. Hoffman said he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown." I hesitated and she noticed it.

"Please tell me everything," she said in a low voice.

"I can't yet. They'll have to perform an autopsy. It looks as if he gave her an overdose of sleeping tablets, in a glass of milk."

A big tear was rolling down her cheek and I gave her my handkerchief. Her hand was cold as it touched mine. "Better get that down," I said as the waiter brought the second drink.

The edge of the glass clattered against her teeth as she swallowed. "Poor Jerry," she murmured huskily. "He must have been insane."

I wanted to tell her that "poor Jerry" was far from insane and had come near getting away with a perfect crime, but what was the use? Don't speak ill of the dead, et cetera.

"I hated to have to tell you all this, Helen," I said gently, "but I can't suppress evidence like that. If it ever got out it would ruin my reputation."

She made an effort to smile but it didn't jell. "I understand, Bill." She patted my hand, then suddenly looked at me. "How did you happen to find all this out?" she asked me.

"I went to the apartment. Routine check-up. It looked suspicious from the beginning, and the torn-up story spilled the beans."

She seemed to be getting control of herself again. "Did you question any of the people in the apartment house?"

"No one but the janitor. No one could have heard anything with those noisy records going full blast. Not even the shots."

She nodded absently and had that far-away look in her eyes again. She barely touched her food when it came, and it was a pretty dismal dinner. On the way home in a cab I put my arm around her. "Listen, baby, I know how you feel, but what's done is done and there's nothing you can do about it."

She hung onto my hand, and the bright-red bag in her lap reminded me of something, but I didn't know how to start. She

hadn't mentioned the insurance money, so they couldn't have notified her yet. And from what she'd told me about Brown it had been a long time between alimony checks. "How are you fixed for money?" I finally blurted out. "I wish you'd let me help you if you need it. You don't have to marry me, you know."

She lifted up her head and my heart jumped at the look in her eyes. "I'm O.K., Bill," she whispered and then she kissed me.

The next morning I traced the Mt. Vernon call I'd seen on the telephone bill. It turned out to be the Fay in the diary, a Fay Crosby. The name rang a bell in my memory, but I couldn't track it down. I called her up and she said to come right out, she was very anxious to talk to me. Well, I was anxious to talk to her.

She turned out to be an actress and an old chum of Janet Brown's. That's where I'd seen her name: on some show program. She was a big red-headed gal around forty and it didn't take much of a detective to see that she'd spent most of the forty years tipping the merry elbow. She lived with her mother in an apartment near the station and I hadn't been in the house more than two minutes before she had a bottle on the table and a couple of glasses. After she'd explained her great grief, with gestures, over the terrible tragedy, I asked her how recently she'd seen her friend. She raised a couple of heavily penciled eyebrows toward heaven and exclaimed, "Why, she came out to visit me the very day it happened!"

I raised my eyebrows, too. "Are you sure it was the same day?"

She made a flowing gesture with five scarlet fingernails. "She came out that very afternoon, Mr. Reagan, and I expected her to stay overnight as she usually did. I just can't understand it. She was in such good spirits and Janet wasn't the kind who would kill herself. I know that husband of hers drove her to it!"

"What time did she leave here?" I asked her.

She raised the eyebrows again, this time even higher. "I don't know! She complained of a headache just before dinner and went upstairs to lie down. She often did that, so I didn't think anything about it. When I went up to bed, I peeked into her room and she wasn't there. She must have gone out while we were in the dining room. You can imagine how I felt when I picked up the paper the next morning!"

I could imagine how she felt all right. I was doing some imagining myself. What had caused Janet Brown to suddenly develop a headache and then sneak back to New York? Was she worried for fear her husband would come back from Boston and not find her there? No, that didn't fit Janet's character at all. I began to smell

something cooking and it smelled of murder. Double murder! Janet Brown had planned that trip deliberately to give herself an alibi! She had planned to murder her husband!

The insurance policy had been the incentive in her case. That and the handy gun in the desk drawer had given her the idea. The chances were they had been in the same drawer; that was the logical place for a policy. Nosing around while her husband was away, she'd found them both, and the idea had hit her right between the eyes. A chance for escape, new clothes and a new career on the coast. And, curiously enough, her reasoning had followed the same line as Brown's. They'd both figured out the same kind of alibi. She'd planned to sneak away from her friend's house without their seeing her, return to New York in time to welcome her dear hubby back from Boston, kill him, and then return to her Mt. Vernon guest room where her hostess would find her safely in bed the next morning. The only chance she took was that Fay might look in on her during the evening.

There was only one thing wrong with the theory. Janet Brown hadn't had the brains to think out such a perfect alibi, such an ingenious crime. With Brown it was his business, but everything pointed to Janet's being a far from brilliant woman. An idea struck me and I looked at Fay Crosby, who was pouring herself another drink.

"I suppose you've seen most of the plays Janet appeared in?"

She smiled weepily. "Oh, yes. I was with her in a lot of them."

"Do you remember one where she killed a man and tried to get away with it?"

The redhead concentrated with gestures and then her face lit up. "Yes! It was in *The Vixen*! She shot her ex-husband, who was trying to blackmail her, and after she'd killed him she squeezed his hand around the gun so it would look like suicide! Oh, she was wonderful in the part!"

"I'll bet she was," I agreed.

That was it. Seeing the gun and the insurance policy, she had started figuring out some way of killing her husband and getting away with it, then she remembered the play she'd been in. On the way back to town, I did a little crime reconstructing. Janet waiting with the gun for her husband's return from Boston; waiting in bed, probably, pretending to be drunk, the gun hidden under her pillow. That explained the bandaged hand, a simple device to avoid showing fingerprints. She'd probably used it in the play. And she had the phonograph going full blast, playing "You Always Hurt the One You Love," so the shots wouldn't be heard.

Jerry's return. The strained greetings which might have sparked suspicion on both sides. The suggested glass of milk which gave him the opportunity to slip in the extra sleep-

ing pills. The waiting for them to take effect. Janet's waiting for the right opportunity. It was fantastic. Two people planning to murder each other and, unconsciously, timing it in synchronization! And up to the very last moment, neither of them aware of the other's intent!

I could picture Janet sipping the milk and then her sudden realization that she'd been drugged. Then she remembered the suicide note and knew she was about to be murdered. Pretending sleep and covertly watching her husband go into the kitchen. She might have even smelled the first faint traces of gas and, in a desperate attempt to overcome her drowsiness, had staggered to the kitchen and let him have it. That must have been the explanation for the shots. After she'd shot him, he'd wrestled the gun out of her grasp and, in a blind rage of frustration, shot her. Then they'd both collapsed and, in falling, had closed the kitchen door on their twin doom!

It was sensational and I couldn't get the silly grin off my face. I could see the headlines: "Lieutenant Bill Reagan Solves Double Suicide. Suicide Pact Double Murder!"

The train was pulling into Grand Central and I smiled at the Three Feathers billboard in front of me. What a feather in my cap this was going to be! A nice present from the insurance company, a bonus from the boss, a million dollars' worth of publicity, and maybe a captaincy. And maybe Helen.

The murder would void the insurance policy, but I would make that up to her. And the chances were she'd feel a lot better not having it at all. She was that kind of gal.

I'd painted the scene so clearly in my mind that now I wanted to visualize it in its original setting. It was going to be one whale of a story, and I didn't want to miss a trick. Seeing the apartment would give me the entire picture.

I grabbed a cab and stopped in at police headquarters. I didn't want to see the boss yet. I wanted to surprise him. So I had too much imagination, did I? I could picture that fat face of his when I walked into his office and spilled the news. I got hold of the cop who'd been called in on the suicide and asked him where he'd found the insurance policy. Yes, he'd found it in the desk drawer, next to the flannel gun case. That was the clincher. When he wanted to know why I'd asked him, I told him the insurance company was making a routine investigation. I didn't want to let it out yet, and I wanted the credit all to myself.

When I got down to 13 Bank Street, the janitor was sitting on the brownstone steps talking to what looked like a Greenwich Village poetess. They were both smoking pipes.

He handed me the keys without my even

asking for them, and grinned toothlessly. "Make yourself to home, lieutenant."

The woman took the pipe out of her mouth and looked at me, then she looked at the janitor. "Is this the officer who was here before?"

I said I was and she got all excited. "You know, the strangest thing happened the night of the suicide. I suppose I should have told you before, but I didn't think much about it at the time and only remembered it yesterday when we were talking about the tragedy." She stopped for breath. "I was just telling the super about it."

The janitor nodded vigorously. "That's right, she was."

"What's it all about?" I asked with a yawn.

She relit her pipe and I was afraid she was getting ready for a long story. I was anxious to get upstairs and I wasn't in the mood to listen to a lot of village gossip.

She got her pipe going and spit out some tobacco. "I live right under the Browns." She winked owlishly. "There was a couple for you! They ought to have moved to Madison Square Garden! Fighting all the time. Well, that night they had the phonograph going until I thought I'd go crazy. They never play anything but noisy records, and when they're not playing records they're throwing things at each other."

"They're not throwing things any more," I reminded her.

She laughed raucously. "Unless it's hot coals! Well, as I was saying, it was so noisy that I finally went upstairs to put in a complaint, and just as I was about to bang on the door, it opened and who should come running out but a girl!"

"Out of the Brown apartment?"

She nodded. "Burst out is more like it. She almost knocked me over. I thought it was a visitor or something and I was going to tell her what kind of friends she had, but she didn't give me a chance. She just stared at me as if she'd seen a ghost and then ran downstairs as if the devil were after her!"

"Remember what time it was?"

"Yes, it was about eight o'clock. I'd just finished washing the dishes and was going to work on my sonnet."

"I'd hit it right. She was a poetess, but she didn't look as if she ever washed anything. Her news was startling, though. The janitor had discovered the bodies at eight thirty!"

"What did the girl look like?" I asked.

The poetess sucked on her pipe. "She was a pretty little thing about twenty-five or six. She had big brown eyes and yellow hair and pink cheeks and it wasn't rouge. She had on a black-and-white checked skirt with a black blouse, and she carried a red bag. She wasn't wearing any hat."

"You'd make a good detective," I told her, "and thanks for the information. It was

probably one of Brown's girl friends. She got out just in time."

"He had plenty of 'em," the janitor chuckled. "He was a great guy with the dames."

I walked on upstairs and I felt a terrible sinking sensation in my stomach. It was like going the other way in an express elevator. Going the other way and heading for a crash.

I let myself into the apartment and stood there staring at nothing. Helen had brown eyes and yellow hair and pink cheeks that wasn't rouge. And she had a black blouse and carried a red bag. Mrs. Brown had been right when she suspected her husband of having visitors!

So I was going to reconstruct the scene of the crime, was I? I could feel the sweat coming out on my forehead and it took four matches before I could hold my hands steady enough to light a cigarette. Well, the scene was the same, but the show had changed into a nightmare. And there was no waking up!

It must have been Helen. The phrase kept ringing in my ears. It couldn't have been anyone else. The description fitted her perfectly. The only thing the poetess had overlooked was the Bambi brooch Helen usually wore with that black blouse. Then I remembered that I'd missed it the day I went down to see her. The day after the double suicide!

The boss' words came back to me like a sock in the jaw. "Your future wife is going to get a nice present of twenty-five grand! You always were a lucky guy!"

Yeah, I was a lucky guy all right. So Helen had known about the insurance policy. She must have known about it. Probably Brown had told her; it was only natural.

Helen wouldn't do that, I heard myself whispering; she couldn't do that. Maybe the yellow-haired girl hadn't been Helen. Maybe it had been one of those strange coincidences; another visitor who looked like Helen and wore the same clothes. I was only trying to kid myself. It had been Helen all right. It couldn't have been anyone else. And she'd probably been there before.

I stared around the apartment and tried to figure out how it had happened. She might have dropped in and left before the tragedy. But, no. In that case, she wouldn't have left the way she did. Frightened and running.

I tried to visualize what had taken place, tried to make the ghosts come to life again. It was like trying to remember a terrible nightmare you'd had. But this wasn't any dream. My eyes stopped with a jerk at the closet door, the one opposite the kitchen. Instinctively, I turned and opened it and the second I opened it I knew I was going to find something I dreaded. Something that would place Helen there without doubt.

I'd gone through the closet before, but

the jumble of hanging clothes hadn't uncovered anything. On the inside of the door there was a cloth shoebag hanging from a couple of nails, with rows of pockets. Stuck couple of nails, with rows of pockets. Stuck Bambi brooch.

I put it in my pocket and found myself tremoling like a scared kid. I could see her there, pressed against the shoebag and watching the stark tragedy through a crack in the door. Watching it and powerless to stop it.

Powerless? All she had to do was to step out. Step out and stop it. Neither of the gunshot wounds had been instantly fatal. It was the gas that had killed them. All she had to do was step out and turn off the burners. Helen had killed them!

The janitor was still sitting on the steps when I went out. The poetess had disappeared. I gave him back the keys and told him I wouldn't be bothering him any more. It was getting dark and I started walking, not even noticing where I was going. Walking like a drunken man who keeps staggering ahead to keep his equilibrium. I was dimly conscious of a yellow sunset and in the middle of it I saw Helen's face. It was looking at me with those soft brown eyes and saying, "I couldn't help it, Bill. I couldn't help it."

I stared blindly down at the street and the eyes were looking at me from behind that closet door. How had she got in there? She'd probably stopped in at the apartment on a sudden impulse to see Jerry, thinking she might help him some way. Maybe help both of them.

Then I was laughing bitterly inside. She'd had a chance to help them, but she hadn't had the guts. She'd stood there and let them both die. Stood there when all she had to do was step out of the closet. I could understand her dilemma. She'd probably knocked on the door and found no one home. The door must have been ajar, so she'd walked in and decided to wait a few moments. She'd heard a woman's step in the hall and, realizing it was Janet, she knew she was trapped and that there would be a scene. She'd gone through that with her once before.

Impulsively, she'd stepped into the closet, deciding to wait for an opportunity to slip out without being seen. It was fantastic that she should have picked this moment, but fantastic things happen in life. Fantastic things like two people planning deliberately to murder each other!

And then Jerry had come and she'd been the unwilling witness to the swift unfolding of a climax that had held her transfixed with terror. She must have been unconscious at first of the impending tragedy, just waiting an opportunity to escape—and then, right in front of her eyes, it had happened. In her fright, she might not have noticed the gas fumes, and the blaring phonograph and the shots had thrown her into a demoralized panic. When the kitchen door had slammed shut, she had rushed out of the apartment without thinking. No wonder the poetess said she'd acted as if she'd seen a ghost!

It was like an accident about to happen and being powerless to stop it. Yes, she had been powerless. I suddenly remembered walking my first beat in Brooklyn, and seeing a kid dashing out into the street in the path of a lumbering truck. The shock of it had stunned my mind into a motionless trance and I'd stood there frozen in my tracks as the heavy vehicle struck her. And I still stood there while others ran out to pick up the little crumpled figure.

I hadn't killed that girl. At that time I was only a rookie, with a rookie's greenness and without the alertness and quickness of reaction that training had developed. Yet, I could have saved her, but I hadn't killed her. And Helen hadn't killed Jerry and his wife.

I felt the Bambi brooch in my pocket and the prick of the pin stabbed into my consciousness and made me realize where I was. I'd walked all the way down to the Battery and was standing on a dock staring out at the ocean. I tossed the pin into the water and, as it sank, I could see Helen's face smiling at me thankfully.

When I got back to headquarters the sergeant told me the boss was looking for me. I went into his office and he tossed a letter across the desk. "This will interest you," he grunted.

I looked at it. It was a note, written in a wild scrawl, and told of seeing a yellow-haired girl dashing out of the Brown apartment the night of the suicide. It was from my friend, the poetess. I threw it back on the desk with a tingling sensation in my spine.

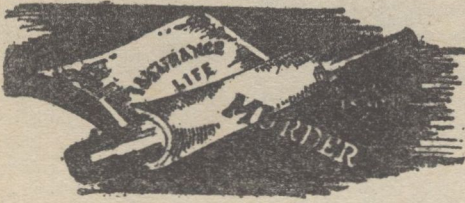
"Want me to go down and investigate it?"

The boss threw it in the waste basket and glared at me over his pipe. "Are you kidding? That dame is obviously nutty as a fruit cake." He made a circle with his finger beside his head. "I just wanted you to see it to show you what too much imagination will do!"

"It sure does queer things," I said.



Nightfall



BY
WILLIAM CAMPBELL
GAULT

*. . . she was too lovely and she had
too much money and all the eligible
men she knew were too dull*

It happened on a Tuesday, I remember, and I read about it in Wednesday morning's paper. I read about a lot of things, in that morning's paper, trade being dull this winter, and particularly this month. I read about it in the office.

A Mr. Ellington Strauss had fallen from the window of his fourteenth floor office in the Equity Building. Times were fairly prosperous, and brokers just weren't jumping from windows these days. Mr. Strauss was a broker. He was also, it appeared, a happily married man in sound financial condition, so the suicide theory was more or less eliminated. The element which gave the story front-page prominence, besides his social position, was the time. Mr. Strauss had fallen at midnight.

He wasn't, it seemed, the type of businessman who puts in long hours. He had *never*, his widow stated, worked that late before.

That was Wednesday morning, and it was just another news story. Wednesday afternoon, I spent on the trail of a hotel skipper, and earned a reasonably honest twenty-five dollars.

Thursday morning, Mrs. Strauss came to see me at the office.

"Helen West recommended you highly," she told me. "You were formerly with the police department, I understand, Mr. Barry?"

I nodded, and studied Mrs. Strauss. She was attractive and on the sunny side of thirty. She wore a dark suit and it contrasted nicely with her blond hair. She looked like Ann Harding. She also wore a mink coat.

"You've read about what happened to my —" She broke off, biting her lower lip.

I said I had.

"I'm not satisfied with what the police think about that." This last came quickly, almost blurted.

"They think it was an accident?"

She nodded, her eyes on my face. She was leaning forward in her chair. "I . . . I mean, how could it be—"

"He may have gone over to open the window, and it may have stuck." I stopped then. It sounded too foolish. "The police don't always reveal what they *really* think, Mrs. Strauss. It's conceivable that the case isn't closed, so far as the department is concerned. Don't underestimate their skill or their interest." Which sounded like a speech, I suddenly realized, and I may have blushed, though I doubt it.

"They consider it an accident," she said flatly. "I don't."

I wondered at her poise, the apparent absence of grief. I waited, saying nothing.

"Helen tells me you formerly worked for the homicide section, here?"

I admitted that I had.

Her voice was hollow, now, and dull. "Mr. Barry, I want you to find out what really happened."

"I can work on it," I warned her, "at your expense. I may come to the same conclusion the police have."

"Expense doesn't matter," she said. She was silent a moment, as though considering her next words. Then, "My husband and I weren't quite as happy as the newspapers would have you believe, Mr. Barry. Some rather ugly rumors have come back to me, already."

"Suicide?" I asked.

She looked startled. Then she shook her head. "There was a girl, a Linda Jerome. There were other girls before that, you understand, but he seemed to be serious about this Linda. I didn't, of course, tell the police about her—"

I didn't get it. Ellington Strauss was dead. If they weren't happily married, why should

his widow care? But perhaps—
him, despite his infidelities. Though I
couldn't believe jealousy would motivate
her, not now.

I asked, "Is there anything else you
didn't tell the police, Mrs. Strauss?"

Again, she looked startled. And, I
thought, guilty. She said, "Nothing else."

Well, it was her money. I'd work on it,
I said, and the retainer changed hands,
and she left.

I phoned Helen at her shop. Helen's an
interior decorator, and my girl, sort of.
"Thanks for the business," I told her.

"You're welcome. How about lunch, on
you, at some expensive place?"

"If you won't eat too much."

"I'll try to be a lady," she promised.
"Shall we say Leon's at eleven forty-five?"

"O.K. What do you know about Mrs.
Strauss? I mean, are you at all intimate?"

"I can learn to be," she replied. "But
what's that got to do with Mrs. Strauss?"

"Try not to be a comedienne," I said
sternly. "I meant Mrs. Strauss, of course.

You know her well?"

"I knew her fairly well in the old days.
Since I've joined the breadwinners, I don't
see much of that gang, Tony."

"But you do know her? And you've
probably heard things—"

"I might have," she agreed. "At lunch,
we'll talk it all over. I've a customer. Good-
by." A pause. "Good-by—sweetheart."

The line went dead.

It was still some time before lunch. I
went out, into a frigid north wind, and
down a block to where the coupé was
parked. The snow from last week's blizzard
was still piled high, but the streets were
completely cleared.

I drove down to headquarters, bucking
the wind all the way.

Lieutenant Burke Rafferty was in his
office, and the office was filled with smoke,
cheap cigar smoke. He was reading some
papers.

He took the cigar out of his mouth when
I entered. "Hell of a day to be out," he
said. "It must be important."

"You working on that Strauss business
personally?"

"Was. It's dead. This is a big town,
Tony, and I've got a small section. When
you coming back to work?"

"Never, probably. Can I see what you've
got on that Strauss thing, or would the
chief holler?"

"I can tell you all I know, but you could
read that in the newspapers. The elevators
are self-service, after ten o'clock, so there's
nothing from the operators. Cleaning
women saw nothing, they got to the four-
teenth floor about five in the morning
usually. If it was anything but an accident,
if he was slugged, and then tossed from the

teenth floor. We could check the
months on it, maybe, and find out some-
thing. We haven't got a couple months.
And maybe we wouldn't find out a damned
thing." He took a deep breath; that had
been a long speech.

"See you again," I said. "Bad weather
isn't it?"

"Who you working for, Tony?"

"A client."

"Give, Tony." The cigar was still in
hand. "If we want to be nasty—"

"You haven't time to work on it,"
pointed out. "I have. When and if the
should be a pinch, the alert Lieutenant
Rafferty would be right there, getting
name in the papers, Deal?"

"You talk like an angle-shooter,"
said. "What are you being so cute about?"

"I'm a private investigator. I sell
services, investigation and privacy. You
understand that, Burke. You know
wouldn't get mixed up in anything fishy."

"You're working for the insurance co-
pany," he guessed.

"Could be."

"O.K., he said. "There's one other angle
This Strauss, we hear, was mixed up
some girl. We don't know who she is,
don't even know if it's true. Just one
those things you hear. You could look
that."

"Right," I said. "And thanks. I'll
be in touch with you."

"Good idea," he agreed. "Close
Don't freeze your ears."

He was relighting the cigar when I
his office.

Mrs. Strauss had given me the J
girl's address and I phoned her, from
phone booth in the lower hall. Miss
was home, and would be home this
noon. Whether she would be home
depended on the nature of my business.

"It's about Ellington Strauss," I said.

A silence. I could hear the clatter of type-
writers in the next room, a loud-voiced
alderman in the hall. Finally, "Your name
is Barry, you said?"

"That's right. I'm a private investigator,
Miss Jerome."

Another silence. The alderman was com-
plaining to his listener about the city's in-
efficient snow removal in the recent storm.
Miss Linda Jerome said, "Well, all right.
At three o'clock. Does . . . do the police—"

"No," I said. "Three o'clock will be fine,
Miss Jerome."

I left the booth, and went out again into
the north wind. It wasn't quite eleven, but
it would take some time to find a parking
place, and if I were early I'd be luckier
about getting a table.

I found a parking space and had the
table when Helen arrived.

... established,
"Would you like a drink?" I interrupted.
"I'd like an Alexander."

I ordered that and a rum punch. When the waiter went to get them, I asked Helen, "What do you know about Mrs. Strauss?"

"I went to school with her. I haven't seen too much of her since, Tony. She was very popular with the boys, I remember. It's sort of . . . of the romantic type, isn't it you think?"

"She looked very poised and efficient to me," I said.

"Well, yes, I suppose, to a man. But, anyway, she always had enough dates, so she could be choosy. And she always had enough money so she needed to be choosy." Our drinks came. Helen lifted hers high. "I'd like a happier married life, when it comes," she murmured.

"You're shameless," I told her. "You can't embarrass me." Then, "If this Mrs. Strauss is so popular, maybe she didn't like to be let down, especially when she learned her husband had this streak of tomcat in him." I wondered if she knew that," Helen said. "Everybody else did. And, knowing that, I wonder why she is paying for this investigation."

"I knew why," I said, "it would help. It's the feeling she has not confided in me completely."

I drove Helen back to her shop, after she had come in for a moment to look at a chair she'd bought. It was nearly two o'clock. I left the shop and drove over to a small office on Eighth near Cook.

The Skipper wasn't there. Skipper is a man I use at times. I left a message with his secretary, and drove back to the office. There wasn't much mail, but I read what I could. It was, killing time until I was due at Linda Jerome's. The Skipper called while I was waiting.

I asked him if he'd ever heard about the Jerome girl.

"I don't think so," he said. "But that name rings a bell, somewhere, Mr. Barry. What about her?"

"She could be mixed up in the death of that Ellington Strauss," I explained. "You know, the broker who fell from the fourteenth floor of the Equity Building."

Skipper said, "I heard something. I forgot what it was, now. Look, I'll call you back. I'll find out what I can." He hung up.

At quarter to three, I was on my way over to Miss Linda Jerome's apartment. It was a fine apartment building, white and tall and modern, across from the park. Miss Jerome, the clerk informed me, lived on the twelfth floor and was expecting me. I went up in the elevator.

... at the door. She was dark and slim, with large, dark eyes, with no slimness where it shouldn't be. She was wearing a platinum-gray wool dress. She was not alone.

A tall, rather distinguished man sat on a love seat near the fireplace. He rose, as I entered.

He was, it developed through the introduction, her brother.

He said, "Linda has been very foolhardy, Mr. Barry. I'm sure she regrets it, now."

She looked at him and at me. She said nothing.

He asked, "Do the police know of her association with Mr. Strauss?"

"Not yet," I replied.

"But Mrs. Strauss does?"

"I don't know."

"She does," Linda said. "He asked her for a divorce so he could marry me. You should be investigating her."

"I'm sure the police already have," I murmured.

She went over to get a cigarette from a box on the coffee table. Her dark eyes were glowing, and her hand trembled as she lighted the cigarette with a table lighter. She said vehemently, "It would be like her to drag me into this mess. She hired you, didn't she? She sent you up here?"

"No," I lied.

"What can she hope to gain by it? Why is she so anxious to make a scandal of it? Unless she's got something to hide."

"Calm yourself, Linda," Calvin Jerome said quietly. "Hysterics aren't going to help any, now." He turned to me. "Just how deeply is my sister involved in this, Mr. Barry?"

"That's what I came to find out," I answered. "I've no more desire for a scandal than you have, Mr. Jerome. Discretion and tact are a part of what I sell. But I also work with the law, all the way."

He ran a hand through his thick blond hair. "I see. Well, to be frank, I saw nothing wrong in Linda's friendship with Ellington Strauss. What she says is true. They had planned to marry. I'm sure any love Ellington may have had for his wife was dead."

Linda said, "She didn't love him either. But he almost doubled her fortune in the years they were married. That's what she loves best of all—money. That's all she lives for."

Calvin said, "Be calm, Linda." His voice was harsh now. "Mr. Barry isn't interested in your opinion of Mrs. Strauss." He shook his head. "I think, perhaps, you'd better tell him about Diedrich."

Her eyes were scornful. "I'll tell him nothing. Let him bring the police into this. I've nothing to hide. But perhaps Mrs. Strauss has."

"I've no desire to bring the police into anything if it means a useless scandal. I've

no reason to want to involve any person unless it can clean up this business," I told her.

She said something I couldn't catch, and went over to stand near one of the room's full-length windows. She said, "I've nothing more to say, Mr. Barry. If you think the police should be brought into this, I'll be available at any time they want to question me."

Calvin Jerome shook his head sadly. "Perhaps that would be best," he said.

I couldn't see that there was any percentage in further questioning. I rose to go. Jerome said he'd come along with me as far as the street.

She didn't come to the door with us.

In the hall, while we waited for the elevator, I asked, "Who's this Diedrich?"

He hesitated. He looked nervous. Then, "His name is Ed Diedrich, 'Big Ed' Diedrich, I think he's called by his . . . his associates. He had quite a crush on Linda. It's one reason I was glad to see her interest in Ellington Strauss, despite the fact he was married. This Diedrich is some sort of promoter, I think."

"He's a rough customer," I said. "He was a big boy during the Volstead era. He hasn't lost much prestige since."

The elevator came now, and we said no more about the matter.

We parted outside at the curb. Calvin Jerome hailed a cab. Then, just before getting in, he turned to put a hand on my arm. "You have to do your duty I know. But I would appreciate any protection against unfavorable publicity you could afford Linda." His smile was weak. "She's more sinned against than sinning, if you'll pardon the cliché. She's a headstrong girl."

I agreed she was. I promised to do what I could.

The wind was still from the north, but it wasn't as violent. I drove back to the office for lack of anything better to do. I saw the big black Caddy parked at the curb in front of my office, but it didn't mean anything at the time. Though it seemed a bit unusual; this isn't a neighborhood that supports Cadillacs.

The pair of them were waiting for me outside my office door. Both short, both broad, both fairly well dressed. One I remembered from the old line-up days, Jug Butler. The other could have been his brother; he was that similar.

Jug said, "It's about time you came home, nosey."

I stopped there in the hall. In the quiet, empty hall. My office is the only occupied space on that floor. "You boys wanted to see me?"

"We brought you a message." It was the other lug this time. He nodded toward the door. "C'mon, open up." His hands were at

his sides, but Jug's were in the pockets of his overcoat where they stayed.

I opened up, and they followed me in. The door closed behind us.

Jug said, "The Skipper got too nosey. We worked him over a little. He said you were wanting to know about the boss' girl. If there were any questions, you could ask us."

"Big Ed must be well over fifty," I said. "I didn't know he had a girl."

"You could ask him about that instead of sending a pigeon. You got any guts at all, you could have come right to him. You're not the law, you know, Barry."

I said nothing.

"This playing copper don't pay off so well, the way it looks." His eyes went around my small, bare office. "The boss pays better than this. You should have come to him."

He came over, to stand a few feet away. His hands were still in his pockets. I couldn't take my eyes away from them.

I heard the other man walking around the side of the desk toward me. I wanted to turn, to face him, but my gaze stayed glued to Jug's right-hand pocket.

I felt the other man's fist under my ear, and I went down. I was instantly sick, the room was whirling, but I tried to get up. Jug's foot crashed my ribs. I went crazy. I shouted something and scrambled to my feet.

Jug's right hand came out of his pocket and I saw the blackjack. I saw it too late.

There was a pounding in my head, and then I heard the bell, like a recurring and ebbing wave of sound. The bell seemed to be inside my head. I opened my eyes slowly as consciousness drifted back.

The telephone was ringing.

Getting to my feet was the toughest part; my head seemed ready to burst with the sudden elevation. Weakly, I said into the phone, "Barry Agency."

It was Mrs. Strauss. She had reconsidered. She didn't think an investigation would be quite . . . quite proper.

I told her about the Jerome girl and about her brother. I told her about Big Ed Diedrich and what had just happened to me.

Her voice was hesitant. "Do you think it wise to continue under the circumstances?"

I felt for the tender spot on my skull and found it. "It's your money," I said.

"Yes"—her voice was curiously speculative—"it's my money."

I wondered why she should accent that last word.

The voice went on. "I've a natural suspicion where my money is concerned, Mr. Barry. Perhaps you had better carry on."

Which I had intended doing, with or without her subsidy.

I phoned Rafferty and told him what had happened. "Jug Butler," I said, "and some guy about his general build. Driving a

Cadillac four-door, a black one. Big Ed Diedrich seems to be in this business up to his hips as far as I can see."

"Why?"

"No idea," I lied. "He isn't being coy about it though. He doesn't seem to mind being the center of interest." For some reason, I didn't tell him about Linda Jerome. For some ethical, gentlemanly reason, I told myself.

"O.K., we'll check this Diedrich. You want to swear out a warrant for Butler?"

"I do. You couldn't have him fall down a flight of steps if you pull him in, could you?"

"You know we don't operate that way—often. Especially since you left. See you later, Battler." I thought I heard a chuckle as he hung up. Nice robust sense of humor in the man.

I tried a cigarette, but it tasted like wet straw. My head was throbbing with painful regularity. I tried to think, and nothing came. Then something did, something I suddenly remembered. I got the phone book from a drawer.

It was only to confirm something I was almost sure of. The Gotham Sporting Club was in the Equity Building. It was, I remembered, on the twelfth floor. It was one of Big Ed Diedrich's babies.

I took my time going down the stairs; my balance seemed to be off. Outside I took a good deep breath of the cold air. That helped.

I drove down to the Equity Building slowly. The coupé doesn't ride as well as it might.

E. Wadsworth Melton, the building's manager, was a short, pompous man with sharp blue eyes. He seemed a little impressed by the buzzer I flashed.

No, the Gotham offices weren't cleaned by the building's staff. Mr. Diedrich had his own cleaning women; he didn't want the firm's files or desks subject to possible snooping. The sharp eyes were suddenly wary. "Has this investigation anything to do with . . . with the unfortunate occurrence of the other night, Mr. Barry?"

"I think so. But you can rely on my tact."

He nodded. "Mr. Diedrich has, I've heard, some unsavory connections. But he's been an excellent tenant."

I went down to headquarters from there to make my complaint.

Then I picked up Helen for dinner.

We ate at a less expensive spot than we had at lunch.

"Wonderful day," she said.

I said it was a little cold for my taste.

"I don't mean that, silly. I mean a wonderful financial day. If this keeps up, you won't need to worry about that job of yours. I'll have plenty of money for both of us."

That's when my brain began to function

again. That's when the pattern became clear. I'd been going at this thing from the wrong angle.

I said, "Honey, a movie is out. Papa's going to work tonight."

She looked at me suspiciously. "Mrs. Strauss, I'll bet."

"Right."

"Tony, not really. You—"

"Work," I said. "Not play."

"Promise?"

I promised. Women, I reflected are naturally suspicious. Including Mrs. Ellington Strauss. I drove Helen back to the apartment she shared with her sister. I called headquarters from there.

Rafferty wasn't in, but Sergeant Jonas told me that they'd questioned Big Ed Diedrich and his alibi was perfect. During the time of Ellington Strauss' fall, Big Ed had been miles from the Equity Building, and there were any number of reliable witnesses who would testify to that. Including the mayor, who'd been at the same night spot.

Which all made sense. Big Ed had wanted to be suspected if anything went wrong. And something had gone wrong.

Jonas said, "Of course, he's got lots of mugs working for him. But where would we start? That Butler has disappeared completely."

"When the lieutenant comes in," I said, "if he comes in, tell him to meet me in front of 6741 Arlington Circle."

Then I called Mrs. Strauss. I told her I had to see her immediately. She would be home, she said.

When I pronged the receiver, Helen asked, "Is she in trouble, Tony?"

"Not yet," I answered. "You know, I think you've solved this case for me."

I left her with that; that and a good-night kiss and her prayers.

It was a long drive to 6741 Arlington Circle. It was a large, impressive home in a neighborhood of large, impressive homes, and the svelte, elegant Mrs. Strauss met me at the door herself. She'd evidently been watching for me.

She was wearing a strapless evening gown and an apprehensive expression. She led the way to a small denlike room off the entrance hall.

We were scarcely seated in there when I said, "You haven't told me all there is to tell about this business, have you?"

She looked at the carpeted floor then up at me. "I thought I had. Perhaps—"

"What's his name?"

She frowned, studying me. "Are you suggesting— Who's name, Mr. Barry?"

"Your . . . friend's. I'm trying to think of the tactful word."

She was still frowning. She wasn't indignant. She may have had more than a little suspicion about him as it was. She'd always

had money; she'd needed to be suspicious. She'd always been popular, too. She needed affection.

"You think—" she began, and stopped.

"I think he's mixed up in it," I said. "I think he's a smooth operator, and there's only one mistake he made. He made that for a sound theatrical reason."

She lifted her head now, and her chin was proudly out-thrust. "All right. I have a friend. His name is Curtis Revere. Is that what you wanted to know, Mr. Barry?"

"You're seeing him, tonight?"

"He's due to call for me in twenty minutes."

"You haven't told him I'd be here?"

She shook her head.

Through the front window I saw headlights stopping outside. It was a department car.

"If he phones," I said, "don't tell him. I'm going outside for a few minutes."

She nodded. Her eyes were dull. It's hell, I thought, not ever being sure.

There was a Detective Adams behind the wheel of the department car. Rafferty sat next to him.

I said, "Park this warning signal out of sight and come back. You can stay up on the porch, I think. There's cover there. Nail anybody going out, nobody going in. Maybe Adams had better cover the back door."

Rafferty snorted. He said, "Easy, Philo. If this is police business, why not let the police handle it?"

"There's nothing you could prove," I told him. "He might talk to me, once the deal is sour, but it's a damned sure thing he'd have nothing to gain by spouting off to the law."

"Who's the he?"

"Guy named Curtis Revere. Mrs. Strauss' boy friend."

"Oh. Oh, yes. The obvious thing, huh? O.K., Tony, it's your play."

"And your pinch," I added.

The car moved down the street.

I went into the house again. Mrs. Strauss didn't look any happier. I said, "With your beauty, with your charm, it's a damned shame you're so rich."

Something like a smile now. "And a double-damned shame that all the wealthy men I know are so dull. But Ellington wasn't."

I said, "I'll wait in this room. You can go to the door and bring him right in here when he comes." I paused. "And I can be wrong. There's a chance of that. I've been wrong before."

"I certainly hope you are this time," she said.

We turned the lights out in the small room and waited in there. There was enough glow from the hall light for us to see each other, but not enough to make us visible from the porch.

We didn't talk much, just sat there and waited. Mrs. Strauss had already told the maid she'd answer the door.

I learned that Curtis had come into her life some time ago, months before she'd learned Ellington was serious about this Linda. Which changed my theory somewhat, but not the pattern.

We were quietly smoking when the front doorbell chimed. She put out her cigarette and left the room. When I heard two pairs of footsteps in the hall, I turned on the lights in the den.

Then they were in the room.

My right hand was in my jacket pocket, and my .38 was in my right hand.

Mrs. Strauss said, "Mr. Barry, this is Mr. Curtis Revere."

His eyes held surprise for just a moment. Then they held nothing I could read.

I said, "I've already met him. But he called himself Calvin Jerome this afternoon."

He looked past me, then at Mrs. Strauss. His mouth was tight.

I said, "I figured it for a badger game in reverse sort of. I was wrong on that. But realizing that a stoolie had heard of Linda Jerome made it seem reasonable that she must be in some racket. You're not really her brother, are you, Curtis?"

His smile was thin. "O.K. The jig's up. I don't imagine either of you want a scandal. I imagine I'm free to go."

"Your imagination is too active," I said. "That bit of drama you and Linda put on this afternoon was a result of your imagination. But it led me to think Big Ed was my boy, and that's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

He shrugged. His eyes were on my pocket now. "Nobody's been hurt. I'm sure we can make a deal."

"Not with murder we can't," I said.

His shock was well simulated. "Murder? Surely, Mr. Barry, you don't think—" He looked at Mrs. Strauss. "Jean—"

She looked away.

I said, "After you got along so far in your plans, you realized the danger of escaping from the building. That's when you went to Big Ed. If you could use his office to hide in, in the event you couldn't get down fourteen floors that night, you'd cut him a piece of the pie later. This directing any possible suspicion toward Big Ed was probably his idea, after you went to him. As a sort of reserve red herring. He made certain his alibi was perfect. It was too good, that alibi."

He looked bored. "Are you quite through, Mr. Barry?"

I shook my head. "Your accomplice, Linda, served two purposes. First, as her supposed brother, you made the date with Mr. Strauss that night at the office, and slugged him there. Second, by seeing that

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Murder plays cupid

Although Jeff Hunter was a consulting efficiency engineer, it was the darnest way he was always getting mixed up in a murder case!

I.

"A VERY, very good morning to you, Smitty," long, sun-bronzed Jefferson Hunter called to his small wiry assistant as he breezed into the office. He crossed the room and threw up the wide windows. "Let's have some glorious nippy October ozone in, shall we?"

"Close those thrice-cursed windows," Z. Z. Smith roared in a voice whose volume was in inverse ratio to his size.

Jeff hesitated. "I was feeling so good too. Just this one fine morning, Smitty?" he asked wistfully.

"No! My contract—"

Jeff closed the windows. "All right! But what's in your contract to cover—"

"It distinctly says, I quote, 'The party of the first part shall in no arbitrary way infringe upon the personal bodily comfort of the party of the second part'—that's me. And if going 'he-man,' throwing up windows in freezing weather, doesn't—"

"It isn't freezing! Oh, skip it! You can't get me down today, Smitty. This is my big day! I feel so good! What's the news?"

Z. Z. Smith groaned disgustedly and studied his memo pad. "Chief Gaines phoned. He says if we shift from our commercial services into private investigating work, we'd better be prepared to show him a private-eye license, or else. He must have heard about the Mrs. Courtney Carter business. I told you to stay out of it! Then, there was a young dame—she heard about us from Mrs. Carter—who phoned about

some hard-boiled eggs. Then there's the business of the slaughtered chauffeur."

"Just a minute, Smitty! I don't intend to have you running off at the mouth about Mrs. Carter for the rest of your life. Let's settle that once and for all. I only did her a favor because she holds the controlling interests in the Divine Mining Corporation, Mammoth Steel, and World Wide Chemicals. A nod from her, and we're set for life with those corporations. Besides, it was nothing. Only recovering a few of her daughter's careless love letters."

Z. Z. Smith's snort rattled the windows.

"All right! All right! So I went to Johnny Jones, the lad Cecilia Carter thinks she loves, and I . . . er-r-r—"

"Coerced, extorted, squeezed, browbeat—any of these words will do." Smitty frowned. "Oh, skip it! About the hard-boiled eggs and the murdered chauffeur—"

"It wasn't like that at all!" Jeff shouted. "I merely told Johnny that Cecilia was too young to know her own mind, and he gladly returned the letters to me. He didn't ask a penny for them. He—"

"Did you read them, Jeff. What did they say?"

Jeff ignored the question. "Anyway, Cecilia will forget all about it. She and Mrs. Carter flew to Europe this morning."

"I know they did. Mama Carter phoned here just before the take-off. Now, about those hard-boiled eggs—"

"She did? What did she want?"

"She asked me about your bill. I told her there wasn't any bill."

"You did exactly right, Smitty."

"So she said as long as the customs officials wouldn't let her take her most precious possession with her to Lisbon without a lot of red tape, she was making you a gift of her O Wange Aunt Drawerer; at least, that's what it sounded like to me. I asked her to repeat it, but she was in a rush and hung up. Does it mean anything to you?"

"Oh, she shouldn't have! The services I rendered in no way justified—I wonder where I can hang it?"

"Enlighten me, please, Jeff."

"You loused that message up, Smitty. Fortunately, I can figure it out. She must have said she was sending me her Anne of Orange drawing. It hangs in her living room over the fireplace. You slipping, pal?"

"Jeff"—Smitty drew himself to his full sixty and one-quarter inches—"if my services are not satisfactory, you know what you can do. I can't be expected to understand old bit . . . old women who speak in pseudo-French accents over an open telephone at an airport, and refuse to repeat their messages."

"That drawing is a finished preliminary layout sketch by an old master. It—"

A discreet knock on the office door interrupted Jeff.

Smitty rose and opened the door. Both men whistled involuntarily.

Poised in the wide doorway was a diminutive ash-blonde, not an inch over five feet. She was wearing a fall suit of deep violet that matched her eyes, and a beret-type hat of the same material that exposed a wide intelligent forehead. Pinned to one shoulder was a simple spray of three scarlet-and-gold maple leaves.

Jeff Hunter found himself reluctantly rising to his feet in homage, a thing he had sworn never to do for any visitor who invaded the privacy of his office.

"May I come in?"

"Please do." Jeff and Smitty bumped heads bringing and placing chairs for her.

Her lovely mouth twisted in a wistful smile, and she chose the chair that Z. Z. Smith had placed in the position most advantageous for feasting his eyes upon the visitor.

"To what," Jefferson Hunter asked, "do we owe this pleasure?"

"Oh, didn't Mr. Smith tell you, Mr. Hunter?" Her shapely eyebrows rose questioningly toward Smitty.

"I'm afraid that this isn't one of my assistant's better days." Jeff grinned at Z. Z. Smith's discomfort.

"Then you must be Miss Veronica Wade?" Smitty's face showed his astonishment.

"Yes, I'm Miss Wade. Though I'm usually called Ronnie rather than Veronica."

"Of course," Smitty smiled. "As a matter

of fact, Miss Wade, I started to mention the matter of the hard-boiled eggs to Mr. Hunter several times, but the pressure of work prevented him—"

"Oh," Jeff said. "I remember now. The hard-boiled eggs. Of course—"

"We'd heard about the detective work you did for Mrs. Carter, and though this seems an awfully silly thing to hire a detective for—"

Jeff cleared his throat. "Er-r-r, my dear Miss Wade, someone has grossly misrepresented the services we render. You see, our specialty is efficient reorganization of large corporations. We— In fact, it was only as a personal favor to my dear friend, Mrs. Courtney Carter, that we—"

"Personal favor? Dear friend?" Her eyebrows rose. "I . . . my mother understood from Mrs. Carter that she didn't know you at all. In fact, mother was very amused because Mrs. Carter phoned to ask her if it would be proper to receive a private detective at the front door, or have him use the tradesman's entrance. Did you say something, Mr. Smith?"

"Not a word, Miss Wade." Smitty's eyes were twinkling.

"Miss Wade"—Jeff jumped to his feet—"I most definitely am not a private detective. I am, if any term can be descriptive of my work, a consultant efficiency engineer. If there is one species of humanity I despise, it is a private detective. I am very sorry that I . . . we cannot help you."

"You see, you don't own a corporation." Z. Z. Smith spoke gently.

"Just a minute!" Jeff Hunter's face flamed. "Miss Wade, we'll look into this matter for you, Smitty! Take notes. Now let's have the facts, Miss Wade."

"Thank you, Mr. Hunter. I hate to trouble you with it, but mother is an invalid and little things worry her unreasonably. It began about the middle of September, just a month ago. One evening mother wanted a raw egg, milk and sherry before retiring. I wheeled her into the kitchen and got an egg from the refrigerator. When I broke the shell, I discovered that the egg was hard-boiled. So was the next egg I selected. The third one was raw. Mother said she'd speak to Melinda Swanson, our cook, about it. She assumed Melinda had boiled the eggs for salad and accidentally put them back with the fresh ones."

"And is that what happened?" Jeff asked.

"Oh, no. About the first of October, we again found a hard-boiled egg in the

basket. Melinda denied having placed it there. Melinda's a country girl and knows about such things, so she held each egg up to the light, something like candling them, I guess. Four of the eggs proved to be hard-boiled. Melinda said the eggs must have been boiled before she got them. She promised to speak to the man she buys them from."

"Did she?"

"I suppose she forgot it. At least, we did. Then last night, Sunday, I found another hard-boiled egg. I held those that remained in the full basket to the light, and there were six hard-boiled eggs out of the two dozen. This morning—"

The office door glass rattled under the pounding of a fist.

"Don't break it down," Smitty called. "Just turn the knob and come in!"

A red-headed, freckled-face boy, holding a battered carton, shuffled through the door.

"You Jefferson Hunter?" he addressed Jeff.

"I am, son."

"Then, here's your cat! Four bits, please. The lady said all her dough was in escudos, pistols, pesos and francs, though why that should start her to blushing, I don't know, and I said, 'Huh?' and she said, 'Scram, brat,' collect from the shamus, and I said—"

"I am not a shamus! And I haven't a cat. You have the wrong party."

"Listen, chum, do I hafta call the cops in to collect my four bits, huh? She distinctly said, 'Take itsy, bitsy precious to Jefferson Hunter, the shamus.'"

"But—"

"I want my four bits!"

"Oh-h-h!" Ronnie Wade went down on one shapely silken-sheathed knee. "Why, it's Mrs. Courtney Carter's pedigreed orange Angora! Oh, you beautiful, beautiful creature! Hurry, Mr. Smith, get the poor kitten out of the box. It's in a panic!"

"Here's your four bits." Jeff dropped a half dollar into the grubby palm. "Now scram!"

"You want any errands run, mister? I sorta run a private delivery outfit of my own. If you—"

"Scram!"

"Well, in case you ever do"—the red-headed boy was impervious to hostile glances—"just phone Willie, 2222-J. That's me. I'll get the message. Say, mister, you sure you can spare this four bits? Sure it won't break you, huh? Usually folks throw in a little graw-grat-graytuity, that means tip!"

"Here!" Jeff dropped an additional quarter into the outstretched palm. "Now scram! And don't bang the— Oh, damn it!"

"Look at him, or is it a her, Mr. Hunter?" Ronnie rubbed her cheek against

the purring kitten. "Isn't he adorable? My, I wish you were mine."

"Uhm-m-m," Smitty muttered to himself. "Anne of Orange drawing. Uhm-m-m! O Wange Aunt Drawer wasn't such a bad interpretation at that. Slipping, am I?"

"Dry up, Smitty," Jeff snapped. "Miss Wade, will you accept this kitten with my compliments?"

"Oh, I'd love to, Mr. Hunter, but I wouldn't dare! Mrs. Carter would be furious with both of us. I'm sure she'll check regularly on its health, and—"

"Remember the corporations, Jeff," Smitty said dryly. "No cat, no corporations! Pretty pussy!"

"Cut it out, Smitty, and answer that phone! I'm busy! Take a message."

Z. Z. Smith lifted the receiver of the ringing phone. He listened a moment before speaking.

"I understand, chief. Jeff's in an important conference just now, but he won't be long. We'll come out as soon as he's free."

Jeff Hunter signaled Smitty, who cupped his hand over the telephone mouthpiece.

"Smitty, ask Chief Gaines if he knows how to differentiate between the sex of kittens?"

"By the way, chief, how can a person tell a male kitten from a female one? . . . Easy, huh? Yeah, yeah. O.K., we'll be out."

"What did he say, Smitty?" Jeff leaned eagerly forward as his assistant racked the phone.

"Chief Gaines"—Smitty cleared his throat importantly—"wants you to come out to Mrs. Courtney Carter's immediately. There's a little matter of a dead chauffeur. That's something else I've been trying to tell you—"

"What do I have to do with a dead chauffeur?"

"That's what the chief wants to know. In the chauffeur's wallet at the time of his death was your personal check for twenty-five dollars."

Jeff Hunter whistled, and a worried frown formed on his forehead. "I can easily explain that, but we'd better go right out, I guess."

"I knew about that." Ronnie Wade continued to play with the kitten. "That's another reason I came to see you. Though why mother should see any connection between hard-boiled eggs and the Carter's chauffeur being murdered is beyond me! May I come along, Mr. Hunter? I live near the Carters."

"Yes, by all means," Jeff replied, and turned to his assistant. "Smitty, the chief said it was easy to tell the difference between kittens, didn't he?"

Smitty nodded, his whole attention on Ronnie Wade.

"Well, how do you do it?" Jeff snapped

in exasperation. "Getting information out of you is like pulling teeth."

Smitty looked deep into Ronnie Wade's amused eyes, and they both blushed and looked away from each other in confusion.

"Oh!" Jeff grinned. "Maybe you better write me a letter about it."

"That's entirely unnecessary, Jeff." Smitty was smiling broadly now. "The chief said, I quote, 'If the little kitten grows up and has kittens, it's a safe bet it ain't a male!' end quote."

Jeff was behind the wheel of the long, sleek, yellow convertible. Ronnie Wade, the orange kitten in her lap, was sandwiched between him and Z. Z. Smith. The powerful car purred along the wide pathway toward the northern suburbs. Jeff Hunter broke the silence.

"Miss Wade, I think it would be wiser if we dropped you at your home before we see Chief Gaines. After that matter's been cleared up, we'll stop by and talk with your mother."

"Thank you, Mr. Hunter. I really hate to trouble you, but mother, being confined to a wheel chair and having so much time on her hands, does worry unduly about little things."

"Ronnie, I mean Miss Wade"—Smitty gently touched the girl's hand—"what is wrong with your mother?"

"She had an acci—that is, she fell several years ago and broke her hip. Because of her age, the bones won't knit firmly. She—turn left at the next crossroad, Mr. Hunter, please. I live in the brick colonial cottage on the left. You can drop me, or if you'd rather, you can park in our drive and walk through to the Carters'. Their property backs ours."

Jeff stopped the convertible in the Wade driveway. Smitty took the kitten and assisted Ronnie from the car. Apparently in a complete daze, he watched her lovely legs flashing in the bright noon sunlight as she ran up the wide brick walk to the doorway.

"Close your mouth, Smitty"—Jeff kept a straight face—"before Ronnie slips a hook into it. Put the kitten over here on the grass, and come on."

For once Smitty didn't answer back. He followed Jeff silently along a flower-edged brick path through the leaf-strewn garden. Though the dividing line between the properties was not a physical one, it was immediately apparent.

The Carter grounds were well tended. Every leaf had been raked from the lawn, which was smooth, evenly mowed and edged. Fall perennials and late-blooming roses flowered in profuse splendor. Giant goldfish lazed in the sun-warmed shallow waters of a lily pond.

Jeff headed toward the police cruisers parked before the Carter two-floor garage.

The blue-coated officer with the word "CHIEF" on his gold badge detached himself from the others around the cars and came toward them, hand extended.

"Hello, Jeff. Howya, Smitty?"

"Hello, Bill."

"Hello, chief."

"Jeff"—the chief's smile vanished—"I don't want trouble with you, but unless you stick to your knitting, you're in for it."

"I don't understand, chief."

"No? Listen. You've been out here gumshoeing for the dame that owns this elaborate layout. Don't bother to deny it. You helped break up a nice clean little boy-and-girl affair, and that murdered rat"—the chief nodded toward the second floor of the garage—"probably helped you to do it. Spare me your lies or evasions. When he was murdered, your personal check for twenty-five dollars was in his wallet. You going to talk, or shall I run you downtown and book you for operating a detective agency without a city license?"

"Why, Bill"—Jeff's face was guileless—"whatever made you think I'd hold back on you? James Pepperell is . . . was nothing to me."

"I'm glad to hear that. Start talking, then."

"There's nothing to say, Bill. I did a little confidential work for Mrs. Courtney Carter, and Pepperell helped me. The check you found in his wallet is, I presume, the one I gave him several days ago for his services. The nature of the job he did for me is strictly confidential. I can't discuss my clients' affairs. But I can assure you, Bill, that his services were not criminal."

Chief Gaines smiled grimly. "Come on, Jeff, downtown."

"Bill, you can't—"

"Can't I? How can you claim professional confidences when you haven't a license to—"

"O.K., chief." Jeff grinned sheepishly. "You win. Mrs. Courtney Carter found a pile of discarded rough-draft letters in her daughter's wastebasket. They were pretty hot stuff. She called me in to get back the final drafts of those letters from whomever her daughter had addressed them to. The salutations were 'Lover,' 'Dream Man,' 'Light of My Life,' and so on. No names. She was afraid of blackmail."

"Hm-m-m. That doesn't sound like Cecilia."

"It turned out that only the rough drafts were like that—just dreams Cecilia was putting into words. The final drafts were mild girlish letters. As you say, boy-and-girl stuff. James Pepperell posted the letters for Cecilia. He secretly got in touch with me and offered to sell me the name of the addressee. That's what the twenty-five bucks was for. And that's all there is to it."

"I see. So after he told you they were addressed to Johnny Jones, you went and

got them back, and turned them over to the old lady."

"Yes. They were harmless enough in their final form, but she took Cecelia and flew to Lisbon, via the Azores, this morning. What do you know about Johnny Jones?"

"Johnny Jones," the chief answered, "is a darn nice kid. His father was one of my lieutenants for years."

"I didn't know that."

"I don't suppose you knew either that Mr. Courtney Carter, before he died, had often expressed the wish that his daughter and the son of his old friend, Police Lieutenant Jones, would eventually marry. I've heard him say it myself."

"No, I didn't know it."

"Mrs. Carter doesn't even know Johnny, Jeff. He just didn't fit into her plans for Cecilia, so he'd been barred from the house ever since Courtney Carter was taken sick. He's twenty-one now and on the force's eligible list."

"It's all news to me, chief. I thought it was an undesirable affair just starting."

"O.K. Let's go up and take a look at the body."

A much chastened Jeff Hunter and an amused Z. Z. Smith followed Chief Gaines up the narrow stairway to the living quarters of the chauffeur above the garage. They stopped in the open doorway of the two-room apartment.

Chief Gaines cleared his throat. "It is assumed that the murderer rapped on the door about six a.m. this morning. When James Pepperell, wearing only a bathrobe over his pajamas, answered the knock, he was neatly shot between the eyes from a distance of not more than three feet. The chalk marks on the rug outline where he fell. But his body was not discovered until after nine, when the gardener, at the cook's insistence, came looking for him. Now, let's go into the bedroom."

Z. Z. Smith, bringing up the rear, hoped that neither Jeff nor Chief Gaines saw him stoop suddenly and scoop up a bright maple leaf from where it was partially concealed under the bottom of the open door. He pushed the leaf into his breast pocket, and followed the others into the adjoining bedroom. The only personal note there was a shelf of books, and their bright jackets furnished the room's only color.

Chief Gaines pulled down the gray blanket covering the face of the corpse on the bed. A wave of nausea gripped Z. Z.'s stomach. He wished he weren't so squeamish. The dead face, though hardened by its owner's mode of living, was not entirely repulsive. The only disfigurement was a blood-clotted hole, the size of a large pea, low on the forehead, midway between the closed eyes.

"Yes," James nodded, "that's James Pepperell."

"This your check?" The chief held out the blue slip protected by a transparent envelope.

"That's it."

"Did either of you know him or had you seen him prior to this business of Cecilia's letters?"

"Not I." Jeff shook his head. "I've only seen him twice before this. Once when he approached me with Johnny Jones' name, and later, after I'd recovered the letters, when I gave him the check. I've been in the army for five years, remember."

"You've seen him before, Smitty?" The chief's question was partly a statement.

"Yes, chief. Er-r-r, in fact, I've had some dealings with him. Quite a few."

"Such as—"

"Various and sundry scarce articles, such as cigarettes during the shortage, and only a couple of weeks ago he offered to get my name put at the top of an automobile dealer's delivery list."

"I see. That doesn't surprise me. The only thing that does is why he was working here."

"Would I be out of order to ask if he has a record, Bill?"

"I don't mind telling you, Jeff. He has quite a dossier, but no convictions. We were certain he was bootlegging during prohibition, but we could never catch him. The same with bookmaking and other petty rackets. During the war he could always supply scarce items, for a consideration. He must have been in the black market, but we couldn't prove it. A few years ago, after Mr. Carter's death, he came here as chauffeur. Incidentally, he did drive a taxi at one time."

"How did Mrs. Carter happen to run across him?" Smitty asked.

"According to the butler, who incidentally didn't consider Pepperell a proper servant, an employment agency sent him. Mrs. Carter had ridden in his cab on occasion, and apparently remembered him favorably. She hired him over the butler's protest. Incidentally, I wish she were home. She and her daughter left here about eight this morning, before the body was discovered."

"Then who drove them to the airport this morning?" Jeff asked.

"I thought of that, top." The chief smiled. "The airport station wagon picked them up. It's the usual thing, to be sure of their passengers arriving on time. The plane took off around nine, about the time the body was found," he finished.

"What are you doing about all this, chief?" Z. Z. asked.

"The usual, rounding up acquaintances, friends and enemies. Eternal questioning. Searching for the gun. Do you two have anything to add? If you haven't, you might as well run along."

"Not a thing," they chorused.

II.

"WELL, Smitty, let's collect our kitten and get going," Jeff said when they were again walking through the garden. "Where'd it go?"

"How should I know? Maybe it's smelling the pretty flowers."

"This is no time for wisecracks. Get looking for it. If we lost it, Mrs. Carter would be—"

"There it is, Jeff. There by the lily pond."

The kitten was rolling on its back on the warm flagstone edging of the pond. It raised its yellow eyes, stretched, and moved to the edge of the pond at their approach.

The pond, a shallow one, had tubs of lily tubers sunk in its bottom. The long tendrils, topped with plate-sized pads, radiated from and efficiently screened the tubs.

A lazy fat goldfish wiggled along the edge of the pond. Faster than the eye could follow, the kitten's paw shot forward and the fish took refuge under a lily pad. Again the silken orange paw flashed. It missed the fish, but snagged the pad, tearing it from its stem.

Jeff's and Smitty's mouths flew open as they saw, nestled in the mud where the pad had concealed it, a gun.

"Smitty," Jeff broke the silence, "that's a pretty good kitten. Go put it in the car and hurry back. Keep a lookout for me. If you see anyone coming, whistle 'The Road to Mandalay.' Hurry!"

"O.K." Jeff joined his assistant on the path. "Remember this, Smitty, 3-7-9-6-3; a .30 calibre Holtmeyer. Got it?"

"Got it! You didn't touch the gun, did you, Jeff?"

"Not to leave prints. I fished it out of the mud with my pencil, read the number, and dropped it back. Chief Gaines will find it soon enough. Let's dust off the Wades and get going."

A scowl crossed the little assistant's face. "Jeff, I can appreciate the relatively different financial importance of the Wades and the Carters, but I've never known you to—"

"O.K. You can handle the Wade end. Come on."

Ronnie met them at the door and led them into the small bright room that was her mother's sitting room. The old lady in the wheel chair before a large picture window, studying them over her half spectacles, wasn't in the least like an invalid. She held out a thin hand in greeting.

"I'm glad to see you." She smiled at them and turned a petulant look to her daughter. "Ronnie went off this morning in such a rush after we learned of James Pepperell's death that she forgot to give me my knitting bag."

"Oh, mother, I'm so sorry. It never, until just this minute, crossed my mind."

"I'll never get my afghan finished at this rate. Sit down, gentlemen. I only managed to knit six squares this morning. Are you gentlemen interested in afghans?"

"I'm afraid not." Jeff smiled impatiently.

"Then put my knitting bag back on the shelf, Ronnie."

Smitty leaped forward, took the bag from Ronnie's hand, and standing on his toes, placed it on the indicated corner shelf.

"Now then"—Mrs. Wade brushed the wrinkles from her lap robe—"tell me who has been putting hard-boiled eggs in my refrigerator."

"There are a few questions we have to ask first," Jeff told her. "Where does your cook get her eggs?"

"Goodness me! I don't know! Ronnie, do you know where Melinda buys eggs?"

"No, I don't, mother. I do know they are about a dollar a dozen and very scarce. I've heard Melinda complaining about it."

"Can't you ask her, Mrs. Wade?"

"She isn't here today. And, in a way, I'm glad she isn't."

"Why?"

"She went to visit her family in Indian Springs, a farm village about thirty miles down-state. She left after supper last night."

"I meant, why are you glad she isn't here?" Jeff persisted.

"Because, young man, she's been walking out with that scamp, James Pepperell. In fact, Pepperell brought her to us several months ago when Susie quit. And I expect if she were here now, she'd be having hysterics all over the kitchen. I've watched Cecilia Carter mooning over her lost Johnny, and I'm fed up with love-thwarted females. Although, unless I'm mistaken, and I very seldom am, I'm due for a lot more of it, anyway." She looked meaningfully at Ronnie.

Ronnie blushed, but before she could answer, Jeff interrupted.

"Under the circumstances, there's nothing for me . . . for us to do, then, until we can talk with Melinda Swanson. Will you have her call us when she gets back?"

"The moment she returns," Mrs. Wade promised.

Back in the office, Jeff and Smitty watched the orange kitten abandon its pursuit of an elusive sluggish fall fly on the window sill and begin an inch-by-inch investigation of the room.

"Cute little rascal, isn't it?" Jeff commented as he leaned over and rubbed the kitten's silky head. "It's a shame cats can't be trained like dogs. They're only ornamental."

"That's all you know about it, Jeff," Smitty said, as he picked up the telephone and dialed a number. "The Orientals, probably because of their infinite patience, successfully train cats, especially the Angoras and Persians, for hunting small game, par-

ticularly the quail type, both on and off a leash."

"Sounds logical. Maybe I'll train this little fellow. He's good at finding guns anyway, isn't he? Well, let's forget the Wades now and concentrate on James Pepperell."

"Records, please," Smitty spoke into the telephone.

"If we can clear that up before Mrs. Carter's return," Jeff continued, "I know she'll be duly grateful and will act accordingly. Especially if we keep her household out of it. Suppose you—"

"No!"

"What do you mean, 'No'?"

"I mean you promised Ronnie to look into the matter of the hardboiled eggs. With me, that comes first. No one asked us to mess in the James Pepperell business, anyway."

"Get that call over with"—a crafty light burned in Jeff's eyes—"and then we'll discuss the matter."

"Hello," Smitty shouted into the phone. "Bevins?"

"Smitty!" Jeff jumped to his feet. "Don't—"

"Z. Z. Smith speaking. Make a note of this, will you, Bevins? A .30 calibre Holtmeyer, number 3-7-9-6-3. Is it registered? . . . I'll hold on. . . . No record, huh? . . . But what? . . . I see. . . . Thanks a lot. I'll do something for you sometime." Smitty racked the phone.

Jeff Hunter leaned back in his chair and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Eventually he regained his composure, steeped his fingers, and frowned across the back-to-back desks at his assistant.

"Smitty, I can appreciate your personal feelings about Ronnie. Don't blush like a schoolgirl. I can appreciate your wanting to find out about the hard-boiled eggs, to further the acquaintance if for no other reason. But if we handle the Pepperell affair, it will sooner or later mean good hard cash in the bank."

"You promised Ronnie, Jeff. I feel—in fact, I have never felt so—"

"Oh, hell! Go on and clear up the hard-boiled egg business. You'll be worthless to me until you do."

"Thanks, Jeff, I'll stick right with it. I'm going to interview grocers in the Wade neighborhood. What are you doing this afternoon?"

A Machiavellian smile appeared on Jeff Hunter's face. "Just dabble, Smitty," he said airily. "Just dabble! For instance, I'll check with some medical friends of mine about Mrs. Wade's infirmity. Ask them how a crippled woman could have got her knitting bag from a high shelf when she was alone in the house."

"Jeff! You wouldn't!"

"Then I'll want to ask a few more questions, just to eliminate the possibility that it

was Ronnie who dropped that maple leaf from the spray she was wearing on her shoulder. I mean the leaf you found in James Pepperell's doorway."

"Jeff Hunter, you're a rat! And I don't mean a nice, clean barn rat, either."

"There are other possibilities that have to be investigated, too, Smitty."

Z. Z. Smith slowly pushed back his chair. For a moment his eyes were fixed on the floor under the desk. Then he rose, crossed the office to the clothes rack, and clamped on his hat.

"While you're doing all that, Jeff," he said slowly, "you might give a little thought to the gun."

"Yeah, I could wring your neck for calling Bevins. You should have gone to headquarters and sneaked a look at the files. Anyway, though, I thought Bevins said the gun wasn't registered?"

"He did," Smitty answered. "What you didn't hear, Jeff, was that Bevins said that there was one numbered 8-7-9-6-3 registered. It wouldn't have been possible, because you never make mistakes, for you to have misread an 8 for a 3. If it had been anyone but you, I'd be inclined to think a little of that lily pond mud blocked out part of the 8, making it look like a 3. But as long as you—"

"Cut it out! In whose name is the gun listed?"

Smitty moved nearer the door. "In Cecilia Carter's name, Jeff."

The color drained from Jeff Hunter's face.

"And, Jeff."

"Yes?"

"Speaking of eggs. Be careful of your feet when you get up."

"Feet? Why?"

"I think Anne of Orange laid an egg under your side of the desk—and not a hard-boiled one, either."

"Smitty! Come here! You can't—"

"The hell I can't, Jeff. It's your cat. Remember the corporations, old boy. Don't do anything rash!"

The heavy office door slammed behind Z. Z. Smith.

In Pal's Grill, Z. Z. Smith slid into a booth, ordered a double Scotch-and-water and the plug-in telephone. He sipped his Scotch and dialed 2222-J.

"Willie? This is Z. Z. Smith of Jefferson Hunter's office. Can you grab a cab and come right down to Pal's Grill? I've got a job for you. The cab is on our expense account Good boy. . . . I'll be waiting for you."

Smitty racked the phone and ordered his lunch. He took a long sip of the Scotch, and dialed the Courtney Carter residence.

"Chief Gaines? Z. Z. Smith. . . . Er-r-r, chief, I have a personal interest in that James Pepperell business. Nothing to do with Jeff or his work. Could you give me the low-

down? I've done favors for you in the past, and I'll go out of my way to do them again. I promise. Thanks, chief."

As Chief Gaines talked, Z. Z. Smith made shorthand notes. When the chief had finished, Smitty consulted the notes he had made before speaking.

"Well, it seems to sum up to this, chief. The only persons who could have killed Pepperell, except for a rank outsider, are Mrs. Carter, her daughter Cecilia, Johnny Jones, whose car was seen near the Carter driveway at five a.m. by the milkman, Mrs. Mary Wade and her daughter Ronnie. The Carter servants are alibied by each other, and Mrs. Wade's cook is away. Right?"

"Correct for now," the chief answered.

"As to Pepperell. You found no papers except Jeff's check and a black notebook in the big car's glove compartment containing mileage, et cetera, similar to a manifest sheet kept by a cab driver. That's probably where Pepperell acquired the habit. You also found a bankbook showing a fat balance which Pepperell could never have accumulated legally out of his salary. There was also a key that you assume is for a safe deposit box somewhere. Right?"

"Correct," the chief said.

"Also," Smitty continued, "Miss Wade could add nothing to the statement her mother had made to your men earlier, that they were asleep at six o'clock and saw and heard nothing. They are the only near neighbors. Nothing more you can tell me?"

"Not a thing, Smitty. I wish there were."

"Thanks, chief. Needless to say, you haven't located young Johnny Jones?"

"No, Smitty, and it worries me. His car is in his garage, and his mother is frantic."

"Forget the worry, chief. Unless I'm badly mistaken, Johnny will be very much in the headlines in a day or two, nothing discreditable, either. You have nothing to worry about there, I can promise you."

"Humph! I wish I were as sure."

"Now, I'll try to earn the information you've just given me," Smitty said as he gazed into space. "If I were a murderer, the very first thing I'd do after shooting Pepperell would be to get rid of the gun."

"That's a big help." A sarcastic note crept into the chief's voice.

"I think I would toss it some place that would be sure to obliterate fingerprints even though it was found, such as a lake or river, or a roaring furnace, or something like that. Even a rain barrel."

"The Carter residence uses oil heat," the chief said, "and I've already looked in the garbage incinerator. Naturally, they don't have a rain barrel. Say, there is a lily pond in the garden, though."

"That sounds like a logical place," Smitty smiled. "It's located, if I remember correctly, in a spot where a person leaving the garage

would be bound to pass it. If I think of anything else, I'll get in touch with you, chief."

Z. Z. Smith racked the phone and looked up as a cab ground to a stop outside. A grinning Willie emerged and charged into the restaurant.

"Hi, chum!" Willie grinned infectiously, hitched up the baggy slacks he was wearing, and slid into the opposite side of Smitty's booth. "What's on your mind, pal? What gives?"

"Willie"—Z. Z. Smith copied his boss' mannerism of steeping his fingers—"I want you to contact all the grocers located near the Parkway in the north suburbs, I want you to ask them how hard-boiled eggs could possibly get mixed in with the fresh ones they sell. Ask each of them if they've ever had a complaint about that. Understand?"

"Sure. Simple enough, except I can tell you their answers now."

"You can? What?"

"They'll look at me and say 'Scrammo, bratto!' Why shouldn't they? I ain't a customer."

"Hm-m-m. Perhaps if you bought something each time?"

"That'd help, pal. If they gave me any lip, I'd make them take the stuff back. You gotcha-self an idea, chum."

"Fine. Now let's see." Smitty snapped his fingers. "I know what you can buy, a can of salmon in each store."

"Salmon! You mean canned fish?"

"Right. Jeff can use it to feed the kitten. Let me give you some money." Z. Z. reached for his wallet.

"Skip it, pal." Willie drew out a thick wad of small bills. "Operating capital," he explained. "I betcha I'm the biggest kid operator in this town. I'll bring in my expenses listed on a sheet. Sales slips, too. Say, how much salmon should I buy?"

"As much as necessary to accomplish your mission."

"Golly, chum! I might go into a couple of dozen stores. You don't want to spend all that dough on just an old cat, do you?" he questioned.

"What's the difference? The salmon will keep." Smitty let impatience creep into his voice. "If you buy too many cans to carry, call a cab to haul you around. Come to think of it, you better use a cab, anyhow; you'll be able to get around faster, save time."

"Smoley hokes!" Willie grinned in delight. "You guys are big operators, too. Chum, it ain't that I doubt your word or anything, but how about putting those orders in writing?"

Smitty grinned. He took one of Jeff's business cards from his pocket, wrote a condensation of his orders on it, signed it, and handed it to Willie.

"Thanks. Say, you left off the salmon and the cab, pal."

Smitty amended the orders to include salmon and cab and returned it. Willie pocketed the cards and stood up.

"When you want my report, chum?"

"Tomorrow morning will do."

"I'll be seeing you then." Willie, radiating energy, breezed out of the restaurant.

Z. Z. Smith spent the next thirty minutes eating the lunch spread before him, and doing some serious thinking. He brushed away the last of the meal, reached for the telephone, and dialed the number of the janitor of their office building.

"Sam," Smitty said after identifying himself, "we're taking care of a little kitten in our office for the next few days. Would you look after him for us? See that he's properly fed and watered?"

"Is he housebroken?"

"I don't know."

"Well"—Sam sounded doubtful—"most cats are naturally clean, given half a chance. I'll put a box of sand in the corner of your private washroom. And for Pete's sake, be sure to tell Mr. Hunter not to close the cat out of there. Cats are hell on rugs. You should buy a harness and leash and take him for a walk occasionally."

"You've got something there, Sam. You get the leash and let us know the charges."

"O.K."

Smitty paid his check, called a cab, and gave the Carter address.

Only one uniformed policeman, sitting on an upturned trash barrel before the garage, was visible as he alighted from the cab.

"Where's everybody?" Smitty asked.

"You a reporter?" the officer countered.

"No. I'm Z. Z. Smith, a friend—"

"Oh! You're the wise cookie who tipped off Chief Gaines where to find the gun, after six of us had spent the morning looking for it." The man's voice was definitely not friendly.

"Sorry," Z. Z. Smith said. "If I'd known you, I'd have tipped you off, instead of the chief."

"Would you, now?" The officer's tone warmed a little. "It would have meant a lot to me."

"Fact," Smitty said. "You never can tell when I'll find out something else important. What's your name, officer?"

"Tom Whalen. Say, ain't you the guy that's the mathematical genius? Ain't you the one they say can look a billion-dollar corporation's balance sheet that is three cents out, and figure right off that the shortage was caused by the wife of the vice president in charge of sales who swiped a stamp from her husband's desk to mail a personal letter? Ain't you that guy?"

"Folks exaggerate, Tom." Smitty blushed. "I was wondering if I could look at the black book where James Pepperell kept the big car's mileage record."

"Sure you can." The officer led the way

into the garage. "Some crate, eh?" He opened the door of the massive sixteen-cylinder custom-built sedan and took the notebook from the glove compartment.

Smitty flipped open the cover. James Pepperell, in carefully ruled columns, had entered the date and the speedometer reading each time the car had left and returned to the garage. There were also several sheets of gas, oil and accessory purchases. Smitty hurriedly scanned the columns of figures.

"Hm-m-m. Seven and forty-two one hundredths miles to the gallon of gas. New battery every year. New tires every twenty-five thousand miles."

"Cripes!" The patrolman's eyes widened in amazement. "We added them figures for half an hour and couldn't make out the miles she got on a gallon; you do it in seconds."

"Just practice." Smitty smiled. He turned back the pages and ran down the trips. "Hm-m-m! On September 1st and 15th, October 1st and 15th; in fact, on the 1st and 15th of every month, this crate made a sixty-two-mile trip. October 15th was Saturday. Today is Monday, the 17th. There's a clue for you, officer! You might inquire into where James Pepperell went on Saturday."

"Anything else about the figures you find interesting, Mr. Smith?"

"Only a seven-mile trip every—I get it! They're Sundays, probably church runs. Thanks a lot. I won't forget you, Tom." Smitty handed back the book.

"I'll look into these sixty-two-mile trips, Mr. Smith."

Smitty nodded, turned, and headed along the walk past the lily pond to the Wade property.

"Hello, you." Ronnie dropped the grass rake she was using to sweep leaves from the lawn. "You wouldn't sneak up on a little lamb without warning? That's wolfish!"

Smitty's eyes danced at the sight of the girl in rolled-up jeans and close-fitting red sweater. The clothes certainly suited her figure.

"Er-r-r, that's the first time I've ever been called wolfish."

"Maybe it's because your other victims didn't see through your sheep's clothing until it was too late to cry 'wolf.' Have you solved the mystery of the hard-boiled eggs yet?"

"No. I was wondering if I could have a word with your mother?"

Ronnie Wade's eyebrows rose. "I guess that's as good an excuse as any I've heard. Mother warned me, too. Let's go."

Smitty followed her again into the cozy sitting room. Mrs. Wade laid aside her knitting and eyed him sardonically over her glasses. "Well, young man, I knew from the gleam in your eye that you'd be back soon, but I thought you'd at least wait until this

evening. Ronnie, go and change that outlandish costume! Sit down, Mr. Smith."

Smitty sat down and cleared his throat. "I'd like to have you tell me about Mrs. Carter and her daughter, Mrs. Wade."

"Goodness me! Emilie Monet Carter! Well, she's just Emilie! What do you want to know about her?"

"Just your own impression, as a neighbor."

"Hm-m-m! There's a law against slander."

"Then you don't like her?"

"I didn't say that. Liking has no bearing on what I think. Courtney Carter married her when he was forty-five. She was his secretary; not much more than a grasping, ambitious child. He said she was a convent-raised orphan of a well-bred French family. I wouldn't know. There always seemed to be a streak of plain commonness in her, in spite of all her airs and graces."

"Then you didn't have much to do with her?"

"Don't go jumping to conclusions! I was old enough to be her mother at the time of her marriage, but Mr. Wade and I were handed a belated heavenly surprise package at the same time Emilie received her little gift from heaven. It was first babies for both of us. The girls are practically the same age. That, despite the wide difference in our ages, drew Emilie and me together, though she was always standoffish except about the babies."

"I see."

"When Courtney died, she broke off the last semblance of intimacy. Emilie spread herself in society, taking Cecilia along with her. Neither Ronnie nor I see much of them now, unless they want something."

"What about Cecilia?"

"That Cecilia! She was a scamp if I ever saw one—when she was younger, of course. Courtney bought her guns, even a pistol. They'd fire at targets in the yard by the hour. He treated her more like a son than a daughter. It drove Emilie wild. But after Courtney's death, she changed all that. A la-de-da finishing school, singing lessons, art lessons, piano lessons—she kept the child so busy, she lost all her childhood friends. I hope the life of dances, cocktail parties, and cotillions, and such, has made it up to her."

"I see. You feel that Mrs. Carter broke Cecilia's spirit?"

"I wouldn't say that, Mr. Smith. I've a notion her spirit is—shall we say, dormant?"

The *tap-tap* of high heels crossed the upstairs hall. Smitty rose to his feet as Ronnie came down the stairs.

"My! My!" Mrs. Wade smiled mischievously. "You do make a charming little couple!"

"Mother!"

"Well, my goodness! You do! Now you and Mr. Smith run along and find out who

has been putting hard-boiled eggs in my refrigerator. I've got to get some knitting done."

III.

Z. Z. SMITH found himself drying dishes, and liking it. He was standing beside Ronnie at the sink, leisurely taking the dishes from her hand before she could place them on the drainboard.

"Your mother, Ronnie, is a very remarkable woman," he announced. "How she could manage, from a wheel chair, to have such a dinner ready when we got back from our walk, is astounding."

"She is remarkable," Ronnie agreed. "She likes you, too."

"I'm glad. She said at dinner that she believes in love at first sight. Do you, Ronnie? I do."

"Hm-m-m. We didn't accomplish much about the hard-boiled eggs, did we?"

"No. We're stymied there until we hear from Melinda. However, I have a theory about James Pepperell's death that I'd like to go out and test. Let's hurry."

"You mean I can come with you?"

"Of course, Ronnie."

Suddenly, the dishes began to accumulate on the drainboard. In a whirlwind of energy, Ronnie had them washed and dried, while Smitty held the dish towel in puzzled bewilderment. She caught his hand and led him quietly to the front door.

"We'll be back soon, mother," she called, and closed the door before Mrs. Wade could reply or protest. On the moonlit step she turned and looked at Z. Z. Smith. "Now, what's your theory?"

"I believe, Ronnie, that Pepperell was sufficiently methodical to keep records of his transactions as he kept the black mileage book in the car. I think that his records will be pretty complete and instructive. Do you think we could get into his quarters and search them?"

"Yes. But haven't the police already—"

"Probably. But they don't know what to look for. I saw a shelf of novels there this morning and have since concluded that a book jacket with the name of a novel on it could hide an account book, or a diary, or—"

"You might have something there. Let's slip through the garden. I think we can get into the rooms above the garage. When Mr. Carter was alive, those rooms were Cecilia's play rooms, and when we forgot the key, we used to climb the rose trellis on the end of the garage. Mrs. Carter moved all Cecilia's things into the basement and turned it into an apartment, after she hired a chauffeur, but I expect the trellis is still there."

Z. Z. Smith's groping fingers found

Ronnie's and, hand in hand, they walked along the moonlit brick path. The October night was as warm as summer, and they could smell the roses as they crossed the line between the properties, circled the lily pond, and, keeping close to the shrubbery, circled the garage.

Ronnie suddenly halted, and the fingers of her right hand closed tightly about Smitty's. Her left hand flew to her mouth, stifling her startled cry. Slowly, her hand came down, and she pointed to a bulky figure sprawled, face down, on the concrete garage apron. Smitty shifted his gaze from the rose trellis and the opened window above it, to follow Ronnie's pointing finger.

"That's a cop, Ronnie," he whispered. "He's been gagged and handcuffed. Go back!"

"No."

"Then stay here in the shrubbery until I see what's up."

"No."

She clung to his arm as he crossed the garage apron. Tom Whalen, manacled with his own handcuffs, and gagged with a wadded handkerchief, stared pleadingly up at them in the moonlight.

Smitty knelt down and removed the gag. "Z. Z. Smith, ain't it? And Miss Wade? *Sh-h-h-h!* Someone knocked me out and now they're searching Pepperell's apartment. Find me keys, Mr. Smith, and get me bracelets off. Thanks!" Tom Whalen sat up and massaged his wrists. "Now you two scoot back and phone Chief Gaines for help. Sure, the killer up there relieved me of me gun."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. Everything happened so fast, I never saw him. Judo-commando stuff! One minute I was peacefully smoking, and the next, I found me face kissing the concrete, trussed up like a pig for slaughter. Get along and phone! Hurry! I'll do me best." He picked up a wrench and turned toward the garage.

As Ronnie and Smitty started back along the brick wall, Smitty looked over his shoulder in time to see a lean, dark figure, carrying what appeared to be a book, climb through the open window and begin to descend the rose trellis.

Smitty jerked to a stop, spinning Ronnie around into his arms. The little man's lips puckered, but no sound, except a tuneless outrush of air, came from them.

The figure slowly inched down the shaky trellis framework. Smitty's arm closed more tightly about Ronnie's slim waist, and his tuneless whistle became audible. The first three shrill notes of "The Road to Mandalay" cut the garden's silence, and the figure, nearly to the ground, halted abruptly.

The wrench held by Tom Whalen swung, in a wide arc, and the man clinging to the trellis swayed a moment under its crushing impact before falling to the ground.

"The officer has him," Ronnie breathed into Smitty's ear. "Let's go back and see—"

"No, honey," Smitty sighed, "I have no wish to see any more. Besides, I've got a better idea. Come on."

Arm in arm, they continued along the path, past the Wade residence, and down the driveway to the road. Smitty paused and looked around. To his right, he saw the bulk of a car, its chrome work gleaming in the moonlight. Dragging a not too reluctant Ronnie, he moved toward it.

"Why, it's Mr. Hunter's yellow convertible!" Ronnie's eyes widened in amazement.

"Yes," Smitty answered. "Sometimes he leaves it for me to use when he's very busy. Get in, dear."

"What are you going to do?" Ronnie asked as Smitty switched on the light and made a note in a small black notebook he drew from his pocket. "Just getting into practice for when we . . . er, I have a car of my own. Speedometer reading 7-9-9-3-9. Hm-m-m! Ronnie!"

"Yes?"

"Better sit over here in the center, closer to me. These convertibles are drafty affairs. That's much better." Smitty slipped his arm around her. "What I'm going to do is drive to Indian Springs and interview Melinda Swanson, instead of waiting until tomorrow for her to return. We've got to speed things up a little."

"I could think of worse ways to spend a nice moonlight evening." Ronnie snuggled down. "Lead on, Galahad."

Much over an hour later, the slowly moving convertible glided to a stop across the road from the Indian Springs general store.

"I'll go and ask directions to the Swansons." Smitty slid from under the wheel.

"Hurry back, honey," Ronnie smiled. "It's plenty dark and lonesome here."

"Won't be a minute," a beaming Smitty promised.

Walking on clouds, he climbed the rickety steps, crossed the wide porch, and entered the dimly lighted general store. The half-dozen men sitting above the cold pot-bellied stove stopped talking and stared at him, waiting for him to make the first move.

"Could you tell me," Smitty broke the silence, "where I could find Miss Melinda Swanson's house?"

"She ain't home," one of the men volunteered. "Clyde Swanson took Melinda and her ma over to Watertown to the movies. I saw them going out just after dark."

"Have you any idea when they'll get back?"

"Nope. They might visit awhile with Clyde's brother Joe, and then they mightn't. You can go up to the house, the last one

in the village on the right of the road, and wait. Don't figure Clyde would mind, though it's pretty late."

"Thanks. Perhaps I'd better wait and see her in town. By the way, do you have any eggs?"

"Nope. No eggs. Moultin' season, and they're high and scarce. 'Sides, what eggs I get are all spoken for at sixty cents."

"I see. I wonder if you could tell me something." Smitty was feeling more at home. "Can you think of any way that hard-boiled eggs could get mixed in—"

All the men around the stove, except the one Smitty had been addressing, broke into guffaws. They slapped their thighs and doubled up with mirth. The first to recover turned to Smitty.

"Pa'dner, you sure came to the right place to ask that question. Jim, here, is getting rich slipping hard-boiled eggs in among the fresh ones."

"No such a dam thing," Jim swore. "That's a barefaced lie, mister! A bareface lie! What happened was this. In a country store, eggs are the same as money. Folks bring in a dozen and, at today's market, take out sixty cents' worth of store goods. Though they're selling for a dollar a dozen in the city, we trade them at sixty cents. Kids usually have a chicken or two of their own, and they've been bringing in one or two eggs on their way to school since school opened in September, and getting five or ten cents' worth of candy. 'Tain't unusual."

"About the hard-boiled ones—"

"I'm comin' to that, mister. High prices squeeze country folks and small farmers first. We're getting squeezed now. Cash is scarce. So the kids are bringing in every egg they can lay their hands on. And some of the little devils palmed off the ones their mas cooked and put in their school lunches. That's how come some hard-boiled ones been getting mixed in with the fresh ones since September. Soon as I heard about it, I begun candling them, and that's that."

"I see. Does Melinda Swanson or her family ever buy eggs from you?"

"Nope, they don't. They've got a few hens, enough for their own use."

"Thanks. You've—"

"Just a minute!" The storekeeper held up his hand. "Listen!"

Outside, the deep bellow of a man's voice, raised in alcoholic song, roared through the night.

"Quiet, now!" the storekeeper snapped as he jerked the light cord and plunged the store into gloom. He shot the bolt across the door. "It's old man Mooney, mister. He lives alone a mile up the road. Harmless enough old coot, but if he sees a light in here, I'll have a job on my hands. I'll never get rid of him."

"Night in and night out," one of the sitters explained in a low voice, "for twenty-

one years, he's been making a trek to Tompkin's still for a quart of lightning. Bet he won't have to be embalmed when he dies."

The singer, keeping well to the center of the road, paused and looked toward the darkened store. He ignored the car across the road, shook his head sadly, and continued on his way, still singing

A moment later the storekeeper jerked on the light and unbolted the door. "Sorry this had to happen, mister. Won't you set awhile and wait for the Swansons?"

"Thanks, no. I'll see Melinda when she gets back to town."

The yellow convertible coasted to a stop before the Wade residence. Smitty cut the motor, took out his small black book, and entered the speedometer reading—7-9-9-9-9.

"Ronnie," he said hesitantly, "it's such a nice night, and I'll bet you've never seen a speedometer change from 79,999 to 80,000, have you? Let's—"

"Yes, let's."

Smitty tramped on the starter. "Don't move away, now!"

The yellow convertible, after its first burst of starting speed, lazed along the wide park way. Late travelers sounded their horns and sped past. A slow-moving dark-blue sedan, with POLICE lettered in silver on its side, crept up on the slower moving convertible. When it was close enough for the occupants to read the yellow car's license plates, the sedan roared forward. The blinding fender light snapped out the STOP! POLICE! warning, and the car nudged the convertible to the curb.

Both officers jumped out, their guns gleaming in the silvery moonlight.

"Come out! With your hands in the air! Cripes! It's Smitty and a dame!"

"Er-r-r, yes. What's the matter?"

The officers holstered their weapons and stepped forward. "You have permission to use Mr. Hunter's car, Smitty?"

"Why, yes. That is, I always do."

"But not this particular time, huh?"

"Well, not exactly, but then I, we . . . that is, it's usual—"

The younger of the two officers grinned. "You seem to be having trouble making up your mind, Smitty. Suppose you climb back in. You, young lady, get in the police cruiser. Jim here"—he nodded to the second officer—"will take you home. Come on, Smitty! We're going to headquarters!"

Ronnie came over to the convertible. "Darling," she said as she leaned through the rolled-down window, "no matter what happens, no matter how long they keep you, I'll be waiting." She planted a kiss on the surprised Smitty's mouth, turned and, without looking back, got into the police car.

"O.K., Smitty," the young officer said, "snap out of it. Let's go! There's quite a reception waiting for you at headquarters, quite a committee."

"What's up?"

"You'll find out," the officer chuckled. "I

can darn near promise you, you'll be booked for the 'unauthorized use of an automobile!'

"Jeff wouldn't!"

"Wouldn't he?" the officer answered. "Who took the cuffs and gag off Tom Whalen when Jeff Hunter had him nicely put on ice? And just in time for him to wham Jeff one with a monkey wrench?"

"Oh-oh!"

"Want to stop by your room for a toothbrush and your pyjamas, pal?"

Z. Z. Smith paused in the doorway of the main conference room at headquarters. He avoided the hostile glances of the occupants as his eyes swept the crowded room.

There was a sadly rumpled Jefferson Hunter, his hair marred by a shaven spot over which an adhesive pack lumped out like a cold fried egg. There were numerous police officials and departmental employees, among them Chief Gaines, Tom Whalen, Bevins of Records, Stevens of Ballistics, and several young hopefuls from the D. A.'s office.

Further on, he saw a chastened Willie sitting next to an enormous woman who was obviously his mother. Near them was a white-coated store clerk and a taxi driver, as well as a bored uniformed patrolman.

All but Chief Gaines ignored Z. Z. The chief turned to the little man, nodded to a vacant chair, and cleared his throat importantly.

"First, Smitty, let's get Willie straightened out, so he can go home and go to bed. You hired this boy, didn't you?"

"Yes, chief."

"And you are, I hope, prepared to pay for such damage as he has been responsible for during the time he's been employed by you. I may add that since he has a signed, written order from you, there's no way you can avoid paying."

"What damage?"

"There's the matter of a broken showcase glass, caused by Willie's upsetting a pile of canned goods, and an unpaid taxi bill. Suppose you just give me your check for a hundred dollars, and I'll return any surplus."

"That's kind of high," Smitty said as he wrote out the check.

"Chum," Willie called, "I ran out of operating capital just as I got the information you wanted. Can I help it if the grocery had the cans piled all lopsided? These jerks—"

"That's enough, young man," Chief Gaines snapped as he accepted Smitty's check. "You folks can go now. Come back in the morning and file your claims."

"Willie," Smitty called as the entourage moved toward the door, "get in touch with me at the office in the morning."

"You better phone first, Willie," Chief Gaines interrupted. "It may be quite a while before these two are in circulation again."

"I'll see you, pals," Willie grinned and

slammed the door behind the departing group.

"Now we'll get down to business," Chief Gaines announced. "You men from the D.A.'s office can advise me of the specific charges I can pile on Hunter and Smith, and see whether you can think up any I miss."

The young attorneys nodded gravely.

"First, in the matter of Willie, they contributed to violation of the Child Labor Law. Then there's the matter of Jeff's assaulting Patrolman Tom Whalen. Being accessories after the fact, in the murder of James Pepperell, can apply against both of them. You heard Bevins report as to their knowledge of the weapon and their concealment of that knowledge. Also, they have violated City Ordinance 169, Section D, Paragraph 3c, dealing with the unlicensed, illegal operation of a private detective agency—"

Smitty couldn't help smiling himself, in spite of the gravity of his position, as he caught a glimpse of Jeff's face.

"Then there is the matter of a stolen yellow convertible coupé, license number—"

Smitty looked hopefully to his employer to refute this charge, but Jeff gazed steadily at Chief Gaines, ignoring Smitty's existence.

"Then there is—" Chief Gaines paused at the sound of a knock on the conference room door. "Come in."

A grinning desk sergeant stuck in his head. "Ah-h-h, there's good news to-night, chief. It just broke on the Gay Gossip's Quarter Hour. Come out, and I'll tell you."

"If it's on the air, sergeant, I don't suppose it's much of a secret. Out with it."

"When the flying boat *Blue Bird* touched the Azores this evening on its way to Lisbon, Portugal, the passengers got out to stretch their legs along the dock. When she was ready to continue her voyage, two passengers failed to show, a Miss Cecilia Carter and a Mr. Jonathan Jones."

"Well!" For the first time since entering the room a broad smile spread over the chief's face. "Well! Well! What happened to them?"

"Apparently they crossed the dock, stepped aboard a small passenger-freight steamer that was about to sail for the States, and were married by the captain when they were on the high seas."

"And Mrs. Courtney Carter?" the chief asked. "What did she have to say? Boy, I'd like to have seen that!"

"No comments! She immediately boarded the *Red Bird*, which flew in from Lisbon a few minutes later, and is now on her way home."

"Thanks, sergeant! That news cheers me up considerably." The chief smiled broadly at Z. Z. Smith. He let his eyes wander across the table to Jeff Hunter. "Why can't you two behave? Jeff, are you going to withdraw your charges against Smitty for the unauthorized use of your car?"

Jeff nodded.

Smitty wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "We'll behave, chief. We promise. It's just that there was a temporary slack period at the office, and Jeff and I were doing a little good-will missionary work with an eye to future business. Believe me, when there's another slack period, I'll see that Jeff does his missionary work far, far away or by mail."

"O.K., Smitty. Anything to say, Jeff?"

"I'm sorry things turned out as they did, chief. I was only trying to protect my client, Mrs. Carter's, interests. Moreover, I've solved the murder, although I've been unable to get tangible proof. That's why I tackled Officer Whalen tonight. I thought I might find it in the journal or day book I reasoned must exist. I thought I could hand you this case completely wrapped up."

The chief nodded. "Perhaps the journal will help us when my lab men break down Pepperell's code. Who do you think killed Pepperell, Jeff?"

Jeff turned apologetically toward his assistant. "Sorry to have to do this Smitty. The murderer, chief, is Mrs. Wade, Veronica Wade's mother. It's all in the deduction stage, no tangible evidence, but I don't think I'm wrong."

"Your reasons for thinking Mrs. Wade's guilty, Jeff?"

"Earl Marshall, her doctor—he's also your M.E., chief—assures me that it's quite possible, though unwise, for Mrs. Wade to get around without her wheel chair. Her hip fracture has been wired and pegged—it's stiff, and the bones refuse to knit properly—but she can get about if she really wants to. I caught onto that this morning, when I realized she must have been able to get her knitting bag after Ronnie went out, and she was alone in the house."

The chief frowned thoughtfully. "Her motive?"

"Revenge! Mrs. Wade was crossing the street several years ago, when a fast-moving taxi crowded her. She attempted to step back onto the curb, but her heel caught and she fell, breaking her hip. James Pepperell was the driver of the cab that crowded her."

"I didn't know that. How could she have procured the weapon which belonged to Cecilia Carter?"

"All Cecilia's playthings were stored in the basement of the Carter residence after Courtney Carter's death. It was common knowledge. The basement door is usually unlocked. Once we accept the fact that Mrs. Wade is able to get around by herself, everything else is possible."

"That unlocked basement door," the chief said, has been a stumbling block, Jeff. Anyone could have taken the gun. Have you anything else to add?"

Jeff leaned back in his chair and looked apologetically at his assistant. "Smitty, I hate to do this—"

Smitty only nodded.

"Well, chief, when Ronnie Wade came to see us this morning, she was wearing a spray of maple leaves pinned to her shoulder. Smitty found a leaf, while we were in Pepperell's apartment with you, that could have come from that spray. I believe that after Ronnie was dressed, she missed her mother, and rushed out looking for her. I think she found her mother in the garage, unable to get home again after killing Pepperell, and helped her back, throwing the gun in the lily pond on her way. The girl didn't tell us that James Pepperell was responsible for her mother's invalidism. She started to say her mother had an accident, then changed her statement to say her mother fell. The hard-boiled egg business was just a clever blind by which she hoped to keep in contact with us. She knew we'd be involved because of my recent transactions with James Pepperell."

"Chief"—Smitty jumped to his feet—"I know all that sounds logical, but Jeff's conclusions are all wrong. Anybody could have dropped that leaf in Pepperell's apartment; they're all over the lawn. He's just trying to protect the Carters, he—"

The chief stood up. "I think we all need a good night's sleep. The perspective will have changed by morning."

Smitty and Jeff rose also, and Jeff moved toward the door. "Thanks, chief, I really appreciate your not detaining Smitty and me. I fully realize we overstepped our bounds. But I wasn't kidding you when I told you about that poor kitten being shut up in our office, with nothing to eat. After all, if it hadn't been for the kitten, you probably wouldn't have found the gun yet."

"Come in!" the chief called as a knock sounded on the door.

The door swung inward, disclosing a large police officer. A thin loop of leather circled his big hand, its other end attached to a light-green harness which closely fitted the body of Jeff's small Angora kitten.

"Ah, there you are, Glancy!" The chief grinned. "Just in time, too. Jeff was getting himself all worked up about that kitten. Glancy, Jeff wants to take it for a walk, so suppose you go along with them, and when they've had enough air, bring them safely back. They're visiting in the detention wing tonight."

IV.

Z. Z. SMITH, stretched out on his cot in a detention cell, pretended to be asleep when a swearing, protesting Jefferson Hunter, accompanied by the small orange kitten, was forced into the cell across the corridor.

He pretended to be still asleep as he watched Jeff put the kitten on the floor and stretch himself resignedly on the cot. He

even smiled to himself as he watched the kitten promptly climb the leg of the cot, form itself into a tight orange ball, and press itself against Jeff's side.

Soon all three occupants of the detention wing, worn out by a trying day, were sleeping soundly.

"Cripes, pal," Willie said to Smitty the following morning after he, with a cab driver's help, had lugged twenty-seven cans of salmon into the office. "Cripes, pal, your boss is like a cat on a hot stove. Where was he going?"

"Home, to wash up. He'll be down later."

"Well, I'm sorry he don't like to be called a shamus. But I found out I wasn't getting far with the first grocers, so I began telling them I was a private eye attached to Jefferson Hunter's detective agency, and things went better. How was I to know you didn't have a license?"

"Jeff has a complex about shamuses. You did find out how hard-boiled eggs could get in with fresh ones?"

"Sure, pal." Willie repeated what Smitty had already learned in the Indian Springs store. "I also found it was possible for nest eggs to get in with fresh ones. And at Easter time, egg-picking time, they get a lot of cracked ones, too."

"Thanks, Willie. How much do we owe you?"

"Will a dollar an hour be fair enough? I worked darn hard for seven full hours, chum. I ain't including the time I was in the hoosegow, either."

"Fair enough! I don't see how anyone can complain about that price."

"Neither do I, chum. Then there's the expenses, and they're not padded a cent." Willie's voice was uncertain.

"How much?" Suspicion crept into Smitty's voice.

"Well, chum, prices are high these days—"

"How much?"

"You better take an aspirin. Ten bucks an hour for the cab."

Smitty stiffened, the color draining from his face.

"I got receipts, chum. And there's twenty-seven cans of salmon for the cat. Chum, you sure you don't want some aspirin?"

"Let's have it while I'm still rocky. It won't hurt so bad. Surely cat food—"

"Pal, that cat food averaged about seventy-five cents a can, twenty bucks two bits in all."

Z. Z. Smith stiffened, his eyes blank. Willie misread shock for a refusal to pay.

"Do I have to call in the cops to collect, chum?"

"Oh, no," Smitty said gently, and reached for the check book as the phone clamored for attention.

"Oh, Smitty," Ronnie's agitated voice

crackled when the instrument was unracked, "the police are here to take mother to headquarters in an ambulance for tests and questioning. What shall I do?"

"Ask them if they have a warrant."

After a pause, Ronnie again spoke. "They say they haven't."

"Then don't let them take her. Call your lawyer. Oh, Ronnie, I do love you— I—"

"A fine time to bring that up! I could wring Jefferson Hunter's neck. Thanks a lot, Smitty! I knew you'd think of something."

"Keep me advised." Smitty spoke into an already dead line.

"Hm-m-m!" Willie grinned knowingly. "She the dame was here yesterday when I brought the cat?"

Smitty blinked and nodded as he wrote out the check.

"Nice, chum, nice. If she was only a little younger, I could go for her myself."

"Scram!" Smitty shoved the check into the grubby palm.

"Thanks, pal. Keep me in mind when you got more errands."

"I'll never forget you, Willie," Smitty truthfully promised.

Jeff, carrying the kitten, roared into the office. "I just saw that red-headed Willie brat. He had the guts enough to shout, 'Hi, shamus,' at me from across the street."

"Willie reads too many detective stories." Smitty tried to smile. "I expect he found out that we really are a licensed agency now, Jeff."

"Well, don't remind me of it! Of all the lowdown tricks! Blackmailed into taking out a license! I'll get back at Bill Gaines! I'm going to call the papers and tell them I solved the murder before the police even got started. Hand me that phone!"

"Jeff, please—"

The phone began to ring.

"Answer it!" Jeff snapped. "I'm not here."

"Oh, Smitty, you are wonderful," Ronnie's voice came over the wire. "The police have gone, and Melinda Swanson just came back. She's in a state about Pepperell's death, but she says she'll stay with mother while I go down to see our lawyer. I asked her to call you."

"Good girl. Let me know how things go." Smitty racked the phone.

"Why shouldn't I call the papers?"

"Because," Smitty told him, "the case against Mrs. Wade isn't proved. She—"

"It's proved as much as this case will be proved against anyone! No fingerprints! No clue! No eye witnesses! No—"

"Jeff, please wait a while. I've kept you from making impulsive mistakes before. A short delay won't—"

There was a sharp rap on the office door, and it swung inward abruptly.

Smitty needed no introduction to realize that the perfectly turned-out blonde woman

with the blazing eyes was Mrs. Courtney Carter, fresh back from the Azores.

"Who . . . who," she shrielled, "is Mistaire Zee Zee Smeeth? I want that you should find heem, Mistaire Hunttaire. Zat man must be broken, crushed, exterminated. Find him *toute de suite*, but immediately!"

"Dear Mrs. Carter"—Jeff's voice became smooth as butter as he guided her to a chair. "Sit down and tell me what this Mr. Smith has done."

"You ask me what has he done? He has ruined my Cecilia, ruined all my plans, ruined everything!"

"What? how?"

"He makes ze arrangement by cable for zat tramp ship to wait. He sends that Johnnee after us, On ze same *Blue Bird*. I should have but known. Thees Johnnee, hees face was so familiar to me, but it had been so long. I—"

Smitty was glad to pick up the ringing phone. Oblivious to Jeff and Mrs. Carter, he began talking.

"Oh, Miss Melinda Swanson? Did you enjoy your visit to Indian Springs?"

Melinda Swanson said she had, under the circumstances.

"I tried to see you last night, but you had gone with Clyde and your mother to the movies. It won't be necessary for you to leave Mrs. Wade to come down here. I've managed to obtain the information I wanted elsewhere. However, it might be a good idea if you phoned Chief Gaines. I'll be out there this evening, and we can clear up the loose ends. Thanks for calling."

"Melinda Swanson?" Mrs. Carter's eyebrows arched. "I once knew a Mlle. Swanson on the Riviera."

"This isn't the same one." Jeff looked grimly at Smitty. "This is Mrs. Wade's, your neighbor's cook."

"Oh-h-h-h."

"Dear Mrs. Carter"—Jeff cleared his throat importantly—"I've taken the liberty of looking into the killing of James Pepperell. You've heard of his death?"

"*Ouï! Le pauvre James*. Such a good chauffeur! It is sad!"

"Well," Jeff continued, "I've determined that he was shot and killed by Mrs. Wade. In revenge for his crippling her. I've informed the police, and it will be only a matter of time until they obtain sufficient evidence—"

"But, no! Impossible! She cannot walk!"

"I'm afraid it is not only possible that she can walk, but that she also committed the murder. It may be a little hard to prove, but—"

Mrs. Carter's speculative eyes seemed riveted on the orange kitten playing on the window sill. She turned and faced Jeff.

"My taxi. It was waiting. I must go."

Jeff moved with her toward the door.

"And, Mistaire Hunttaire, you must find and crush this Zee Zee Smith pairson! You must annihilate him! As sure as my name is Emelie Mon-nay Carter, I shall not rest until he is dead! He has ruined everything, but everything. And when you find him"—she nodded at the kitten—"perhaps I shall give you a mate for ze pretty kitten."

Jeff closed the office door behind her.

Smitty, doodling on a scratch pad, refused to look at his employer. He wrote numbers, the gun numbers, speedometer reading numbers, mileage numbers, all the numbers he had met up with during the past twenty-four hours. There was something solid and satisfactory about numbers.

"Stop stalling, Smitty. Did you or did you not double-cross me on this Johnny Jones business?"

"Why go into that? Cecilia Carter and Johnny Jones are human, not corporations."

"Well—" Jeff realized argument was futile. "I guess we've come to the parting of our ways, Smitty."

"Yes"—Smitty dropped the pencil—"it looks like it. But, inasmuch as our differences did not arise out of the work I was hired to do, namely, accounting, I must insist on the thirteen weeks' severance pay due me."

Jeff thought that over and knew there was no way he could avoid it.

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Smitty sighed, "And just when I was about to propose to Ronnie, too."

"What will you do when you leave me, Smitty?"

"I haven't given it much thought, but I suppose with my severance pay as a backlog, Ronnie and I could open a detective agency. Since we're particularly interested in love problems, we could specialize in divorce cases. Most agencies won't touch them."

"Revolted, though!" Jeff frowned.

"Naturally, I'd capitalize on my former connection with the Jefferson Hunter Detective Agency. We—"

Smitty's words suddenly stopped, as the blood drained from his face. His eyes were fixed upon the figure-covered scratch sheet before him. Slowly, he swayed in his chair.

"Smitty!" Jeff jumped to his feet. "What's the matter?"

"Jeff! Call Chief Gaines! Go to the Wade house. Hurry! Don't lose a minute! Go on!"

The little man slid forward, out of his chair, to the carpeted floor. The Angora kitten leaped from the window sill, inspected him curiously, then snuggled to the unconscious Smitty's side, purring loudly.

Smitty opened his eyes to find himself stretched out on the office couch. Dr. Marshall, an anxious Ronnie, Chief Gaines, and an upset Jeff Hunter were grouped around him.

"Everything O.K. at Ronnie's? I must have fainted."

"Everything's O.K. now. And not only did you faint, you completely collapsed," Chief Gaines answered. "What set you off?"

"My doodling. Those figures! Everything became clear and I thought there might be another murder. I realized it was thirty miles from town to Indian Springs, only two miles less than James Pepperell's semi-monthly trip, for one thing."

"Yes," the chief said, "he took money regularly to old Mr. Mooney who lives a mile beyond the store. That accounts for the sixty-two-mile semi-monthly trip. He also stopped in the store each time to buy eggs, which he resold to city neighbors, including the Wades, for a dollar a dozen and more, depending on the scarcity. He never missed an opportunity to make a profit, no matter how small."

"Then I remembered about Willie saying, when he brought the kitten, about Mrs. Carter's explaining he should collect from Jeff because her money was in 'escudoes, pistols, pesos, and francs,' and Willie said she'd got to blushing, and he wondered why. She blushed because her subconscious mind had caused her to blurt out the word 'pistol' for peso. Shall I tell you more?"

"Keep talking," the chief told him.

"As Mrs. Wade pointed out, there was a streak of commonness in her. I think she's the daughter of the village drunk in Indian Springs. He's been drinking a quart a day for over twenty-one years; that is, ever since Emily Mooney, or Emilie Monet as she was calling herself, married Courtney Carter and began supporting her father."

Chief Gaines nodded.

"Unfortunately," Smitty continued, "Mrs. Carter was ashamed of him, instead of realizing that that sort of drinking is a disease. She preferred to keep him under cover, instead of having him cured. She probably felt that, cured, he would have been a detriment to her social ambitions. I didn't remember until later her sudden interest in Melinda Swanson, and my mention of Indian Springs, and my suggestion that Melinda contact Chief Gaines, Melinda was Pepperell's girl friend, you know."

"Yes," Chief Gaines agreed, "Mrs. Carter was very interested in Melinda Swanson. She never even knew, for she had been steering clear of the Wades, that Melinda worked for them. Of course, she recognized the name."

"Chief"—Smitty closed his eyes—"my conclusions are as unprovable as Jeff's against Mrs. Wade, but for one thing. There won't be a police officer to come forward and prove they're wrong, as I'm sure one of your men did by admitting handing Mrs. Wade her knitting while they were questioning her, when she was in the house alone after Ronnie left to come here yesterday morning. Instead of the hard-boiled eggs being a blind, they actually led to the way to our learning about Mr. Mooney."

The chief nodded. "There's nothing wrong with your reasoning, Smitty."

"Chief"—Smitty tried to smile—"did Mrs. Carter, by any chance, lose her head and rush out to the Wades in search of Melinda? That's what I was afraid of."

"She sure did. We caught her just before she could plunge one of the kitchen knives into Melinda. She admits she was hoping to plant the knife on Mrs. Wade, whom Jeff had already assured her was suspected of the murder of Pepperell. She thought that Melinda knew who she was. When we arrived, surrounded the house and surprised her in the kitchen, she turned the knife on herself. We broke in in time to prevent her suicide. She's seriously injured, but she may live."

"I doubt it," Dr. Marshall interrupted. "She lacks all will to live, and the chances are she'll die. It'll be better that way."

"She made a full confession," Chief Gaines went on. "She'd been paying blackmail to James Pepperell for years; his insolence and demands for more and more money finally brought her to the point of

desperation. She made up her mind to kill him, go to Europe, and fight extradition if she was suspected. She only returned to the States because she didn't know Cecilia and Johnny were already married, and thought she might still break it up. Pepperell may have been blackmailing her for other reasons than her family background and her father's drunkenness. We'll know more when we break down his code."

"You'd better go back to sleep, Smitty." Dr. Marshall jabbed a hypodermic needle into the little man's arm. "You're not used to such violence."

Smitty stroked the back of the kitten, who was curled up beside him. "Jeff, these cables and the money I spent for Johnny Jones' trip are all good investments. You'll see. Mrs. Johnny Jones will inherit her mother's holdings. I helped young Johnny for various reasons, but mainly to further protect our interests, in case something

happened to Mrs. Carter. They'll be grateful."

"Well," Jeff said, "I'm even willing to forget Willie's expense account, though it comes high. In fact, I'll go so far as to give you and Ronnie the kitten and the twenty-seven cans of salmon as an engagement present!"

Smitty's fingers found Ronnie's. "Darling," she whispered, "I hate violence. But this murder case was the Cupid that brought us together, so it could have been worse. Our detective agency will only handle nice, peaceful divorce cases."

"Whatever you say, Smitty."

"Nuts!" Jeff said. "Ronnie! Let Smitty sleep, and you come over here so we can discuss his new contract."

"Dear," Smitty called to his future wife. "be firm about regular hours for me. I want to be home every night to help you with the dishes."

"Aw, go to sleep!" Jeff snapped.



Nightfall

(Continued from page 17)

Mrs. Strauss heard about Linda and her husband, you could widen the breach there."

His voice was cold and hard. "It all makes an interesting story. Unfortunately, from your viewpoint, none of it can be proven. Don't you think we've had enough conversation for one evening?"

"I like your nerve," I said. "Even now you've still got it. And that double identity gag took nerve. You could never be sure that I wouldn't recognize you after you married Mrs. Strauss."

"So? And now—"

"And now," I said, "you can go. But not far, I'm afraid, Mr. Revere. You're a marked man." I took my hands from my pockets.

He stared at me, but only for a moment. Then his right hand moved swiftly inside his overcoat, and when it came into view again, it held an automatic.

I'd been banking on that, on the ham in him. A frustrated actor, this gent, I felt.

"I won't shoot you, Mr. Barry," he said.

"But you overlooked one angle. You'll find out later what it was. You could have nailed me if you'd had the courage." He bowed to Mrs. Strauss. "And if you, Jean dear, didn't have such a phobia for unpleasant publicity."

He backed out of the room, making his dramatic exit, glowing in the knowledge of what a daring figure he made.

I learned later that he didn't have the gun in shooting position when Rafferty stopped him on the porch. But he made the mistake of trying to get it there.

Rafferty put two slugs in him.

He didn't die, not right away. The angle he'd talked about was the piece of bar steel with which he'd slugged Strauss. They found it in one of Big Ed's files, and Revere's fingerprints were all over it. Ed had kept it in case he'd ever wanted to threaten Revere.

He died in the hospital three days later. They nailed big Ed and Linda, but they never did find Butler. I'm still looking for him.



the
Snake dance

By D. B. OLSEN

*... it was a queer houseparty
that Miss Rachel found her-
self in the midst of*

I.

THE house had the tawny savage color of the desert in it, adobe and sun-bleached tile, and it sat back from the highway on rising ground, surrounded by cottonwoods. On its other side it faced a wide sweep of desert, the distant mesas and tablelands, stark and unshadowed under the morning sun.

In the courtyard a blue sedan had just pulled to a stop. In the car were a blonde woman with too much make-up, a thin, tall, darkly-handsome man, and a girl whose blank, evasive eyes seemed to wander in an agony of shyness.

A big, black, independent-looking cat stood in the arched Spanish doorway and said, "Meowrrrr," inquisitively.

"Don't get excited," Miss Rachel Murdock said from the hall. "They are supposed to be here. They're coming to Gail's house-party."

The girl beside Miss Rachel rubbed her neck hard, a nervous habit she had. "I'll let them think you came, as they did, simply to see the Snake Dances at the Hopi village."

Miss Rachel, watching the three get out of the car, agreed. "They won't be on their guard against me, then."

The blonde woman slid out from behind the wheel and brushed at her clothes critically. The man, opening the door on the other side, almost fell. There was about him an air of alcoholic unsteadiness and lethargy. The lost-looking girl—she must, Miss Rachel thought, be Ilene Taggart—clung to a big black handbag as if it were a shield.

They came into the cool spacious hall and Ilene introduced them to Miss Rachel. The blonde woman was Christine Ryker. The man was her husband, Bob. Ilene Taggart had cold, nerveless hands and her eyes looked through you.

At that moment there was sudden excitement. Christine Ryker had glanced back idly, had seen Pedro, the houseman, taking suitcases from the car. Her voice had a screech in it like a badly handled saw. "Don't bother with our luggage! Don't touch it! Bob will take our things upstairs."

Pedro looked at her blankly, then shrugged with Latin resignation and left the bags in the car.

Bob Ryker bent toward Miss Rachel's taffeta shoulder. "Christine always suspects everyone of being as nose-y as she is!" He didn't, oddly enough, have any liquor odor on him, just a faint hint of onion.

He drinks something that doesn't smell, Miss Rachel thought, and then chews an onion flake. She watched him, but his smile was guileless.

While the three were in the bedrooms freshening up, Gail drew Miss Rachel into a small closet under the stairs. "What do you think about them?"

"I couldn't form an opinion so quickly. It did strike me that Miss Taggart's air of ladylike repression verges on the neurotic. And her eyes—"

Gail had picked up the cat and was rubbing her ears. "Ilene has had a tough time. She's an orphan. In college, we all thought she'd go places as an artist, she did such splendid vivid stuff. Then while we were getting out the anthology, the one the notes were cut from, she developed eye trouble. She had to give up doing illustrations and feel her way around like a blind person. Losing that chance did something to her, twisted her, embittered her. The doctors have been able to help her eyesight a little. An uncle died and left her some money. She gets around all right, but she never has tried to paint again."

"Would she have a motive for doing the things which have been going on?"

Gail shook her head. "I can't imagine Ilene doing anything so . . . so futile and jealous. Her bitterness seems turned in upon herself. She wouldn't want to hurt other people."

Miss Rachel's hand went down into the pocket of her taffeta skirt and emerged with a sheet of notepaper. Pasted upon it in uneven lines was a series of words. The words had been cut individually from thick creamy paper and they were printed in a small, distinctive type.

"You're positive that these were cut from the anthology?" she asked. "In your letter you didn't give reasons. Have you compared it with any of the others?"

"No. I didn't want to be embarrassed by showing it. The type and the paper on which the words are printed—there's no mistaking them."

The pasted message read:

Under the manzanita tree
Whom should you find but little *he*,
Spoiled it, branch and leaf and roots,
Made you kiss his big black boots.

Gail had turned her head so that a wing of her brown hair hid her face. "It means something unpleasant, doesn't it?" Miss Rachel asked. "Could you explain or is the hurt too deep?"

Gail's hand crept up to fumble at her neck. "I can't . . . can't tell you what it means. You won't show it to anyone, will you?"

"No, I won't show it. If I had, would the others have understood?"

"One would." She rubbed the back of her neck hard, as though an intolerable nervous pressure centered there. "Even after seven years, one would remember."

The cat moved uneasily as though some quality in Gail's voice had disturbed her. The voice had control in it, control screwed to the last notch on the vise. Gail went on, "Even without showing my message, I knew about the others. Christine Ryker was furious about hers. She wrote me about it. Bob Ryker got one, too. He hid it from her, but she had seen the envelope. Probably Bob's only reaction was to drink a little extra. Ilene came up here to see me when she got her note. She doesn't live far. Her uncle left her a small ranch near Flagstaff. She wouldn't show me the note, but she stayed for several days, hanging about like a lost child."

"Often these quiet people are hurt more deeply than they show."

"Her being here gave me the idea of the houseparty. I remembered the Hopi Snake Dance coming shortly. It was an excuse to get them here, to find out who enjoys digging up old griefs."

"If the sending of the notes was all, wouldn't it be wiser just to ignore it?"

Gail brushed at her hair. "No. I have to know."

Miss Rachel studied the pasted-together message. "You think that the man referred to in the jingle may have sent it."

"Oh, no!" Gail cried, but her tone lied for her. "I haven't seen him for years. It's someone who has kept in touch with the rest of us. Who else would keep a book full of scribbles of college kids?" Her voice jerked to a halt. There had been a step on the other side of the door.

Miss Rachel felt that in the silence her ears were pointed as nervously as her cat's.

There was no further sound. Gail went on in a whisper, "You won't meet all of them until this afternoon at the Hopi village. One of our members was a Hopi girl; she took over the illustrating of the anthology after Ilene had her trouble. She took over Bob Ryker, too. He had been sort of attentive to Ilene before that. But he and Zia had a quarrel later and he finally married Christine. Zia is a most unusual girl for a Hopi. Talented, far better educated than any other Indian woman I've known."

"Shall I have a chance to talk to her?"

"I've asked her to come back with us." She seemed to be listening for further sounds outside the door. "I suppose we shouldn't be in here too long. Before we

go, thanks so much for coming. Just because you'd been grandmother's old friend—"

"I was glad to come. I'll admit being curious, too." Miss Rachel looked very much like a tiny Dresden china figure with her white hair and lavender taffeta gown and pink lace mitts. The mitts were something new; she had seen some like them in a movie. They added to the impression of gentle Victorian helplessness; which, considering the dangerous business she had made her hobby, was all for the best. "Father tried to discipline curiosity out of me but he failed. He finally just gave up."

Gail smiled, then opened the door softly so that they could slip through. The hall felt fresh and airy after the closeness of the closet. As they walked toward the door of the living room where the cactus blossoms made a crimson splash against the wall, a voice spoke behind them.

It was a deeply masculine voice with a touch of irony in it. They turned together.

He was rather short as he stood there on the stairs; a rugged, sturdy man not much taller than Gail. He had rough blond hair, his square face was wind-bitten, and the way he was dressed implied an outdoor bachelor existence. "Forgotten me?" he asked, and put out his hand.

Miss Rachel took his hand since Gail obviously wasn't going to. "I am Rachel Murdock, an old friend of the family."

He regarded the little old lady and her cat with friendly humor. "Lucky family, then. I'm Hal Emerson. Gail, you meant me to come, didn't you?"

Gail didn't speak. She was looking at him with hatred and astonishment.

He went on a little unsurely, "Ilene told me the old literary gang was gathering. High time, too. I thought naturally that everyone who had been a member—"

Christine Ryker came in from the patio. The shadow of the arches behind her mercifully cut down the brassy yellow of her hair, the overbright orange rouge, the mascara which she must have put on with a knife. "Oh, here we are! Hal, how nice!" She giggled delightedly. "Gail, I really like your house. When I heard you'd bought this adobe ruin, I almost cried. I could imagine you living with lizards and tarantulas. But it's lovely! You've done wonders with it!" Her nervous, over-animated face turned from one to another.

Gail had quit looking at Hal Emerson; she seemed cold and distant. "I've enjoyed living here. It's utter desert, of course, and water has been a problem. I've spent more money than I should have, I suppose."

"Oh, but you've kept on with your writing," Christine dismissed it, as though naturally Gail were now wealthy.

Emerson hadn't taken his eyes off Gail.

"I just got here. Pedro gave me a room. Show me your house, won't you?"

Gail said frozenly, "Christine will be glad to, I'm sure. I have to see that lunch is started and served in time for us to get away."

Christine seized Emerson's arm and smiled up into his face and batted her mascara-smearing lashes. "Of course, I'll show him. If we don't come in for lunch, don't wait. We'll be busy." She giggled. Emerson seemed reserved with her, but he hadn't asked Gail to change her mind. He went away with Christine Ryker.

Gail stood rigid, staring after them.

Miss Rachel yawned tactfully, covered the yawn with a lace mitt. "I think I'll rest a little before lunch. Here is your note. Keep it safe."

Gail held out her hand indifferently, crushed the note as she put it into the pocket of her blouse. "I'm going to serve cocktails after awhile. Martinis. Shall I chill some orange juice for you, instead?"

"Oh, goodness, no," said Miss Rachel. "I like martinis. Well, I'll see you in about half an hour."

She went upstairs with her cat to the long, cool, tile-paved gallery. On one side open arches looked out over the patio, on a tangle of flowers and vines, to the sunny Arizona desert beyond. On the right were the bedrooms, a long row of them in the spread-out manner of Spanish houses. The long wall was faced with cream-colored stucco; there were black beams overhead. Beside each door hung a cluster of gourds and pods, painted brightly, the traditional symbol of welcome, of the easy hospitality of the Southwest.

Miss Rachel experimented with Christine Ryker's door and found it locked. She went on to the husband's room next to it, found the door half open as though Bob made a point of not having any secrets. On his dresser stood a quart bottle of vodka, a tin box of dried onion flakes, a blue scarf, some exceptionally heavy driving gloves, a carton of cigarettes and a deck of cards. Miss Rachel studiously went through the dresser drawers—they were empty—and Ryker's suitcase. In the suitcase were another bottle of vodka, two clean shirts, two changes of underwear and a very old dilapidated pair of felt bedroom slippers.

The closet was bare. The bathroom had shaving things laid out. The door which led into the adjoining room, Christine's, was bolted from the other side.

"No note," Miss Rachel told her curious cat. "Perhaps he didn't think it important enough to bring along." As a last possible chance, she peeped under the bed. A small lizard looked at her from a spot about eight inches from her nose. Miss Rachel left hurriedly.

Ilene Taggart's room was unlocked and she went in. An open suitcase lay on the bed, inviting inspection.

The suitcase contained a lot of plain white muslin underwear of a type which Miss Rachel could not recall having seen displayed in a store for the last thirty years. Ilene must make a special effort to find it. The slips, panties and chemises were coarse, shapeless and sexless. In the closet hung Ilene's extra clothes, a rusty-brown suit of the kind social-service workers favor. A dull-gray dinner gown. A playsuit which was definitely bashful.

"How old does she think she is?" Miss Rachel wondered to her cat. "Her figure isn't bad. She has pretty hair." She dug further into the closet. Away in the back, on a satin hanger, were a black net nightgown and a black chiffon negligee trimmed with sly blue ribbons. They still had price tags hanging from them. From their position in the closet, Ilene must be ashamed of them. Or of wanting them just now for Gail's houseparty.

The rest of the room was innocent of any clue to the note-making.

Her cat growled a little. She turned to find Ilene Taggart just inside the door, her figure stiff with shock. "You're . . . you're prying into my things!"

For a moment Miss Rachel just stood, regretting that she had not had a suitable lie ready. Then she found herself blurting something, it turned out to be the truth. "I was hoping you'd brought that note, the pieced-together thing you've all been getting."

"Oh, that," said Ilene. She looked toward the closet and blushed a trifle. "Yes, I brought it. I don't mind your seeing it—you wouldn't know what it meant—and don't ask me to explain." She went to the dresser and took out a big plain patent-leather handbag which Miss Rachel had noticed, but had not had time to explore, perhaps fortunately, since Ilene would probably have caught her at it.

The general appearance of the thing was the same as Gail's.

Star bright, star bright,
Where are all the stars tonight?
Couldn't have love, did get gold,
And now BR . . . but it's cold.

"I don't mind saying that the part about the stars must refer to my partial blindness; I suffered a spell of it seven years ago. Now I'm just nearsighted," Ilene offered. "That's all I can explain. The last part is just mean."

She put her hands together and twisted them into the belt of her plain dark dress.

Miss Rachel read the message through again. "I notice for the second time the

use of a set of initials. Who would B. R. be?"

Of course Bob Ryker was the answer; Ilene wouldn't give it. No, no. They aren't initials at all. The cold, you see, my cold, lonely life *brrrr!*"

Miss Rachel gave her back the paper. "I see."

Ilene put her purse away, then sat down on the edge of the bed and coaxed the cat over to her. "I suppose she's lot of company for you."

Miss Rachel let herself be drawn off the subject of the notes. "No, she's not, really. Cats aren't company. They don't fawn or act chummy. She bosses me a lot. I think she feels that she owns me, that I'm company for her."

The cat seemed suddenly to listen, and after a moment there was a faint dry rattle, not near, just loud enough to be sensed in the vibration of the air. The cat writhed loose from Ilene's arm and stood stiff and alert at the edge of the bed. Ilene reached for her. The rattle came again. It seemed louder, angrier.

"What's wrong with your cat?"

"She heard something, a sound I heard, too. I'm trying to place it. It seemed like . . . like paper crackling."

Ilene twisted her hands nervously. "I thought it seemed more like beads rattling on a string. Dry beads. Amber, like a string my mother used to have."

They waited in the silent room, but the sound did not come again. Ilene got up. "I suppose lunch must be ready. Shall we go down?"

The dining table was set under the arches at the end of the patio. There was a heavy table of redwood, benches down either side, big rawhide-bound chairs at each end. Straw mats had been placed. On them were plates and cups of a type made locally by Indian potters. In the center of the table were fat tallow candles and an arrangement of gourds.

Hal Emerson smoked a pipe as he leaned against one of the arches. Out beside the fish pond was Christine; she wore a sulky, annoyed expression. Evidently the excursion to see the house had turned out badly.

Hal knocked the pipe against his heel and put it into his pocket. "Hello, Ilene."

She had stopped abruptly. Miss Rachel heard the hiss of her breath. "Hal, I didn't expect . . . I didn't think that Gail would want—"

The ironic smile touched his lips. "It was worth a try."

Gail came from the kitchen bearing a tray with a cocktail shaker and glasses. "Is everybody here? No. Where's Bob?"

"In the living room," Emerson said. "Reading up on snakes. Shall I bring him?"

Her hand faltered up to rub at the back of her neck. "Yes, you'd better."

Bob Ryker came back with Hal. He was a man who carried his liquor well. Miss Rachel thought that he was probably pretty drunk by now, but the only symptoms were an increased air of weariness and a touch of redness to his deep-set eyes. He was tall, and the weary attitude seemed to fit his look of undernourishment. His mouth had a tense, stubborn set to it, as though he had resisted a lot of unwelcome advice. On drinking, from Christine, perhaps.

When lunch was over they scattered to get ready for the trip to the mesa. In her room, Miss Rachel found her cat on the window sill, looking down into the courtyard where the cars were parked. Voices had wakened the cat; they came up clearly. Emerson's voice, Gail's answering.

"You've got to give me my chance, let me explain. I didn't have any intention of humiliating you."

"Let me go," said Gail.

"It was such a minor damned thing. Why should we have broken up over it, lost seven years, hated each other? I never gave a damn for the woman—"

"You were there with her," Gail said with a kind of deadly patience, in the place we always met. Our place."

Under the manzanita tree
Whom should you find but little *he*.

"She followed me there; I hadn't asked her. Gail, wake up. It's lives you're tearing up. Our lives. We're thirty, time doesn't wait."

"I came out to check up on the car. Let me go now."

His voice turned to a growl. "I'll kill her for what she's done to us, Gail."

"You can't bring back the past," Gail said quietly.

Apparently, they separated then. There were sounds from one of the cars, but no more talking.

Miss Rachel put on a straw bonnet and changed her pink lace mitts for a pair of blue ones. Her cat followed as she went out upon the gallery; together they stood and looked at Christine Ryker. She was quite eye-catching; she wore a flame-red linen suit and a huge cart-wheel red straw hat without any crown. Her big envelope bag and her shoes were of green suede. She made Miss Rachel think of Christmas, all except the face. She turned from locking her door and pure fury looked out of her eyes. Miss Rachel needed no psychic gift to know that Christine had heard the conversation in the courtyard and that the woman Emerson professed not to give a damn for—a phrase to bring out any woman's claws—was Christine.

"What the devil are you staring at?" she jerked out.

"I'm sorry. I was admiring your hat." It was, indeed, a big unusual-looking hat, though it seemed, somehow, bare.

"Some sneak took the feathers off it," Christine spat. Her eyes pounced on the cat. "Maybe your cat got in somehow and saw it lying on my bed, saw the feathers ruffling there, and tore them off."

"I'm sure my cat didn't damage your hat," Miss Rachel defended. "Your door's been locked all the time."

A stupid break! Christine's shallow eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Yes, it has been. How did you know?"

"I keep mistaking it for mine," Miss Rachel murmured, blushing.

Christine curled her lip at the lie, kept it curled to the bottom of the stairs. There her husband drew her attention. He was carrying a small brown straw lunch-basket

"What's that thing?" Christine demanded.

"Refreshments," he drawled. "Do you think I'm going to sit out in the sun all afternoon without anything? I borrowed the basket from Gail, but if you put up a fuss I'll carry the bare bottle in my hand."

She clamped her rouged mouth shut and went out into the courtyard.

Ilene came down wearing the rusty-brown suit. The ill-fitting clothes, the large black handbag and plain black shoes gave her a hot, travel-worn look, as though she had already made the trip and come back.

"Poor li'l old Ilene," Ryker said. "Would a drink help?"

A little blush came into her face. "No. But thanks."

They went out together.

Miss Rachel petted her cat. "Watch yourself while I'm gone. Whatever it was that rattled, stay away from that."

Samantha blinked her big green eyes solemnly.

II.

ALL the sunshine in the Arizona coppery-blue sky seemed concentrated on the top of the mesa. The village was crowded with people who waited, perspiring and noisy, for the ceremony to begin. Children ran to and fro underfoot, followed by dogs, followed by native policemen. There had been, Gail explained, eight days of ceremonial prayers in the temple, or kiva, and now in the climactic ceremonies the snakes were to be brought forth and danced with in defiance of danger, then sent on their way to the gods with prayers for rain.

There was as yet no sign of the priests who were to perform the dances, and the crowd moved about restlessly under the hot sun. Some of the Indians had set up shop

with jewelry, baskets, and iced drinks, and were doing a brisk business.

Miss Rachel had found a few inches of shadow beside an adobe wall and stood there watching the crowd thoughtfully. She saw Christine Ryker looking over a tray of jewelry. Bob Ryker, imagining himself out of sight in a doorway, had lifted the lid of his straw lunch-basket. Hal Emerson stood in the direct blaze of the sun, his eyes on Christine at the jewelry counter, his expression twisted and bitter. Ilene was at the far side of the plaza; Miss Rachel caught a glimpse of her bent over, talking with a Hopi child who carried a puppy in his arms.

Miss Rachel turned as someone touched her sleeve.

Gail was behind her; with Gail was a Hopi girl. Miss Rachel had half expected Zia to be dressed in the flaring colorful skirts and velvet jacket of the other women; but either the girl had given up her native costume or she had prepared herself for the trip with Gail. She wore a corn-yellow linen dress, cut very simply. A necklace of silver-and-turquoise at her throat and her manner of doing her hair—heavy swirls at her ears in a smaller, modified version of the squash-blossom hairdress of the Hopis—were the only Indian touches in her costume. She carried a buckskin bag by its thongs. Evidently, it contained her overnight things.

Her hand was cool, her smile friendly, as Gail introduced her to Miss Rachel. "You have never seen the Snake Dance before?"

"No. Isn't it dangerous?"

"Not for the Snake and Antelope priests who perform it. I suppose you understand that the entire ceremony is a prayer for rain. Are you prepared for a downpour?"

"Are the prayers so efficacious?"

"Always." Her tone was matter-of-fact, not bantering.

Gail broke in with, "Zia and I have been talking over the situation in regard to the notes. She feels that we ought all to get together and show the messages we received and discuss them frankly. I . . . I agree with her. The message in my note doesn't seem as important as it did." She held her chin up tautly.

The Hopi girl said, "I received one of the notes, a very evil thing which hurt me very much, but which I deserved for a certain act of mine." Her black eyes were calm, resigned.

There was a sudden surge of excitement through the crowd. A group of priests had emerged from the kiva, or underground temple, and began to circle the plaza, meanwhile scattering sacred meal on the hard adobe earth. When all had emerged from below, the chanting and stamping began, a hoarse, throbbing rhythm. "This is the summons to the Gods of the Underworld,"

Zia explained, "to witness the prayers for rain."

The crowd of whites and visiting Indians from other pueblos had crushed forward eagerly, now they began to fall back as snakes were taken from the leafy green shrine at one end of the plaza. There were a few screams from nervous women. The priests danced with the rattlers between their teeth; with faces painted grotesquely in black-and-white, with wildly straggling hair and fringed kirtles, they made a savage, even startling picture. Miss Rachel began to see the pattern behind the ceremony. As the Snake priest danced, an Antelope priest accompanied him and drew the snake's irritable attention by the use of a little feathered wand. When a snake was discarded, it was simply thrown upon the ground and promptly tried to take its departure as quickly as possible. There were minor panics when this happened. Usually a third priest was at hand, not always.

At the height of the dancing, Miss Rachel noticed a young Indian nearby on the corner of a wall, sketching the scene with a stick of charcoal. He worked swiftly, surely; his expression was absorbed. Fixed on him, too, were the eyes of Zia; in them a kind of resignation that he found his drawing so compelling.

The crowd grew more excited as the number of snakes taken from the shrine increased and were discarded. One woman created a near-riot by fainting practically at the feet of a dancing Snake priest. The movement, the heat, the surging crowd made Miss Rachel want to shut her eyes.

But now, she knew, was the time that she must keep them open.

She turned to ask Zia if all the snakes were carefully kept count of. The sunny space beside her was empty. Zia and Gail had disappeared into the crowd, perhaps to find a better view of the dancing. Miss Rachel, suddenly alert, stood on tiptoe and tried to see over the heads. An eddy of hurrying people caught her; somewhere a woman screamed, "Rattlesnake!" She found herself at the edge of the open space. The Snake priests had converged on the heap of snakes and were gathering them up like so much cordwood, starting on the race to the bottom of the mesa to release these messengers to the Underworld, the shadow world where the mute gods waited for the rain prayers. In the sunny blaze, Miss Rachel was conscious of a chill.

One of the priests had lost his feathered wand. It had been tossed to within a few inches of Miss Rachel's foot. She reached for it and one of the Antelope priests took it gently from her hand. But as he carried it away, she looked in sudden interest at the cluster of feathers on its tip.

Gail came through the crowd from the

direction of the cars. "We can get out now. There's such a rush, we'd better make it while we can. What Zia said is true, there usually is a downpour right after the dance. And some of the roads will wash out if there is."

She was looking at the crowd, at a spot where Christine's face was framed by the big red hat. Sudden hatred flickered in her eyes.

The first big spattering drops hit the windshield as they turned into the courtyard. During the drive a mass of black clouds had crawled up over the horizon. The air inside Gail's station wagon was close and heavy; there was a queer silence no one had wanted to break. Gail, driving, occasionally pointed out sights of interest to Miss Rachel beside her. The group in the rear of the car made no attempt to carry on a conversation. Miss Rachel, looking back, caught a glimpse of Zia aloof in a corner, Christine looking slantwise at Emerson, her mouth slyly vengeful.

The house held a damp, cold foreboding of rain. The arches of the patio were black against the gray light, the floor beneath already peppered with sprinklings. Miss Rachel went up to her room, where her cat met her by getting off the bed and stretching her long black body with the gracefulness of a steel spring.

Miss Rachel removed her hat and the mitts, washed her hands in the bathroom, smoothed her white hair before the mirror. The house seemed very quiet, hushed in preparation for the onslaught of the storm. She jumped when Gail quietly rapped at the door and then put her head in.

"I'm sure we're all worn out from the drive. Would you like a pot of tea? Or something with a nip in it?"

"Tea with a nip in it warms one up like everything," Miss Rachel told her. Then they both jumped. There had been a shriek, a sharp, frazzled sound, hoarse and terrified; now there were hurried steps on the gallery.

They looked out to where Christine faced them under the shadow of the arches. She had removed her hat and her hair was damp and held comb marks. She leaned against the arch and clutched her left ankle, rubbing the flesh and grinding out words. "Your damned cat—under my bed. It clawed me! Or bit me! What fangs it has!"

She seemed in a fury of rage and frustration. She ran to the top of the stairway, turned there to spit more words back at them. "I'm going down for an axe or something to chop its head off. No cat's going to get away with that!"

Gail rubbed the back of her neck with a hand which trembled. "She must be crazy. Your cat is in your room. Let's ignore it."

"No, we can't do that, and we must

hurry." Miss Rachel pulled Gail with her into Christine's room. Ornate silver-backed toilet articles were laid out on the dresser. An array of dresses and suits hung in the closet. There were an odor of perfume in the air, dry musky scent, and an open suitcase on the bed was full of tumbled silk lingerie. Apparently, Christine had been standing before the suitcase, digging in it, when she had thought the cat had struck her.

Gail started for the bed, but Miss Rachel stopped her. "Let's have a look first."

They crouched together awkwardly and peered into the shadowy space under the bed. For a moment there seemed to be nothing. Then near the footboard on the floor, Miss Rachel caught sight of glistening dark coils, a coffin-shaped head from which little eyes gleamed evilly.

Someone was screaming, a hoarse series of cackles like a hen's. On the gallery was Florencia, getting off her knees from a position following their own where she had seen, as they had, the thing under the bed. Beyond Florencia, Ilene appeared suddenly. Bob Ryker began to pound at the bolted door to the bathroom.

Miss Rachel pulled the bolt and admitted him. "We must find your wife at once. She's been bitten by a rattler."

He shook his head as if befuddled. "Where did she go?"

"She went downstairs after an axe." She pushed him.

Still he didn't go. "Where's the snake?" "Never mind the snake. Hurry!"

He turned, rather uncertainly, as though he had drunk heavily since coming back from the ceremony, and ran for the stairs.

Miss Rachel got a grip on Florencia's wildly waving arm, forced the rolling black eyes to meet her own. "Get Pedro. Bring him here to kill the snake."

"How did the thing get into the room of the blonde woman?" Florencia stammered.

"That doesn't matter now." She managed to get Florencia under way. Gail and Ilene seemed stunned to uselessness. Ilene kept muttering, "No, no! Horrible!" and Gail clung to the door and looked sick.

"Don't try anything with that under the bed," Miss Rachel advised. She went downstairs and turned toward the courtyard, thinking that Christine might have intended bringing a tool from her car. The courtyard was still, empty of life and dark with shadow. From the sky came gusts of rain. Miss Rachel hurried, conscious of an invisible clock keeping time with her running steps.

Through the hall, out into the patio. Bob Ryker stood in the dusk, running his hands through his hair. "I can't find her."

"Every moment counts. She must have a tourniquet above that bite."

His long thin body wavered there indecisively in the shadows, like a puppet on a string. "I know. I can't think of what to do. Should I shout for her?"

Miss Rachel fairly jumped up and down. "Of course, shout!"

Their voices echoed queerly in the smothered quiet of the patio. Bob Ryker drew a deep breath, put his hands up to form a megaphone.

At that moment there came a loud scraping sound, a clink and rattle, and Christine emerged at the other side of the patio through a small door among the vines. She dragged an axe by its handle, the iron head hitting the brick wall. She moved slowly, as if exhausted, and while they watched, in that first instant of surprise, she stopped and weaved a little and wiped her forehead with the back of her free hand.

Rain spattered loudly, a sudden gust that hissed among the leaves and darkened all the sky. Christine's hair stood out from the dark with a brassy shine. She lifted her head and saw them, Bob Ryker frozen in that motion of calling, Miss Rachel coming toward her swiftly.

She said hoarsely, "That dammed cat! Just wait till I chop its—" She began to twitch. She dropped the axe, shuddered violently, stumbled forward and went down on her face.

Miss Rachel knew, in the moment she bent to touch her, that Christine Ryker was dead. Behind her, Bob's voice stumbled into words. "Her heart was bad. She wouldn't have been able to hold out like a normal person."

From the gallery, Ilene screamed. The sharp, terrified sound seemed to climb into the sky, to shake loose more rain, big drops that darkened Christine's red suit spottily. Broken drops glittered in her hair, on her contorted face.

"We'd better cover her until the police come," Miss Rachel said. She looked up. Ilene's hands were clawing on the gallery railing; her eyes avid and afraid. "Bring down a blanket."

"We'll move her. There's a couch in the sunroom," Ryker decided.

"The police won't want her moved."

"Damn the police then!" He lifted Christine's body and headed for the hall.

Zia came from under the arches and stood quietly beside Miss Rachel. Her voice held little surprise, a fatalistic acceptance mostly. "She has died from the bite of a rattler?"

Miss Rachel explained. "She thought that my cat had clawed her from under the bed. She came down for something with which to destroy the cat. The axe—getting it cost her her life."

The black eyes were cool and uncurious. "Her manner of dying was strange, wasn't

it, coming as it did immediately after the Snake dance in our village? But the fact of her dying might have been expected. She was full of hatred and malice and I'm sure it was she who sent those notes to the rest of us."

The rain hissed around them. The sky was black now, touched with forked lightning as quick as the flick of the feather wands in the hands of the Snake priests. On the gallery, Pedro was advancing now with a rake in one hand, a hatchet in the other. Miss Rachel cried suddenly, "Wait! Don't kill the snake! Capture it, put it into something!"

Gail and Ilene clung to the railing and looked down at her as if she was crazy. "I noticed that the snakes at the ceremony seemed rather lethargic. We should observe this one and see how it acts."

Zia stared at her oddly. "You think this could have been one of ours?" Then she went on quickly, "For a week the snakes at the village had been handled in the various ceremonies in the kiva. Much of their venom had been drawn off. I think, if this had been one of those, it should have been trying to crawl into the dark to sleep."

"That's what it seemed to be trying to do when we saw it. Mr. Ryker said something about his wife's having a weak heart. In such a case even a small amount of venom—"

There were shrieks and scurrying footsteps on the gallery, startled yells from Pedro, the crash of the rake. "It's coming out!" Ilene almost fell from the gallery in terror. "Kill it! Kill it!"

Into the panting moment of fear there came chopping noises, then a scaly threshing, then the sound of something like a whip repeatedly striking the wall. Pedro came at last to look down at Miss Rachel. The gallery light showed his gray face, his mouth set so it should not betray his fright. "I don't know—maybe it was one of them. It was not a big snake nor active, but we were afraid and so I killed it."

A small cold wind blew on Miss Rachel out of the thunderous sky. The pattern was repeating itself; someone had been afraid of Christine and so Christine had died.

And now the snake, the bearer of venom—

They gathered in the living room. Pedro had built a fire on the flat open hearth, mesquite wood which popped and crackled. Christine's body lay in the sunroom, where there was no sun now, only darkness. The sheriff seemed long in coming, and while waited twilight seeped out of the room, night flowed in. The fire threw tortuous shadows on the walls and on the waiting mask-like faces.

Hal Emerson spoke through thoughtful

pipe smoke. "I had a hunch Christine had been sending those notes. Mean stuff. I burned mine, but I couldn't get it out of my mind."

Bob Ryker, prowling a corner of the room among the shadows, turned angrily. Ilene said, "How could she have? She got one, too, you know."

The Hopi girl smiled into the fire. "That would be to fool us, so that we wouldn't suspect her."

"Are you all together in this?" Bob Ryker strode to the fire; his shadow up the wall was lean, sharp-featured. "Accusing Christine, and her not cold yet?"

"It had occurred to me," Miss Rachel offered, "that Mrs. Ryker's preoccupation with the privacy of her luggage might mean that there were things in it she didn't want the rest of you to see. Such as, for instance, materials for further notemaking."

They all looked at her a little strangely, as though old white-haired ladies weren't supposed to have theories about poison-pen letters. Ryker's chin jutted. "You're all nuts. Christine wouldn't—"

"Then you won't mind proving me wrong."

Hal Emerson, short and square, tried to make Gail meet his eyes. "It's your house, Gail. You have a right to know what's been brought into it."

"It's my wife's luggage." Ryker took two steps and lashed out with his right fist, but Emerson stepped lightly aside and then tapped Ryker in return. A contemptuous blow that let the others see he could have meant business if he had wanted.

Ryker sat down heavily in a chair.

"Come on, Gail," Emerson was waiting.

"I'm not coming. I won't pry into a dead woman's things."

"I'll come, then." Miss Rachel got out of her chair briskly and her cat stretched beside the hearth, her green eyes curious. "The sooner the evidence is examined the better. If Miss Ryker was killed because of something she was doing, we'd better find out what it was."

She went out with Emerson. A startled, indignant silence seemed to follow them. Then Gail came hurrying to catch them in the hall.

"Wait. You're right. I'll go with you."

Emerson paused on the steps to tamp his pipe full from a tobacco pouch. "You hate me, don't you, Gail?"

"No. But you said you'd . . . that you'd kill Christine. And now she's dead." Gail shrank against the stair, trembling. "And I saw you handling a snake today when it almost escaped into the crowd."

The overhead light showed the sudden anger in his face. "You were spying on me. You expect the worst of me, so you spy and try to find it."

She turned away. Her hand rubbed at the back of her neck. There was a lost, unhappy look in her eyes. "Let's go and get this over."

III.

THE gallery was wet with the slash of rain in through the arches, Emerson snapped on the light in Christine's room as they went in. The musky perfume was fainter, washed over with the rainy smell from the open window. Miss Rachel went to the suitcase and searched among the tumbled silk. "There's nothing here. She wouldn't have left evidence in the open."

Miss Rachel went to the closet. On the floor was a big fortnighter case, but Miss Rachel seemed more interested in a blue overnight bag on the shelf. She lifted it down, took it to the bed. It was locked, but a key from Christine's big green suede bag opened it. The upraised lid showed ornate jars of cosmetics. This first tray lifted out; beneath was a velvet-lined compartment for jewelry, flat and shallow, and a small under-space for gown or pajamas. "Here, I think. She's put in a false bottom."

"Anything false was thoroughly in character," Emerson said grimly. He must have seen Gail's withdrawal. "I won't speak well of the dead when they take seven years of my life into the grave with them." He bent above the case as Miss Rachel, working with a nail-file, lifted out the false bottom. The case was small and it was hard for Miss Rachel and Emerson and the cat all to see into it at once. The cat won; she got her claws into the leather rim and pushed.

"Nosey," Miss Rachel chided her cat, lifting her away.

In the secret compartment was a sheaf of notepaper, a little tube of paste, tiny scissors and a small book bound in limp brown leather. On the book's cover was silver lettering: "We Are Seven."

"Seven of us, before Ted died at Tarawa," Hal said softly. "At least, we know he's out of it. She waited seven years before she started her devilment. I suppose matching the pattern satisfied some sadistic corner of her little soul."

Miss Rachel lifted the book and rifled its pages. The leaves were riddled by cut-outs. A spattering of white rectangles drifted out suddenly upon the bed. Miss Rachel scooped them up. "Some of Mrs. Ryker's unfinished business. Let's see if we can make anything of it." She began laying out the clipped words.

Gail seemed to hold her breath. Emerson's hand around his pipe trembled a little.

Miss Rachel worked intently, re-arranging what she had found. "This must be it."

Cheater sneaking through the door,
Fork-tongued venom on the floor—

Gail cried, "She knew, she realized what was happening to her!"

Miss Rachel shook her head. "Mrs. Ryker wasn't the type to apply bad names to herself. Her idea was that she was right and the rest of the world was wrong. Anyway, she wouldn't have had time to stop and cut all this stuff between the time she was bitten and we saw her. She had this prepared." Miss Rachel seemed to listen in the direction of the closet. "She may have had something with a forked tongue prepared. Not the one which bit her. She thought that was the cat." She went over to the closet and looked at the big case. "Let's have a look in this."

Emerson carried the case to a chair, used another key to open the locks. The case was empty except for a heavily wrapped package tied with string, about the shape and size of a shoe box. He gave it to Miss Rachel; she did experimental squeezings. "A little wire cage, I think. Can we cut the string?"

Christine must have made the tiny cage. It was of wire netting, neatly sewed on all its edges with heavy twine. In it a small green snake was lying quite dead.

"She forgot that snakes breathe," Miss Rachel pointed out. "She smothered it." The black cat put out a paw and tried to tap the dead snake through the wire.

Emerson re-lit his pipe. "Queer. It isn't a rattler. It's something harmless, some kind of garter snake."

"I think Mrs. Ryker was depending on the note and on the ceremony at the mesa, to prepare her victim for the idea of a rattler."

"Cheater," Gail murmured. "Could she have thought that Bob was—"

"Why don't you ask me?" Ryker asked from the doorway. He sauntered in, staring at them from hollow eyes. He had been to his room; he carried the full bottle of vodka and the tin of onion flakes was thrust into his shirt pocket. "Why don't you set yourselves up as judge and jury and let me have it right now?"

Miss Rachel looked at him innocently. "We aren't accusing anyone. We did find evidence that your wife sent the notes. Of course, she had fooled you completely."

"You know damned well she hadn't," he shot back. "I knew her too well. I knew how she hated the lot of them. They didn't like her writing, didn't want her stuff in the anthology. When I married her they all acted as though they were at a funeral and I was the corpse. She was jealous of Zia and Ilene; God knows why. She must have figured she had enough grudges to keep her going for twenty anthologies."

"How much had you figured out about the plan involving the snake?"

"Nothing," he said abruptly. He ignored the wire cage.

"There was much more to this last plan than the others. It wasn't just the sending

of a vindictive note, raking up some long-ago hurt. This was working on the nerves of her victim, hinting that there was going to be a rattler waiting unexpectedly for the person she referred to as 'Cheater.'"

"I hadn't cheated on her. She accused me of making a trip up here to see Zia last month, but it wasn't true. It was a business trip."

There was a long thudding roll of thunder. Hal Emerson said uneasily, "I don't suppose she had any other stuff hidden about." He explored the room, peering under the dresser, into the shadows at the side of the bed next the wall. All at once he lifted his head. "Look. Something's happening to the lights."

In the fixture overhead the bulb dimmed, then went out like the slow sinking of a candle. "The wire's are down somewhere!" Gail cried.

Someone chuckled softly in the sudden dark. Only Ryker's alcoholic humor, perhaps, but Miss Rachel didn't like the sound. She felt movement among the people in the room. Then silence came back, eerie and pulseless. Suddenly, there came from some part of the house below an explosive, smashing noise, followed by the tinkle of falling glass and a half-choked scream.

Miss Rachel slid out into the rain-stung darkness of the gallery. She heard the running steps of another, soft on the wet tile. She edged away, toward the arches. The cold iron ornamental railing was startling against her palm.

A crackle of lightning lit the gallery and she whirled. Her own door gaped like a dark, surprised mouth. Gail was standing as if frozen near the door to Christine's room. In her hand was a large ball of white twine.

The dark came back like the shutting of a fist. In the dripping patio below, there was the tearing of vines, then a terrified whimper like a child's.

Miss Rachel rushed for the stairs and the lower hall, hearing footsteps follow like a soft echo of her own. She stooped suddenly and put out a foot to trip her pursuer, then was filled with a desire to giggle hysterically. The eyes of her cat, her eternally nosey cat, gleamed faintly up at her. It had been the running leaps of the cat which she had heard.

She found her way to the dripping blackness of the patio, listened for the stifled, whimpering voice, recognized it. "Ilene!"

"Over here. I've run into something in the dark."

"What happened downstairs?"

"Florence and I were in the living room. She had made some tea in the kitchen and was just bringing it in when the lights went out. She stopped and stared at a window and screamed that there was a head hanging outside. Then she threw the tea, tray

and all, at the window." Ilene began to sob wretchedly. "I could see something hanging there, by the firelight, and the screaming frightened me and I ran out here and hit a post or something."

Emerson's voice came from the gallery. "Need any help down there?"

"Please," Miss Rachel told him. "We need a light very much."

"I'll get my flashlight." He was gone a few moments; when he returned there was a click and a white beam cut through the rainy dark to settle on Ilene, scratched and dragged and sitting in a vine she had pulled down in her accident. With Miss Rachel's help, she struggled free. She stood crying, looking up at the gallery. "Don't put out the light."

"I'll bring it down. Everybody seems to have disappeared up here."

They met him in the hall at the foot of the stairs. The hall had a shadowy, hollow look; their steps re-echoed in the silence. Emerson cast his beam around. "I wonder where everybody went so damned fast. What about Zia, wasn't she with you?"

"She left. I don't know where she went. After the others, I surmised. We'd been talking about Christine, sitting by the fire, and I'd just remembered the sound we heard before lunch." Ilene turned quickly to Miss Rachel. "I told Zia about it. The rattling noise from outside my room. Remember?"

The light twitched in Hal's hand. "You heard a snake here, before we made the trip to the Hopi village?"

Miss Rachel stood very still. "I do remember something, a shaking sound, a sort of dry vibration. Like someone shaking a basket of dried leaves."

"A rattler?" persisted Emerson.

"I don't know."

Ilene huddled closer to the light. "I could see a funny surprise in Zia's expression. She asked me all the details; of course, I hadn't paid much attention and couldn't tell her much. She had me describe the sound over and over and then she left. Then I remembered the time Zia and Christine had had a fight and Christine had called Zia a cheat. She hinted that Zia hadn't really done the anthology illustrations at all, that an Indian artist in Zia's village had done them for her. Zia was mad enough to kill. And Indians never forget, do they?"

"Zia brought that buckskin bag with her stuff in it," Emerson said thoughtfully. "It would have been big enough to conceal a small snake in. But if you heard the thing rattle before lunch, someone had it here then. It's screwy."

They were interrupted by the sound of steps in the dark beyond the top of the stairs. Then Ryker came down unsteadily. "Broke my damned bottle in the dark. Who was tearing around up there like a bat out

of hell?" He peered from one to another sullenly. "Seems like every time I run across any of you, you clam up. What're you cooking up, Emerson?"

"What would you use to make a noise like a rattler?" Emerson asked.

Ryker stopped and put a hand on the railing and turned slowly to look up. "Say that again."

"Suppose you didn't want anyone to get the idea your girl friend was bringing something to help you get rid of your wife? What would you use to make a sound like a snake, you snake?"

"You're crazy," Ryker said quietly. He was, Miss Rachel thought, going through a drowsy stage of drunkenness now. "Go 'way and get lost." He lurched to the door of the living room and stared in at the firelight. "What's that on the floor? Somebody hiding? Hey, you!"

Something flew out at him, struck his face and rolled to the floor. Miss Rachel touched it with her toe, a cushion from near the fireplace, ripped now, spilling feathers which scattered on a drift of wind. Feathers! Someone had used the feathers from Christine's red hat to make a feather wand.

Florencia darted from the living room and tried to wriggle through Ryker's reaching arms. He held her clumsily and she clawed him.

"What's the matter with you?" He flung her away and she struck the door, and slid down into a terrified, crouched position.

She muttered a mixture of English and Spanish, something about a head hanging outside a window, about staying huddled at the fire because she was afraid to move.

Miss Rachel ran past her. The living room was a cavern of shadow, full of faint, shifting light and the smell of mesquite smoke. She turned and looked at each pane in turn. In the left wall, bright against the glass, hung a gourd at the end of a string. A reddish gourd whose decorations gave somewhat the impression of a peering face.

This was Florencia's hanging head, a gourd from the upper gallery. Miss Rachel realized that it was hanging against the wall which faced the courtyard, the wall below the bedroom windows.

She went back into the hall. "I'll need your light," she told Emerson. Ilene whimpered, "I won't stay in the dark!" and Florencia muttered a broken protest. "Come on, then. It might be better if we all witnessed the exposure of Florencia's devil."

They went up, the cat among them like a long black goblin, Bob Ryker last, sullen and stumbling. Emerson muttered at Miss Rachel's elbow, "I've already figured out what it is and how it fits into the pattern."

"Have you?"

"Maybe you don't know that there used

to be quite a romance between Zia and Bob. College stuff, but old flames don't always die. Zia could have got a snake more easily than anyone. And that lunch-basket was a damned funny thing for Ryker to carry."

"All very true," Miss Rachel agreed.

The tiles of the upper gallery were slippery, shone like glass under the beam of the flashlight. "Christine's room, I think," Miss Rachel told them. They crowded in after her; the room was damp with rain-smell from the window, full of the soft drip from the eaves. Ilene tried the light switch; the click sounded futile as Ilene's whimper. At the window Emerson fixed the light upon the sill. The double pane opened from the center. Tied to the hinged arm at the bottom was the end of a white string.

Emerson was frowning. "Was this here when we were looking at Christine's stuff?"

No one answered.

"We didn't look at the window," Emerson decided.

"Someone could have tied it there when the lights went out," Ryker offered. "Me. If it's something fishy, you can say I did it."

Miss Rachel drew up the string. It was heavy and wet in her hands. At the end, speckled with rain, was the reddish gourd. "It's been out there quite a while. Longer than when we were here before, I should think." She shook the gourd experimentally and it gave forth a sharp, dry rattle.

Ilene cried, "It . . . it sounds like what we heard from my room!"

Emerson kept the light trained on the swinging gourd. "What do you made of it?"

"Someone had the idea that the sound we heard before lunch, which others must have heard also, wasn't made by a rattler. This gourd was let down, shaken as an experiment to try to duplicate the other sound. Probably on this second time, the rain covered the sound for everyone but the person at this open window."

Emerson's mouth grew grimmer. "Zia?"

"It's possible. If she were puzzled by Ilene's story of that first rattling."

Emerson said, ignoring Ryker. "She wouldn't expose the trick he had fixed up to divert suspicion from them."

From the gallery came a weird blue flicker of lightning, a fresh slashing of rain. Surely the Snake dances were being answered with a vengeance. Miss Rachel said, "There are other possibilities. Christine was planning a terrifying trick on someone she referred to as 'Cheater.' Why couldn't the rattling sound we heard have been part of the same plan, the build-up to make her victim think a rattler was lurking about?"

She waited, feeling the three minds grasp the idea, turn it over; in one case, throw it off. Ryker said, "You're crazy. She hadn't sent that note yet, the victim, as you call it, wouldn't have got the idea at all."

"She may have sent other notes, dropped hints, or just let the idea of the Snake dance and the victim's nervousness fill out the sketch. It seems probable to me that Christine's victim and probable murderer was also the gourd-shaker. Who else would be worried over that detail, still half-convinced that Christine might have had a real rattler in reserve?"

"Zia. She wasn't with us when we found the garter snake," Emerson pointed out. "She'd still be in the dark."

Ilene gasped. "Then Zia is the one Christine was after!"

Ryker caught her wrist roughly. "Why would she try to scare a Hopi girl with a snake? It's nuts. A white person, yes. Not an Indian kid who has seen the Snake dance every year of her life."

Ilene jerked out of his grip. "Don't think you can get tough with me just because you've—" She stopped, turned from the light.

"Just because he's *what*, Ilene?"

She flushed angrily under Emerson's stare. "Nothing."

"Has this skunk been making a play for you?"

Ryker laughed, loudly, and rudely.

Ilene snapped, "Don't be vulgar. He's . . . he was married."

Florencia wept from the shadows, "We need light. In the dark evil things go about their business."

"Aren't there any candles or lamps you could bring out?" Miss Rachel said. Florencia shook her head nervously.

Emerson motioned toward the door with the beam of light. "Let's go back downstairs by the fire. I'll leave the rest of you there and try to find Gail and Zia. Pedro, too. He must be hiding out somewhere, scared out of his superstitious wits."

They went down. At the living room door Emerson stopped short. By the fire was Gail, wet and shivering. A fresh bunch of mesquite burned in the fireplace.

She turned quickly as they entered.

"Where did you go from Christine's room?" Emerson asked bluntly.

Color came into her haggard face. "I went to the kitchen to try to find some candles. I felt nervous about staying on the gallery. Someone rushed past me in the dark, thrust this thing into my hands." She showed them a ball of heavy white twine.

They made a silent circle, staring down at her. She waited, then pinched the back of her neck fumblingly.

Ryker laughed again, rocking back on his heels. "I saw you holding that damned twine when the lightning flashed. I wasn't going to mention it, being a gentleman. There's a theory being cooked up that Christine's murderer was up to some monkey business with a gourd and some twine."

The mesquite fire threw long shadows up the walls. Gail's face was white now, all emotion washed out of it. "The person who stuck the twine into my hands touched my hair first. Identifying me, I suppose. It wouldn't have been you, Bob, would it?"

No one noticed Miss Rachel as she slipped out into the hall. She went quickly to the patio door. The wet, dripping dark beyond was full of shadows. One shadow moved, approached the redwood table under the arches. There was the scratch of a match on wood, a little flicker of light. The fat candle which had been part of the luncheon decoration glowed with flame. Above it Pedro's impassive face and Zia's tense one looked at Miss Rachel.

She went toward them cautiously. "I must see the snake, the one which bit Mrs. Ryker."

Pedro turned to Zia. The girl seemed to nod imperceptibly. From the floor beside him Pedro lifted a small wooden box. He put it on the table and the candle light shone in upon coppery scales, a flat coffin-shaped head which had been crushed, its eyes staring through film.

"Can you open the jaws?"

"Si." He took a big jackknife from his pocket, opened its blade, lifted the broken head with one hand and inserted the steel between the fanged jaws.

"Which teeth carry the venom?"

Zia pointed with a delicate brown forefinger. "Here. They are, as you perhaps know, very fragile."

"One is shattered and one missing. Do you think—"

"Yes, I had thought of it. But Pedro and I—I especially—were in no position to offer evidence."

"Let's go upstairs. Bring the candle and that box."

The cat had leaped to the table and was peering into the box at the snake. A convulsive reflex caused the rippling body to move slightly. The cat hissed and leaped away. "Someday you'll get that nose nipped," Miss Rachel told Samantha.

Samantha gave her a chiding look.

"Yes, I know. So shall I."

When they came back to the living room the silence that met them was tight with hatred. Gail sat alone as if at bay. Emerson was looking at her fixedly, as if he saw something in her he hadn't known. Ryker had taken a bottle of whisky from a cabinet and was pouring himself a drink. Ilene sat uncertainly on the edge of a chair and Florencia was praying in a corner.

The group turned as one and regarded the array of bags and the basket which Pedro carried.

"Put the snake and the candle here beside the fire," Miss Rachel directed. "Put all the other stuff in plain sight out of everybody's

reach. And now, do what you did before with the knife."

Pedro put the candle on the edge of the hearth. The fire and the candle together, or perhaps nervous dread of what was coming, had made him start to sweat. He lifted the broken coffin-shaped head and inserted the knife blade and the pink tooth-studded jaws yawned wide.

"Oh, horrible," Ilene whimpered. Ryker poured himself another drink.

Emerson said, startled, "There's a fang missing."

"They're very fragile," Zia explained. "Often they are broken, or come away when the snake strikes something tangling. In college—perhaps you recall the course—Professor Boyle showed us the little reserve fangs in the skull, ready to move up almost at once if a fang is lost."

Ilene cried, "Are we going to let her give us evidence?"

"The evidence here has all been gathered by Pedro and myself," Miss Rachel explained. "I think we may be considered as sufficiently clear of a suspicion of the murder. We found that the snake which killed Mrs. Ryker had lost a fang. We thought that if we could find that missing fang in one of the possible containers—"

Emerson said quietly, "How do you know that snake hasn't been tampered with?"

"How do you know the tooth did not drop out on the floor when Pedro killed it?" Ilene put in. "Or stick in Christine's leg?"

"If we don't find it in one of these bags or in the basket Mr. Ryker used, then I think we can presume one of those things happened. As for the snake having been tampered with—Pedro has had it all this while, preparing to skin it for a cousin who makes belts."

"Ugh!" said Ilene.

Gail said, "I didn't carry a purse."

"You had a little tool box under the front seat of your car," Miss Rachel said, "and we brought that."

"I won't permit my purse to be looked into!" Ilene cried, standing up suddenly. "It has personal things in it."

"It has a note from Christine, hinting that you'd never get over your love affair with her husband," Miss Rachel pointed out.

Ilene grabbed for her purse. A little regretfully, Pedro drew it out of her reach. Her panting breath filled the startled unbelieving silence.

Ryker said hoarsely, "Dammit, Ilene, I'd never have thought you had it in you."

She backed away from him. "Shut up."

"On our date last month—" He must have read the stark fright, the rage she turned on him. "You were frigid as hell. Did you really, did Christine really get your number at last?"

Miss Rachel remembered the black chiffon

nightgown, the negligee with the sly blue ribbons, hanging far back and ashamed in the depths of Ilene's closet, and she felt pity for the frozen old maid.

"It had to be you, Ilene," she said gently. "What kind of person, and only what kind, could Christine have hoped to scare out of her wits with a garter snake?"

"Nearsighted," Emerson said flatly, and his tone, too, held regret.

"You're playing with me, tormenting me," Ilene gritted, beating her hands together.

"I wish we could be."

"But the gourd, the twine— Ilene was downstairs, she was never on the gallery," Gail said.

"Ilene was alone in the living room. Florencia was out in the kitchen making tea. Ilene caused the lights to short just as Florencia entered. She had, previously, pulled the gourd over so that it showed at the window. Don't you see, only Ilene could have fixed the gourd as it was? She was *inside*; she reached through the window, found the gourd which she had already hung as close as possible, fixed it so that Florencia would see it."

Emerson was lighting his pipe. He had laid his flashlight down, seemed not to see Ilene's slow creeping toward it. "Why?" he asked.

"We might as well go back to the beginning. Gail's invitation to the Snake dance was at the bottom of everything—Christine's determination to frighten Ilene so badly she'd leave Ryker alone; and Ilene's hope of getting a snake and of having it seem an accident when Christine was bitten."

Ilene's tone wasn't whimpering now; it was cunning. "How could I have caused the rattle we heard before lunch? You were with me, you saw everything I did."

"You sat down on your bed and moved about quickly, playing with my cat," Miss Rachel pointed out. "I think you had the twine tied to the bed-springs, hung through the open window under cover of the drapery. You wanted someone to get the idea that there was a stray rattler about which had wandered in from the desert. You were planning to get one by hook or crook from the Indians; you thought the idea of the rattle very clever. Until it struck you, after Christine's death, that Zia was the choicest suspect and that you had cleared her with your trick. If the snake were already here, Zia couldn't have brought it. So you decided, even more cleverly, to expose your own trick and try to make it seem that Bob Ryker had done it."

Gail had dropped her hands in her lap. "The twine—"

"After Ilene had made sure Florencia had seen the gourd and would raise a fuss until it was discovered, she ran up to the gallery—she had followed Zia there and expected to

find her again, in the dark, and hand her the string. Hence the investigation of your hair. She realized that she had lost Zia, but she couldn't wait, she had to get over that railing by a vine."

"There's just one little point—" Ryker was weaving, very drunk. Emotionally drunk as well as by alcohol. "We saw Gail by lightning. No one except God knows when lightning will crackle. So your little idea that Ilene— No, wait. Emerson's flashlight. He'd have known how to shoot a light and catch Gail."

"I had thought of Mr. Emerson," Miss Rachel admitted. "He had a means of creating a sudden, selective light and he could have shorted the lights by means of a floor-plug behind Mrs. Ryker's bed. But then I recalled that Ilene would have a means of getting a light too. The candles on the table. The lightning saved her that trouble. All she had to do was to whimper and—"

Ilene had reached the flashlight; she turned, ran swiftly to the door. "You'll never find me in the dark. Never! And if there is a snake's fang in my bag— Yes, I did kill her. And I'm glad. I'll never forget that moment of utter joy when I looked in and saw she'd gone into the bathroom. And then, with the aid of Bob's heavy gloves and the feathers off her own hat, I coaxed that snake out of my purse and under the edge of her bed. Don't blame the little Hopi kid; he thought I was playing a game. I'm not sorry. I won't have to worry any more for fear she'll find out that . . . that I was still a fool about a sot." She darted into the blackness of the hall like something tormented, and was gone.

The room was hushed and empty except for the crackle of the mesquite fire. Emerson put his pipe aside, picked up Ilene's black handbag and put his fingers on the catch. "Shall I?" he asked Miss Rachel.

There was evidence in the bag, of a sort.

Before Miss Rachel could answer, there came from the courtyard the sudden slewing of a heavy car on the wet earth, the screech of brakes, the sound of impact, a scream that echoed eerily under the mutter of the rain and was then cut short.

"She's met the sheriff. Head on." Ryker bent toward the liquor cabinet and buried his head in his arms. Perhaps he felt, all at once, how he had played havoc with three women's lives. Or perhaps he was simply very drunk and wanted to rest.

Emerson had laid down the purse. It was stiff, shining, angular; an old maid's purse, big and useful. "We don't need to look, now."

"No, we needn't look," Miss Rachel agreed gently.

She stroked her black cat meekly. The cat was angry; she kept twitching her left front

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South

of Christmas

By RAYMOND DRENNEN, JR.

It was a small island and Bill Donovan liked its name, but he didn't think much of it after he'd spent two months in its primitive jail for a murder he didn't commit!

THE first time I saw her was on a small island in the Pacific some twelve miles south of Christmas. She was a long, slim girl, about twenty-six, with burnished blonde hair hanging careless and tangled to her brown shoulders.

She was bending over a bulky object lying on the beach a quarter mile up from the pile of rocks which served as a landing, when I hove into sight. She straightened and stood still, watching me approach. Then she came down the white sand, her long legs swinging in an easy gait. She had on the silken remnant of a white blouse, scarred riding boots and tattered blue shorts showing firm, brown legs. She wore a wide belt, into which was sheathed a long hunting knife, and at her hip swung an unbuckled holster.

"Thank God you came!" she said. Her voice trembled a little. It was husky and faintly British. Watching me, she smiled in a straightforward, friendly manner, adding, "I'm in a bit of a jam."

I tied in my boat and straightened to look at her. She was as brown as a native, as poised and confident as the Queen Mother.

"I didn't know they grew humans on this island," I told her, grinning. I'd been led to believe it was virtually unvisited. "I'm Bill Donovan. Did your party shove off and strand you?"

"Something like that," she said, "only a little more gruesome. I came with Lord Faulkner a couple days ago to have a look at the island. I'm Marion Golden, his secretary, you know."

I didn't know, but I'd heard of Lord Faulkner. I was interested in hearing more.

"Where is he?" I asked.

The girl pointed up the beach, toward the bulky object I'd seen her standing over.

"He's dead," she said. Then added bluntly, "Murdered!"

I twisted to face her and her wide, gray eyes met my suspicious gaze levelly. Finding her here in the first place was next to incredible. Murder seemed to be stretching the point. She was beautiful, with a slim, lovely figure, poised and imperturbable. Her full mouth was parted tentatively, her eyes gravely considering me as the question formed in my mind.

"You—"

"I don't know who did it," she said impatiently. "I was half a mile or more up the beach, around that jutting"—she pointed—"when I heard the shot. We'd signaled that way a few times, so I didn't hurry. It was fifteen or twenty minutes before I got back and found him."

"Who else is on the island?"

"Except for a few natives, I thought we were alone, until you—" She broke off, her gray eyes narrowing oddly.

"Don't mix me in," I said shortly. "I was in my boat."

"You were just coming into sight when I found him," she murmured.

I started up the beach and she stayed at my side, her legs matching my long strides. Halfway there, she stumbled and caught my arm to support herself. Her other hand went to her forehead and for all her browned complexion, she looked a little pale.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," she said, smiling abashed. "You wouldn't have a little food and water aboard, would you?"

"Hell," I muttered, "I'm thoughtless. You must have been under quite a strain. Move up under the trees where you can sit down and I'll get it."

I put my arm around her to steady her, but she shook it off defiantly, laughing.

"It's not that bad. It's only that our supplies gave out last night and I could stand a drink of water and a sandwich or two." She hesitated fractionally, her eyes traveling past me to the corpse. A shudder seemed to run through her at the thought of looking at it again. She urged, "You go on and let me get it."

"There's a hamper in the stern with a thermos of coffee and some sandwiches," I told her. I'd brought it from Christmas, thinking it'd last me today and I wouldn't have to break out the cooking equipment.

"I'll bring it along," she said. She started to turn, then hesitated and opened the flap on her gun holster. She pulled out her automatic and tossed it toward me. I caught it because I had no choice. She said, "The natives know me. I won't need it and you might."

She didn't give me a chance to argue. I was carrying a gun, only it didn't show. I watched her for a minute as her graceful stride carried her confidently toward the landing, then I continued on toward the corpse.

Lord Faulkner had been a big man, two-fifty or so, and was lying on his stomach, his face buried in the sand. I turned him over on his back and the sand was scarlet where his chest had been lying. The hole was right over his heart and I suspected that was where the bullet was lodged. He had on a khaki bush jacket. I was feeling in the pockets when I heard the motor on my launch cough and roar alive.

I cursed and shouted wildly as I sprang toward the landing. It was hopeless for me to try to catch her. She had it well out into the water before I'd run thirty yards. She went out some two hundred yards, then followed the shore line down in the direction I was standing. She waved at me once as she went by. I stood watching her and cursing as she disappeared around the end of the island in the direction of Christmas.

"In training to be a Cub Scout," I muttered stupidly. I'd been a chump, unsuspecting, naive. She'd given a straightforward plea for help and I was realizing too late that she was one of the most competent young women I'd ever met, at home on an island, in the jungle, and, I suspected, at the queen's ball. I loaded my pipe and sat down under a tree near Faulkner, bitterly admiring her boldness and marveling at my own gullibility.

The thought that she'd killed Faulkner hadn't seriously entered my mind. Now I didn't have much doubt about it. She'd said she was his secretary. When I'd landed on Christmas a week earlier, the British commissioner, a man by the name of Acheson, had told me of Faulkner's arrival, but he hadn't mentioned a secretary. The Caucasian inhabitants of Christmas could be counted on ten fingers, so when an European or

American did put in, it was quite an event. Faulkner had beaten me by about three weeks, spending his time mostly on the forsaken little islands like this one surrounding Christmas. According to Acheson, his visit was a burning mystery. So was mine, for that matter, and I didn't enlighten the commissioner, which did much to cool my reception. It might explain Acheson's failure to tell me about Marion Golden.

My eyes swept back toward the landing and I noticed she'd left the hamper for me. "Damn thoughtful," I grunted sarcastically, getting up. I went over and completed my examination of the body, but didn't find anything of interest. There was no identification. The bullet hole was neat and clean, the kind that's made from a jacketed slug. The magazine in the automatic the girl had tossed me carried soft nosed lead slugs. Faulkner hadn't been killed with one of them, but I realized she could very well have reloaded. Or used another gun and thrown it away after the murder, while she was watching me come in.

I dragged him up under a tree, where the sun couldn't burn him out too fast, and threw some green branches over him. Then I went down to the landing and got the hamper.

The two or three natives who'd watched me land had disappeared. I'm strictly one language and probably couldn't have got anything out of them, anyway. Why Marion Golden had acted the way she did was puzzling me. If she'd murdered Faulkner, she'd also had an opportunity to murder me, if I were in her way. She'd left the hamper of food for me, so she didn't necessarily want me dead. I was toying with the idea that she might come back, or send someone back when she got to Christmas, but six hours later when the sun dropped into the water, I gave up the idea. I made a camp of sorts, using my hunting knife I'd stowed in the hamper, and went to sleep. A geologist sleeps almost any place at one time or another, and I slept there.

I hung around the landing the next day, figuring that if anyone came to the island, that's where they'd come and I didn't want to miss them. The third day, I gave that up, too, and started in to explore the island. There was plenty of tropical fruit, coconuts, and the like, so there wasn't any danger of starving. But a civilized stomach gets hungry for meat.

The island wasn't more than eight or ten miles around and rose from all sides to a height of a hundred feet or so in the center. Why it would interest Faulkner and the girl was something I couldn't figure. The terrain was uneven, heavily matted with jungle growth, and near the top the crater formation was evident. I was representing an American firm looking for some radioactive deposit which our earlier surveys indicated

might be found here. If they were, they'd be valuable strategically and I suppose politically, as well as being worth a hell of a lot of money. That's why I hadn't told anyone including the commissioner, the nature of my visit.

The fifth day, I found rock formations on the north slope which told me I'd found what I was looking for. That afternoon, I found a tiny rocky cove on the other side of the island, opposite the landing. My boat was in it.

I spotted it from the slope and came down quietly. There was no sign of Marion Golden. The gas in the tank was ample to take me back to Christmas. She'd used about enough to circle the island from the landing to the cove where I found it.

I didn't know whether she was still on the island. I'd kept my eyes open during my five days of exploration and hadn't seen anything but a couple of native huts. If she were still on the island, I left her there. I circled the island, sticking close to the shore line, before I headed out toward Christmas. I didn't see any other boats.

It was nearly dinner time when I got to what passed for the hotel room I'd taken for the duration of my visit. I had a bath, shaved, put on some clean clothes and had a steak. It was tough and badly cooked, but it was food. I'd felt starved for four days. I finished it with a hooker of brandy, then went over to commissioner's. I wanted to report the murder and figured Acheson could tell where to find Marion Golden. I knew he'd take over, but I wanted to be in on it.

The building was a two-story frame affair, and the commissioner lived upstairs, the lower floor being given over to offices. A houseboy met me at the door and took me to Acheson's office. A sandy-haired young man, in his middle thirties, with a sandy mustache and blue eyes, was seated at Acheson's desk. He stood up politely, held out his hand when I told him who I was.

"I heard you were here, Mr. Donovan." He held a teakwood box of Player's toward me and I took one. "Matter-of-fact, I was getting a little worried that you didn't show back."

"I'd like to see Acheson," I said. "I ran into some trouble that I think he ought to know about."

He gave me an apologetic smile. "I'm Hugh Venning, the commissioner's secretary. I'm sort of in charge for the time being. Mr. Acheson went back to London three days ago on leave. Maybe I can help you, Mr. Donovan?"

I shrugged. "If you're in charge—I just want to report a murder."

His face frowned seriously for a moment, then brightened.

"Oh, I see," he said. "You're an Ameri-

can and you're new to the islands. Natives get killed all the time for one reason or another. We try to stop it, of course, but—" He broke off in a shrug.

"I don't mean a native," I said. "It's Lord Faulkner I'm talking about."

The half amused smile on Venning's face faded and he paled as he started forward in his chair.

"Lord Faulkner . . . murdered?" he whispered incredulously. He stared at me a minute. "Where . . . how? Natives?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I think it was a girl by the name of Marion Golden. At least, she's the one to question."

"Marion Golden?" he repeated thoughtfully. "I don't know her. I haven't heard of her."

I looked at him. "That's absurd," I declared. "You must know everyone around here. They've got to pass through this port to leave the islands."

He shook his head slowly. "I've been here a long time, Mr. Donovan. I assure you I never heard of a girl by that name."

I was starting to get angry. "She came with Lord Faulkner. She said she was his secretary. Did he land here?"

Venning nodded. "Nearly a month ago, Mr. Donovan." He hesitated, then added quietly, "He came alone."

Something was buzzing in my head. I knew that the tropics could get you, but I was pretty sturdy. I'd been in these places before.

Venning asked, "Did you see Lord Faulkner?"

"Yes, on an atoll about twelve miles south of here."

"Was he dead?"

"He'll never be any deader. His blood was pouring through a window in his chest, painting the sand. There's not enough left in him to provide a mosquito with a decent meal."

"When did you . . . er . . . find him, Mr. Donovan?"

Suddenly, I didn't like Venning's polite, patient manner. He wasn't calling me a liar in so many words, but his voice certainly expressed the doubt in his mind.

"I found him five days ago," I declared hotly. "Marion Golden was standing over him when I landed."

"Where is this Miss Golden now?"

"I don't know," I snapped, then I felt silly. "She stole my boat."

Venning smiled. "You're sure you want to investigate this, old fellow?" he asked confidentially.

By then I was damn sure and told him so.

"Very well, then, if you insist." He thought a minute. "I must admit that Lord Faulkner hasn't been heard from for a couple of weeks and I suppose, in Mr. Acheson's absence, I ought to do what

should be done." He hesitated, looking at me oddly. "Of course, it's dark now. We can't do anything before morning, so I'd suggest you go to your room and get some sleep. I'll pick you up in the morning with a detail and we'll go to this island."

I knew Venning didn't give much credit to my story, but his suggestion was reasonable enough and I agreed, with a couple of reservations. I went back to my room, had a couple jolts of good rye that I'd brought with me from the States, told myself that I'd damn well seen a girl who called herself Marion Golden—to hell with Venning—and I started out to make some inquiries.

There was a guard on my door.

He told me politely that it was late and I should get some sleep. He told me that I couldn't argue with him, and he showed me his gun to prove it. I closed the door.

My room was on the second floor. There was another guard under my window. I blessed them both appropriately, finished the rye and went to bed.

The sun wasn't up an hour before Venning was in my room. I was still asleep. He smoked a cigarette, watched me dress, and told me the local news, which I didn't give a damn about. He was trying to find out what I was doing on Christmas, but I didn't give him any satisfaction. Like Acheson, it made him a little sullen. He dried up shortly, but he was polite enough.

He drank some coffee while I had powdered eggs and rolls in the dining room, then we went outside. Four native policemen, or maybe they were the local army, fell in behind us and followed us to the dock. Venning had already arranged for a boat. It wasn't until we got in the boat, that he mentioned Faulkner. He didn't mention the girl.

I gave directions to the island and we rode in silence. As we pulled in to the landing, I pointed out the spot where I'd first seen Marion Golden standing.

I had a little trouble finding the body. I'd covered it pretty well with branches and they'd settled down as they'd wilted. The corpse was well concealed, though badly preserved. The patient look on Venning's face melted as I pulled the branches off.

"I say!" he began, surprised.

"You sure as hell did," I growled. I felt like grinning at him, but I didn't. It was hot and it was stinking and it was serious. It wasn't any of my business, but I was involved and I didn't like it. I was doing my duty reporting the thing and from then on it was up to Venning.

"I'm no doctor," he said, "but this certainly bears out your story. Six days in this heat will do it to a live one."

"Now if you can get your hands on that

Marion Golden, I think you can get some answers."

Venning looked at me oddly. "Hm-m-m, yes," he murmured, and let it go. He gave orders to have the body carried back to the boat, and he and I followed along behind. His face was deadly serious now, his mouth hard and drawn. And, like an Englishman, he was uncommunicative as hell.

"I have the gun she left me," I told him. "It's in my room. I'll get it for you as soon as we get back."

The silence we carried out to the island with us, lasted until we got back. Venning gave orders for the disposition of the corpse, instructing that a local doctor make an autopsy, then told me abruptly to come with him to his office. When he was seated behind his desk, he studied me speculatively for a few minutes, then said quietly:

"Now, Mr. Donovan, suppose you tell me how it happened."

I looked at the guy for about five minutes before I answered. If I'd said anything before then, it would have been a few curses while I was beating his brains out. It took me that long to realize that if he had never heard of Marion Golden, then my story was as suspicious as hell, as far as he was concerned.

I described her to him. "If that girl lived here or passed through here, it would be impossible for you not to know about her, wouldn't it? No matter what name she used?"

He nodded. "It would be impossible for me not to know about her, Mr. Donovan. There is no one who even remotely resembles the description you've given me. I know all the white women within a thousand miles." He paused reflectively. "Perhaps you were mistaken. Could it have been a native woman?"

I shook my head stubbornly. "Impossible," I muttered.

Venning debated for a while, then said, "It's not generally known, but Lord Faulkner was here looking for certain types of ore deposits. Perhaps you can tell me why you are here?"

It was hot in the room where we were sitting. The equatorial sun was beating down mercilessly outside, but suddenly I felt cold. I used Venning's words, saying,

"I was looking for certain types of ore deposits."

Venning nodded slowly. "And apparently both of you found them at the same time. Am I to understand that you quarreled with Lord Faulkner about prior discovery rights of some sort?"

"You are not!" I snapped. "I told you Faulkner was dead when I found him. What I was doing had nothing to do with him. He did not know I was here and I didn't know what he was doing here. Furthermore, I didn't give a damn. I'm just a geologist.

I make my reports and my bosses in New York can do whatever they want with them. I'm not staking out anything for anybody. I'd had no reason to quarrel with Faulkner."

Venning looked up suddenly. "I see, then perhaps Lord Faulkner approached you with a proposition to keep you from reporting what you'd discovered. You refused and in the ensuing quarrel, you killed him. In self-defense, of course."

His eyes were mildly enthusiastic as he took that line. I scowled at him, but didn't say anything.

"I'm only trying to help you, Mr. Donovan. If that is what happened, I'm sure you'll be completely exonerated."

I stood up, saying coldly, "I didn't kill him, in self-defense or any other way. I merely found him dead and did my duty in reporting to you what I knew about it. I'm leaving, Venning, and you can damn well do what you want to about it. If you'll send someone to my room, I'll give you the girl's gun."

"I've already sent for it," he murmured.

"Then that finishes it as far as I'm concerned," I said. "There's a boat due in three days and I'm taking it for the States. If there's anything I can do to help you in the meantime, let me know."

I started for the door and Venning said after me, "I'm sorry, Mr. Donovan, but I'll have to detain you until I get orders from the high commissioner."

I opened the door and was stopped by a guard. There were three more outside. Venning gave orders and they walked me four blocks down the street to a small brick building with bars on the windows. They put me in a room with a cot in it and a wash basin and a three-legged chair beside a small wooden table. The door was a heavy wooden one, with a slide bolt on the outside and a chair next to the door. When it closed, I heard someone sit down in the chair and tilt back against the wall.

A couple hours later, the door opened and a guard came in with a stack of old American magazines and some ancient books. He put them on the table and left.

I spent two lousy months in that stinking jail and never saw anyone except a guard, who brought me some alleged food twice a day. The second day, I demanded to see Venning. The guard didn't even grunt and probably didn't understand me. The third day, I let him have it. I had him out cold on the floor when I looked up and another guard was pointing a revolver at my belly. The hammer was pulled back. After that, they came in twos, with two more outside holding revolvers.

On the sixty-second day, Venning appeared in the doorway. He had a pained smile on his mouth and his sandy mustache twitched a little as he greeted me coldly. I

was filthy dirty, with a two months' growth of beard and there were lice and other crawling things on me and in my clothes. If you've never spent that kind of solitary in the tropics, you can't know what it's like. My arms and legs and body were thin and emaciated, my eyeballs popped glassy in gaunt sockets. The fantasy of the girl danced before my eyes in the shimmering heat waves until she was nothing more than a dimly remembered character out of my youth. My hate and kill passion had been transferred solely to Venning.

But seeing him standing there was like coming out of high delirium.

"Nice of you to come," I muttered sarcastically. I'd been over this moment, in my imagination, fifty million times, because I knew that sooner or later he'd have to come. Somewhere in my mind, I knew that if I dropped from sight, my company would start making inquiries eventually. When they make inquiries, they start from the top in Washington and work down, and the little fellows fall wherever they've made mistakes. I wasn't sure there'd been any inquiries about me yet, but Venning was here as I knew he'd be eventually.

He was a step inside the door. In one jump I could have my hands around his throat and I could crack his neck before the guards could get me off. Then they'd shoot me, I knew. I sat on my cot and sneered at him.

"I've received orders from London to release you, Mr. Donovan. In view of the fact that you're an American citizen, the government doesn't feel that they want to press charges. Lord Faulkner's death has been officially termed accidental."

He whispered the word "accidental" and I just looked at him.

"Did you find the girl?"

Venning smiled patiently. "No, Mr. Donovan."

He couldn't have been more contemptuous if he'd called me a liar. His voice told me exactly what he thought of me.

"Hell," I muttered. "Maybe there wasn't a girl. Maybe—"

I was getting out of this stinking hole. If he didn't want to bring Faulkner's murderer to justice, then why in blazes should I carry a torch? I was getting out of here. This was Venning's territory and I didn't stand a chance. When I got back to the States, I'd make as much stink as I could about being locked up for two months and not permitted to get in touch with anyone.

"Solitary on Christmas," I thought sourly.

"There's a boat in the harbor, Mr. Donovan," Venning told me in a dry voice. "I've had your things moved aboard. It leaves in an hour."

"Is Acheson back yet?" I asked.

Venning chuckled stiffly. "I'm sorry you

feel that way about me. I've only tried to do what I thought was best. I've cleared you completely and there'll be no repercussions. You can leave without fear of any further trouble in the matter."

"Is Acheson back yet?" I repeated nastily.

He shook his head. "No, I'm still in charge," he told me quietly.

I felt like breaking the hand he held toward me. I didn't. I just ignored it and grinned at him. Two guards took me to the boat, a fruit tramp. It was slow and was bound north, for Honolulu, with stops at Fanning and Palmyra. I didn't leave the boat at either place.

In Honolulu, I took the *Clipper* for San Francisco and a night plane to New York.

When I landed at La Guardia, I had the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and remember a lousy dream that's disturbed your sleep all night. I felt ragged and ill-tempered and hateful about a beautiful, blonde tigress who'd put me in the sweetest little frame outside the Metropolitan Art Galleries. I hung on a binge in the Broadway spots and two days later, checked in with my boss, Barclay, on lower Broadway.

Barclay is a gray-haired, gray-eyed money master who'll wear his fingers out clipping coupons after he retires. He came around his desk and greeted me cordially.

"What happened, Bill? We were beginning to get a little worried."

"Dame trouble," I said. Some day I'd tell him the tale and he'd believe me, no doubt, but on the trip back I'd lost my illusions about evening the score with Venning. It was hopeless if I couldn't produce the girl and the trail started back on Christmas.

Sure, Barclay would put in a complaint to the State Department if I wanted him to. They'd send it through diplomatic pouches to London and it'd dribble down channels to Venning. He'd write up the story the way it looked to him, send it to London, they'd polish it up in diplomatic language and by the time it got back to us, it'd look like Venning near died to get me out of trouble. They'd add, of course, that if I'd been a good boy, I wouldn't have got in it to begin with.

"What was her name?" Barclay asked.

"Marion Golden," I answered. "The little tart murdered a guy, ran out—God knows how—and caused me to be locked up in a stinking Christmas jail for two months accused of the kill. It was such a neat job I almost kissed the commissioner in joy when he let me out."

Barclay grinned. "Then the trip was a success?"

I looked at him and shrugged. I brought back tales with me, but I suppose he'd brought back a few tales in his time, too.

"Yeah, it was a success," I said. "The ore is there, all right. I'll dictate my report to Hannah and she can write it up this afternoon for you."

"Good," he murmured, pleased. "We'll go about getting development rights, and in the meantime—"

He told me about a little jaunt to Bolivia that should only take a month or so. He was firm about it, we argued, and I told him a few things he could do with his job, that I was going back to Christmas.

"It wouldn't do any good to quit your job," he said quietly. "You'll need a passport, you know, besides my support when you get there."

Suddenly, I felt like the nut in the jaws of the squirrel. I was being cracked. I was wondering if it were part of the same cracker. I knew what Barclay meant. I'd play tic-tac-toe on the walls of the State Department until Christmas froze over before I got my passport fixed up to return there. I knew Barclay could see to that, if I didn't take on the Bolivia job first.

I went to Bolivia. I took a week in Miami going and coming and when I got back to my apartment in New York, I'd pretty much forgotten about Lord Faulkner and Hugh Venning and the whole damn Christmas affair. Except Marion Golden. I remembered how she'd stood, carelessly beautiful, her sun-burnished hair hanging to her shoulders, her firm brown skin showing through her torn clothes, her wide, gray eyes considering me, sizing me up like a calculated risk. I remembered her, and how I'd like to push her lovely teeth down her graceful throat.

Barclay called me into his office the first thing. He was glad to see me and had the look of keyed excitement that he always gets when he's about to acquire control of some property he's after. He waived aside my Bolivia report and said:

"The Christmas properties, we find, are held by an Englishwoman, Lady Faulkner. Her husband, Lord Charles Faulkner, an old free-lance mining engineer who inherited his title, registered the land shortly before your survey. His widow is the sole heir and we've offered her a quarter of a million, plus a percentage."

"His widow? What happened to Lord Faulkner?" I asked casually. I was wondering if Venning had told me the truth about how they'd disposed of the case.

"Some kind of shooting accident about the time you were there, or shortly before," Barclay replied vaguely. He looked up at me with sudden interest. "What was that tale you were telling me?"

"Skip it," I said slowly. "But you said I could go back to Christmas after I finished the Bolivia job."

"You didn't say why you wanted to go," Barclay replied. "Is it the girl?"

I nodded.

He shook his head. "Murder is nasty business. You stay out of it while you work for me."

"I'm already in it," I told him.

He studied me a minute. "I'm not asking any questions, Bill," he said slowly, "and I've forgotten what you told me, but I thought it was settled."

"It won't be settled," I told him grimly, "until I find the girl."

"All right," Barclay agreed reluctantly. "You can head the survey crew to Christmas if you like after we've settled with Lady Faulkner. She arrived from London a couple days ago, but I held off until you got back. She has maps and I want you to go over them before we close the deal."

"When?" I asked with sudden interest. If old Faulkner had had a secretary by the name of Marion Golden, it was almost a dead cinch that his widow would know about it. She'd know whether the girl had accompanied him to Christmas.

"I told her I'd bring the contract and the cash to her hotel tonight. I'll pick you up about eight."

Barclay was late and when we got to the hotel, they told us at the desk that Lady Faulkner had a suite in the towers. A maid with a flat bosom and a cockney accent let us in. She told us her ladyship would be with us in a few moments, and disappeared behind an ivory door. It swung open almost immediately, and a tall girl in a shirred golden evening gown came out. Her burnished blonde hair was piled high on her head and her wide gray eyes grew wider as she looked at us.

Beneath her tan, she paled as she saw me, but Barclay didn't notice it. Her mouth parted in a forced smile, then grew dazzling as she came toward me, poised and confident.

I stood up, my blood spurting as I grinned at her. Her hands were outstretched. I didn't know what to expect, but I knew it would be good.

"Bill, darling," she exclaimed huskily. "I'd about given up that you'd find me."

She put her hands on my arms, moving against me and kissed me on the mouth. Her lips were soft and the subtle aroma of her perfume clung about her seductively. Then she put her cheek next to mine, her mouth next to my ear, the one that was away from Barclay.

"Play along with me," she whispered, "and we'll share equally."

She moved away from me, a tentative question on her mouth. It was an open invitation. Maybe it was the smile that made me realize the long ride I'd been on and the route I'd taken.

"Of course, it had to be that way," I murmured, reflectively.

Barclay had been watching the play, his face hard and puzzled, but he didn't say anything. Marion Golden's eyes were on me, bold and direct, but there was trouble and uncertainty in them.

"Equally?" I asked.

Barclay looked at me sharply. The girl caught her breath and smiled, satisfied.

"Of course, Bill," she murmured, turning. "I'll get the maps."

She disappeared through the ivory door and returned with several rolled tubes. I satisfied Barclay's questions and he took the contract out of his bulging brief case.

"Did you bring the money?" she asked.

"Right here," he answered, patting the case. "You asked for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash."

She started toward Barclay. I was closer and took the brief case out of his hands. I grinned at her, saying:

"A three-way split isn't enough."

A quick frown flitted across her lovely face, but she didn't hesitate. "I'm not so bad to take, Bill," she said evenly. "We'll make it two ways."

I laughed. "If you hadn't asked for it in cash, even now I might not have understood."

"What's eating you, Bill?" Barclay demanded. "Suppose you start doing some explaining."

Marion Golden shot a quick, nervous glance at Barclay. Her face was pale as paper and she was trembling.

"When you asked for it in cash," I said, "that means there was to be a quick split. Now who would you split with, except the one who was in on the whole deal with you right from the start? The one who murdered Faulkner, then crossed the island on foot to get your boat which you'd left in the cove on the other side where I found mine."

Barclay was staring at me incredulously.

I grinned at him, saying, "When I came to the island unexpectedly, something had to be done to keep me from starting an investigation into the murder until Marion could go to London and register the land in Faulkner's name. So, she stole my boat, figuring that would give her time to get back to Christmas and take the next steamer for London. After she got safely away from Christmas, it was only a question of keeping me quiet until the registration was completed." I lit a cigarette and gazed at her through the smoke. "But someone had to give you widow rights, Marion, or else how could you inherit as Lady Faulkner? You told me you were his secretary. If you had been his widow when I caught you, you'd have told me so and grieved on my shoulder."

Marion Golden slumped down in a chair, her face white and twisted in sudden hate. The ivory door behind her opened slowly and a sandy-haired man in tweeds came in. He was holding a gun easily. It was pointed at me.

"And how was that arranged, Mr. Donovan?" he inquired softly.

"You married her to a corpse, Venning," I said flatly, "In Acheson's absence, you forged documents showing that they'd got married before he died. It was on the strength of those documents that she was able to prove she was his widow. As acting commissioner, you could do that."

"You're very smart, Donovan," he sneered threateningly. "You should have let well enough alone. I could have killed you on Christmas, you know."

"You were the only one on the island who ever told me there was no one by the name of Marion Golden," I said. "You were the only one who could convince me that she didn't exist, and you almost did."

"I should have killed you," he said, coming toward me slowly. "Now it'll have to be both of you. We've gone through too much to let a fortune of sixty-five thousand pounds slip through our hands now."

I laughed suddenly. "They're dollars, Venning!" I cried, swinging the brief case out in front of him. "Good hard American dollars, not pounds!"

The movement of the brief case caught his eye. I followed through with the swing, and let go. It caught his wrist, threw his hand away just enough and that was all I needed.

I jumped aside and came into him with my head down, my fist aimed at his navel. The gun roared and the slug tore air over my shoulder, where I would have been if I had not ducked. I locked onto his wrist with my other hand and brought one up to his chin.

He staggered back against the chair just as Marion was coming up out of it, a small gleaming automatic in her hand. She'd tried to point it at me, but the explosion got Venning in the back. She screamed as he started to slip and I grabbed her. The fight was gone out of her.

Venning spent six weeks in a New York hospital. The bullet Marion Golden had meant for me, lodged in his lung, but they got it out all right and fixed him up to be hung in London. Part of the good-neighbor policy, no doubt. The commissioner, Acheson, and the investigators, exhumed Faulkner's body and found the steel jacketed slug that killed him in his heart. It matched a gun that was found in Venning's desk. Marion Golden will be inside looking out until her youth has passed away.



The Snake Dance

(Continued from page 49)

foot. One of the big claws had been cut off fairly short. Her eyes on her mistress were puzzled and angry.

"I'm sorry," Miss Rachel murmured against a laid-back ear. "I needed evidence. I knew, but I couldn't prove it."

Gail was weeping limply against Hal Emerson's shoulder. Zia was sitting cross-legged, looking into the fire, thinking perhaps of the young artist on the mesa. Ryker was having another drink.

"I take the skin now," said Pedro practically.

"You see, it all turned out for the best," Miss Rachel told her cat. "You'll grow a new claw. You have to sacrifice something, sometimes."

The cat experimented with her damaged claw, ran the others into Miss Rachel's shirt like a row of investigating needles. She seemed happier when Miss Rachel jumped.

Murty makes good

By EDWARD WILLIAM MURPHY

Murty didn't know that solving a murder was going to make him a song writer—

FROM plain-clothes man Murty MacGonigal's viewpoint, Zippy Crandall chose a very unfortunate time to get hit in the head with one of his own slugs. Murty had bandleader Johnny Daring penned in the entrance to the Paramount Building.

"Lissen, Mr. Daring," Murty was saying, "I wrote a corker of a song. It's called 'The Brightest Thing On Broadway is My Baby's Eyes'."

"Don't you ever get tired of writing songs?" Daring asked the fat, red-faced cop. "I mean," he added quickly, "it must be a strain, what with your duties and all."

"Nah," Murty said, scratching his hairy left ear. "I writes them right on the beat. Lissen now:

"Oh, the brightest thing on Br-r-oadway is my Bab-b-by's eyes.
They're big and bright an' lovely and bluer-r-r than the skie-ees."

Murty's voice carried above the noises of the Times Square night, sounding like a lubrious buzzard calling to his mate.

Daring shuddered.

A gentleman with a sleek haircomb, a loud plaid suit, and a fishy eye, tapped the singing cop on the shoulder. "Murty," he said, "you oughta run over to Zippy's shootin' gall'ry."

"Scram," Murty said. "I'm busy, cancha see that?" Turning to Daring, he asked eaerly, "How was it, Mr. Daring, yah think it's good?"

Daring pursed his lips, "Well, I can't say offhand," he began.

The loud plaid suit tapped the big cop again. "Murty," he said, "Zippy's layin' on the floor over there."

"So what?" Murty demanded, clutching Daring's arm so that the bandleader couldn't slip away.

"Nothin'," the loud plaid said, "exceptin' he's got one of his own slugs in his head!"

"What!" Murty bellowed at the back of the plaid suit that was disappearing into the scuffling throng of merrymakers. "Gee, Mr. Daring," he said, "I gotta tend ta business. Yah'll keep the song in mind, won'tcha?"

Daring promised with a great deal of unnecessary crossing of his heart that never

would he forget either Murty or his brain child and Murty hurried away toward a bright sign that shouted that the biggest buy for a buck was ten shots at Zippy Crandall's targets.

"Sure enough," Murty thought as he peered over the rifle-littered counter of the shooting gallery after pushing his way through a throng of morbid sightseers. Zippy, a small man with a long, pointed nose, was reclining awkwardly on the floor of the gallery. Between his narrow-set eyes, a small hole had been drilled. The big cop decided that the hole had something to do with Zippy's awkward position.

"Strictly homicide," he said to himself. "An' that joker interrupts me as Daring is about ta give my song a break." Reflecting bitterly on the perversity of fate, the cop dialed a familiar police number.

As he sat on the rifle-littered counter, waiting for the squad, the muse of song reached down through the dust, the smoke, glare, and the fumes of Broadway, and tapped Murty's bullet-shaped head. Forgetting the sprawled corpse, the long, narrow gallery, the array of targets, both stationary and moving, and the gaping crowd, he pulled out a stub of pencil. Abstractedly, his mind slugging it out with inspiration, Murty reached down for a slip of paper that protruded from the breast pocket of the late Zippy's lavender-and-green checked sports coat. He smoothed it and saw that it contained one word, "Panchatantra." In the heat of creative passion, he began to write:

"My heart is your target tonight,
So, baby, don't miss with your right.
It'll be swell, if you ring the bell,
My heart is your target tonight."

"Well, maybe not Hit Parade yet, but a little polishin' should do it," Murty thought happily.

A heavy car ground to a halt in front of the shooting gallery as Murty was adding a neat design of hearts around the scrawled masterpiece, and disgorged a number of heavy-set, florid men.

One of the men said, "Where's the main exhibit, Mr. Hooker?"

Murty's blue eyes almost exploded from their sockets. "Not Vince Hooker?" he demanded eagerly.

Hooker, a heavy-set, hawk-nosed man, eyed the plain-clothes man curiously. "Sure," he said, "that's me, Vince Hooker."

"You're the guy in charge of the police show this year?"

"That's right."

"Say, am I glad ta see yah!" Murty exclaimed. "I'm Murty MacGonigal."

"Sure," the detective said, "likewise, now where's the corpse?"

"Oh, the corpse," Murty said. "He's under the counter." He brushed away the offending corpse with a wave of his heavy hand. "Don'tcha remember me, Murty MacGonigal? I'm the one who sent yah those songs."

Hooker's sharp brown eyes slitted. "The Brightest Thing On Broadway is My Baby's Eyes?" he asked.

"Yep," Murty said proudly.

"Toddling Through Times Square?"

"I liked that one," Murty beamed. "I also wrote, 'I Found My Heaven On East Forty-seven,' 'She's A Lovely Bird From West Forty-third,' 'It's Great To Be Alive On West Forty-five.' Yah see," he added seriously, "I'm tryna cover all the streets with an appropriate song."

Hooker's face was a dull-red. "Listen, you!" he growled. "Do you think I've got nothing to do but read your songs? Every time I open my mail, a batch of them falls out. They're driving me to benzedrine! 'Serenade For Sixth Avenue,' 'Ballad For Broadway,' 'Seventh Avenue Swan Song!' I can't stand it! Don't send me any more of those awful songs!"

Murty felt as if the *Times* Building had fallen on him. "What's wrong with my songs?" he asked plaintively.

"They stink, smell, crawl. They are corny, stupid, silly, awful. They nauseate!"

"Yah mean," asked the crestfallen Murty, "yah don't like them?"

"In a word, no!" Hooker said. "Now let me get to work!" Skirting the edge of the counter, the detective bent over the body of Zippy Crandall on which the other men of the homicide squad were already at work. After a few minutes, he straightened up. "He must have been standing like this," he said, half to himself. "The shot must have come from—"

"The statue over there?" Murty supplied helpfully, pointing to the statue in the center of the square.

Hooker, his train of thought disturbed, growled, "Shut up! The bullet came from the other end of the counter there! Say," he demanded, "did you do that?"

"What?" asked the mystified Murty.

"Line those slugs up like that!" He pointed to a little row of nine tiny .22 calibre shells that were standing beside a shiny blue rifle at the other end of the counter.

"Not me," Murty disclaimed. "I on'y sat here writin' a song."

Hooker went over and picked up the nine bullets. "Now what's this all about?" he demanded. His eyes were far away as he juggled the bullets in his hand. "Tolley," he said after a moment, "check this gun here for fingerprints. I don't suppose you'll get anything. These guns are handled too often, but it's worth a try."

The hawk-nosed detective rubbed his chin reflectively. "Well, I guess that's all we can do here for the minute," he said, as Tolley began to dust the rifle with fingerprint powder. "I'll try questioning the local residents."

Zippy Crandall's shooting gallery was set between a stand that was decorated like a South Seas paradise and a book store.

"You know these sharpers," Hooker said to Murty. "You come with me."

Murty brightened. "I sure will," he said eagerly, "an' maybe yah'd like ta hear my latest song!"

"No!" Hooker snapped.

"Maybe later, huh?" Murty added hopefully.

Vannie's Coconut Milk stand purveyed a superior brand of vita-rayed beverage at the amazing price of fifteen cents or two for a quarter. "Buy one for your girl, too!" a garish sign ordered.

Vannie, a dapper young man with well-oiled hair that was scalloped in a regular series of waves, and a tricky black mustache, greeted Murty with, "Draw one for you, Murty, an' another for your friend?"

"Skip it!" Hooker said. "We're here on business."

"Vita-rayed," Vannie said, "excellent for the digestion. Guaranteed to cure ulcers. It's the greatest thing in beverages since mothers' milk was invented!" Vannie usually added with a leer, "It's a great little love-potion," when tryng to inveigle young couples into gulping down the vita-rayed mess.

Hooker leaned over the shiny plastic counter. "Look, buddy," he said, "I came here to ask questions, not to poison myself! Did you hear any shots from next door?"

"I hear them all day an' all night," Vannie said, "an' I don't know who killed Zippy. I'm too busy to pay any attention to that penny-ante chiseler!"

"You didn't see anything out of the way?"

"I tole you, I'm too busy. I got customers to attend to." At that moment a young man and girl hesitated on the sidewalk in front of the Coconut Milk stand. "Par'n me," Vannie said, "right this way for the Atomic Age beverage. The greatest drink since mothers' milk. Brewed in Fiji-Fiji where they've been making love-potions for centuries. Try one and get that cozy feeling."

The girl giggled. "Come on, Arthur," she said, dragging him away from the stand.

Arthur's eye had a peculiar gleam in it.

"I think I'd like to try it. Just to see what it tastes like," he added quickly.

Hooker, the detective, growled, "Come on. This jerk can't help us." He led the way to the book store that flanked the other side of Zippy's Shooting Gallery! "Ten for a buck, you can't buy more for your dollar anywhere on the stem!"

Horatio Applegate peered through thick, black horn-rimmed glasses at Murty and Hooker. "Why, hello, Murty," he quavered. "Can I do anything for you?"

Murty replied, "This is Vince Hooker, the homicide man."

Applegate clucked his tongue against his false teeth. "Investigating the murder of poor Zippy?" he asked.

Hooker nodded.

"If anybody can help yah," Murty said, "it's Prof. Applegate. He's the smartest old guy on Broadway."

Applegate waved a thin, bony hand at Murty. "Go along with you," he said. "I'm just an old man, Mr. Hooker, a tired, old man. These young lads now, Vanny and Zippy. I knew there'd be trouble one day. Always arguing and fighting Nice enough to me, though. Whenever I went by either of them, they'd sing out, 'One on the house, professor?' Always! I never accepted, though, not once."

"Yah think Vannie killed Zippy?" Murty demanded.

"Now, I didn't say that, Murty," Applegate said quickly. Wiping his bony hand over his pink scalp, he added, "I don't think Vannie did it at all. I think one of the customers might have done it!"

"Why?" Hooker demanded.

"Well"—Applegate peered at the hawk-nosed detective—"Zippy had a grasping way with him. Fellow and his girl would come up. Fellow'd be trying to impress his girl so he'd hand Zippy a five, Zippy would promptly say, 'You're the biggest spender here tonight, mister,' and hand both him and the girl a rifle each. The fellow, he didn't mean to spend no five like that, but he doesn't want to seem cheap to his girl, so he lets Zippy keep the five. But he never forgets that Zippy has pulled a fast one."

The old book seller cleared his throat and went on, "Vannie's the same way. Fellow gives Vannie a buck, he usually gets eight of them drinks. If he says anything, which usually he doesn't, Vannie says scornfully, 'I thought you loved the girl, Johnny, I thought you wanted to splurge!'"

"They've been pulling that stuff all along?" Hooker demanded. "I'm surprised they get away with it."

"Well," Applegate said, "you know mostly it's kids out having a good time who patronize these places. They expect to be taken, I guess. That's all I can say to help you, though. I'm sorry I can't do more."

Thanking the rusty old book seller, the

two cops returned to the shooting gallery. They were just in time to see Zippy leave the gallery for the last time. "Sick transit gloria on Monday," Murty said. "That's Latin for 'it's all over now,'" he explained to Hooker.

"Hey, Vince," one of the detectives said, "Hogarty found a guy who says he saw the shooting. You want to talk to him?"

"Probably just a nut," Hooker said, "but I'll question him." He walked through the shooting gallery into a tiny back room where a massive detective was flinging questions at a little wisp of a man. When he saw Hooker, the detective said, "I caught this guy peddling pamphlets. He claimed he saw the shooting. Now he says he didn't."

The little man was almost in tears. "Look, officer," he whined, "all I wanna do is make an honest buck. That's all. I'm selling these books, 'Second sight, or, Psychic powers revealed' Now the word reaches me that Zippy has been knocked. It's a selling point, see. I puts into my spiel about the murder. *Bam*, this guy's got his big red hooks in my shoulder!"

"How'd you know Zippy was murdered?" Hooker suddenly demanded, jabbing a thick finger into the little man's hollow chest.

Big tears formed in the man's weak eyes and spilled down over his wrinkled, unshaven cheeks. "I'm on'y tryna make an hones' buck," he said. "I swear I just heard about it. I didn't see a thing." He began to blubber uncontrollably.

"Get his name and hold him," Hooker ordered. "Make it a peddling-without-a-license charge until we get some more dope on this case."

He had hardly finished speaking when the door to the little room was flung open. A big detective pushed forward a grubby-looking citizen, clad in ragged clothing and wearing a small sign saying, "Help the blind!" Seeing Murty, the blind man burst out passionately, "Murty, my old buddy, tell this cossack to get his hands offa me."

Murty said to Hooker. "Blind Billy Hysop, as phony a blind man as ever bummed a nickel."

The blind man gave the cop an injured look.

"Why, Murty," he said.

"All right, all right." The detective gave the phony blind man a shove. "Get in there. We caught another fish," he said to Hooker. "This joker was seen arguing with Zippy Crandall earlier this evening."

"Sure, I was arguing with Zippy," the bogus blind man said. Running a grubby hand over his unshaven chin, he added, "If that was a crime, half the population of New York would be shackled-up in the pokey!"

"Zippy a tough man to do business with?" Hooker asked innocently.

"Tough!" exclaimed Blind Billy. "He'd

rook his own grandmother out of her upper plate! Ask Murty!"

Murty said, "I ain't no homicide man, don't ask me nothin'."

Suddenly, the bogus blind man darted an accusing, unwashed finger at the little man who had been sitting quietly all during the exchange. "There's the man who killed Zippy!" he shouted. "Homer Epp. He hated Zippy because Zippy chased him away from in front of the shooting gallery. Zippy threw all his spooky pamphlets down the sewer!"

"Psychic," Homer Epp corrected acidly, "not spooky. An' you're a liar, Billy Hysop."

"Call me a liar, will you?" Blind Billy shrieked. With his cane, he began to belabor the wispy little man.

"Out! Take them out!" Hooker snapped. "Run them downtown and fingerprint them! Hold them on any charge you want. They've broken half the laws in the book!"

The two burly detectives hustled their captives out of the back room. As the four passed through the door, Hooker hurled a last order like a javelin through the air, "And have that blind comedian scrubbed. He looks like the rump of a mud fence!"

"Got you," the detective holding Blind Billy said with a grin. "We'll have him all pink and beautiful for you, Vince!"

The bogus blind man screamed, "I'll have your shield for this. I'll write to the mayor, I'll—" The shutting door cut short his dire threats, leaving Hooker alone with Murty MacGonigal.

"What a case!" the homicide man groaned. "Dead heels, phony psychics, bogus blind man—" Cocking a weary eye at the blocky plainclothes man, he added, "And crooning coppers!" in a sad voice.

"Yah oughta hear the one I'm working on now," Murty said hopefully. "I got the ideas just as Billy was soundin' off. It's called 'I Was Blind, Till You Came Along, But Now My Heart Is Filled With Song!' Yah like the title?"

"Title?" snorted Hooker. "I thought that was the whole thing!"

"Oh, no," Murty said. "I got a couple more lines in my head. Yah wanna hear them?"

"Leave them age in the wood!" Hooker said. "I'm trying to concentrate. And with you around, that is a superhuman feat!"

Murty scratched his head. "I guess yah ain't got an ear for music," he said. "An' my dentist tells me grindin' teeth like that ruins them," he added.

After that, the silence in the little room was a woollen blanket saturated with extra heavy oil.

Murty fished his pencil stub and paper from his pocket and added a line to his masterpiece. "My heart is your target to-night." With a frown, he studied the word

that had been written on the paper. "Punch-a-train-a. What kinda junk is that?" he asked aloud as he drew a heavy black line through the word.

"MacGonigal," Hooker said wearily, "you know this region. What would you do next?"

Murty neatly dotted an "i." "Vannie," he said, "I'd shove Vannie around a little. He is in a place where he can see whosoever coming outa this shooting gallery. He musta saw the killer an' is keeping his yap shut."

"Why?" Hooker demanded. His eye brightened.

Murty rubbed his thumb across his fingers. "Moola," he said, "dough, gelt, fish, iron men. Vannie likes the feel of dollars."

"Blackmail?"

"Maybe! I ain't sayin' yes, an' I ain't sayin' no."

"Why didn't you let me have this before?" the exasperated Hooker demanded.

Murty scratched his bullet-shaped head with his pencil stub. "Yah tole me to shut up!" he said. "I'm just a dope, so I shut up!"

"Let's go!" Hooker said. Dragging the blocky plain-clothes man through the shooting gallery and out into the street, the detective said, "I hope you've got something here!"

As the two rounded the ornate, simulated palm thicket into Vannies' milk bar, they saw that the proprietor was no longer in his accustomed place.

On the top of the red plastic counter, a single glass of the vita-rayed elixir stood untouched. Otherwise, the shiny surface was wiped completely clean. Vannie was not in sight.

Murty eyed this phenomena dubiously. "Somebody musta wiped the bar with Vannie. It ain't never been so clean before!"

"Maybe he heard us coming and is hiding somewhere," Hooker said.

Murty peered over the counter. "Get out your dustin' powder," he said. "Vannie looks as if he just drunk some of his own coco milk. It looks like one a' the vita-rays stuck in his throat!"

"What!" Hooker exclaimed, peering over the counter.

On the duck boards that covered the floor, the sharp-looking Vannie was sprawled with arms akimbo. In one hand, he clutched an empty glass. A stain marred the perfection of his sports shirt. Sightless eyes stared at the dry fringe of palm fronds that rustled softly in the breeze. Under the glare of the red-and-blue neon tubing that proclaimed the amazing virtues of his product, Vannie's face looked ghastly.

Hooker quickly scaled the red-topped bar and bent over the body. Murty eyed his paunch, and made a fast decision to crawl under the flap at the end of the bar.

From Vannie's mouth, a greenish-looking froth had bubbled.

Murty indicated the filled glass that sat alone on the counter. "Looks like he was going to knock off one a' his two-for-a-quarter specials," he said, "but the first one liquidated him!"

Hooker frowned thoughtfully. "Be quiet a minute," he growled. "I'm thinking!" After a minute of silence, he asked abruptly, "That dive next door sold 10 shots for a dollar?"

"Ten for a buck!" Murty quoted. "Yah can't buy more for a buck anywhere on the stem. Yah can read it yourself on the sign!"

"And this place gives two for a quarter, right?"

"Right!" Murty said.

The detective scratched his ear. "Over there," he said thoughtfully, "one bullet was used and nine were left on the counter. Here, one drink was used and one left on the counter!" Striking the red counter with his open hand, he growled, "There seems to be a connection, but it eludes me!"

"Maybe Vannie bumped Zippy an' committed suicide," Murty said brightly. "An' left the glass like that to make it look like murder."

"More likely Vannie saw the man who murdered Zippy and tried to blackmail him, as you suggested!"

"Could be," Murty said. "Vannie was a gent as loved a buck!"

The assistant medical examiner, who arrived as Murty was speaking, scowled, "Can't you keep order in this neighborhood? This is the second time tonight our poker game's been broken up." He bustled importantly behind the counter and opened his bag.

"He's dead!" he said.

"What-d-ya know!" Murty exclaimed. "I thought he was on'y sleepin'."

The assistant M.E. glared at the fat plain-clothes man and seemed about to say something when Hooker interrupted to ask, "What did he die from?"

"Well," said the assistant M.E., "in addition to the vita-rays, the jigger of coconut milk he gobbled down, contained a large dose of cyanide."

"Cyanide!" Murty exclaimed. "Say, that stuff is pois'nous!" He bent over to peer at the corpse with renewed interest.

"Cyanide. Hm-m-m." Hooker mused. "Come on, MacGonigal," he ordered, "we're going to fine-comb this Fiji-Fiji quonset to see if we can find the poison. If Vannie took the shot himself, the vial the poison came in will still be around!" Without waiting for Murty, he began to rifle the pockets of the corpse. After a bit, he looked up in disgust. "Say what are you doing?" he asked Murty, who was scribbling on the scrap of paper.

"Listen to this." Murty began to sing in his buzzardlike baritone:

"I knew yah was poison, but I couldn't resist,
Your lips were deadly, but were made to be kissed!"

"You know—" Murty broke off quickly as Hooker picked up a gallon jug of heavy white goo and began to advance threateningly.

With the quick motions of a startled squirrel, the fat plain-clothes man began to search under the duck boards that covered the floor. When he judged the storm was over, he said to the assistant M.E. in a vast whisper, "Trouble with Hooker, he's got no ear for music. An' he's the guy they put in charge of the police show. How can a song writer like me get a break?"

"As a song writer, Murty," the assistant M.E. said, "you make a fine Keystone kop!"

"Yah guys with the tin ears can't appreciate a genius like me," Murty said coldly. "Remember, they laughed at—" Murty paused and tried to think of a name.

"King Tut," the assistant M.E. supplied gravely.

"Was he a song writer, too?" Murty asked.

"Sure, didn't you ever hear of that great song, 'Mummy'?" The assistant M.E. laughed uproariously at his own pun.

"Wise guy!" Murty growled and resumed his search of the duck boards, elaborately ignoring the others.

Aside from a few shelves of glasses, a tub of hot water to wash them in, a dozen or so gallon jugs and the coconut-shaped dispenser, there was nothing else behind the counter.

"Maybe them vita-rays is a brand of cyanide," Murty said at length, "for I can't find hair nor hide of no bottle of poison."

Hooker wiped his hands on the seat of his trousers. "Neither can I," he said as he surveyed the tiny stand once again. "I've checked, re-checked, and double-checked, and still I haven't found any trace of the poison. I'm going to have the lab work on that glass. They may turn up something. And I'm going over this blasted stand once more!"

A crowd had gathered in front of the stand and firmly resisted the efforts of the perspiring police to break it up. A murder was free entertainment, a thing rarer than rubies in the amusement belt.

The bespectacled book seller, Horatio Applegate, shoved his way through the seething mob. "Murty," he said waspishly, "can't you break up this crowd? They're jammed up in front of my store so bad that a mouse couldn't get in!"

"Who ever heard of a mouse wantin' to read a book?" Murty asked. "Go away,

professor, can't yah see me'n Detective Hooker here is workin' on a case?"

"Yes, yes, I know," Applegate said acidly, "but remember us taxpayers have a right to protection."

"Put it in a letter ta the mayor." Murty advised.

The old book seller peered over the counter at the dead Vannie. "Eh, well," he exclaimed to the body, "you'll give away no more drinks on the house, my lad!" He added, "Not where you are now!"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Murty grasped Applegate's alpaca sleeve. "Yah know anybody who would want ta murder Vannie?"

"I don't know anybody who wouldn't." Applegate laughed dryly before he added, "I thought you had arrested the murderer."

"We on'y jugged Blind Billy and Homer Epp," Murty said.

"Well," Applegate demanded, "haven't you got the murderer? Blind Billy hated Vannie worse than poison!"

"Say, that's the truth!" Murty exclaimed. "I remember once he threatened to beat Vannie's brains out with one of his own coconuts! Thanks, professor, I'll tell Hooker about that angle."

The hawk-faced detective seemed only mildly interested in Murty's great news. "It's out, MacGonigal," he said. "Vannie committed suicide. I found the vial of poison."

"Where?" Murty demanded.

"Right under our noses!" Hooker said. "In that glass that was on the counter!"

Murty shook his head. "What-d-yah-know about that!" he said. He scratched the hairy lobe of his ear. "Why'd he do a thing like that?"

"Like what?" Hooker inquired politely.

"Draw an odd glass a' his coconut milk an' leave it on the bar like that there? It doesn't sound like Vannie!"

"Well, you worry about that," Hooker said indulgently. "I'm going to shoot downtown and whack out a report on this job after I get the results from the lab."

"Yah wouldn't want to take a couple a' songs with yah?" Murty suggested hopefully. He fished the wrinkled scrap of paper on which he'd jotted down the bits of songs that had come to him that night. "I like this one! 'My Heart Is Your Target Tonight.'"

The last few words drifted aimlessly in the coconut-scented air. Hooker had departed with his hands clapped over his ears.

Murty disconsolately studied the bit of paper, and wandered out into the hurly-burly of the Square. Absently, he collared a balloon salesman, and, after a brief lecture on the evils of illegal peddling, released him.

"What's the matter, Murty?" someone asked.

Murty turned to see Johnny Daring, the band leader. "Oh, hello, Mr. Daring," he said morosely.

"Down in the dumps, Murty? That's the

first time I ever saw you treat a peddler like that."

"Yeah," Murty said sadly, "this double life is a strain. I'm beginnin' ta think I wasn't meant ta be a song writer. Look, three songs come ta me tonight. An' nobody'll listen ta one of them." He handed the wrinkled scrap of paper to Daring.

The band leader read the words Murty had written. "Going in for literature, Murty?" he asked abruptly.

Murty looked as if Daring had sprung a leak in his brain pan. "No, why?" he asked mystified.

"That word you've got written down here, 'Panchatantra'; that's a book of Sanskrit stories and verses."

"Nah," Murty said, "I don't know nothing about no scribbled verse. I got that outa Zippy Crandall's pocket."

Daring shook his head. "Maybe it's the name of a horse Zippy was betting on! But that's neither here nor there. I'll make you an offer, Murty. We're going to do a show honoring the police. You write me a song that's a smasho, and I'll play it on the air!"

"Say, no kiddin', Mr. Daring!" Murty's morale shot up as if it were jet propelled. "I'll have it for yah by morning."

"Take your time and do a good job," Daring counseled. "I won't need it for a couple of weeks."

Tugging at one hairy ear, Murty began to go to work with words. Unseen to all, save the beaming cop, the goddess Fame beckoned. With face uplifted, Murty wandered on like an opium eater. After a good half hour had passed, a slight frown marred the gleaming expanse of Murty's red brow.

Murty suddenly stumbled. "Scribbled verse, nuts! How can a guy concentrate!" he mumbled.

An hour later, Murty had eaten the stub of his pencil until nothing remained but a shred of wood. Scratching his hairy ear, he growled, "I guess I'll have ta get it settled, or I'll never be able ta write a word!"

With firm resolve written on his features, the fat plain-clothes man moved on his way, stopping here and there for a brief word with newsies, hack drivers, chorus dames, actors, barkers, beggars, and the thousand and one characters who infest the brightly lighted district.

After satisfying himself that he had encountered everyone who could answer his question, Murty headed for the newspaper office where he spent a few moments bent over the desk of one of the paper's brilliant men.

"One on the house," he chortled as he dialed a number on the phone. "One on the house!"

MacGonigal, his round, red face beaming, pushed his way into Applegate's book shop a short while later.

"You look happy, Murty," Horatio

Applegate greeted him. The old man settled his black-rimmed glasses more firmly on his nose.

"I am," Murty said. "Daring, the band leader, commissioned me to write a song."

"That's fine," Applegate said, as he began to straighten a pile of books. He picked up a massive volume and blew dust from the binding. "I'm glad to hear you're getting it in the world."

"By-the-by," Murty said, elaborately examining a dictionary, "how much would a good old copy a' the Pan-chat-tantrum cost me?"

The old book seller promptly crowned Murty with the massive volume he had been dusting, sending the fat plain-clothes man sprawling over a basket full of cut-rate books. Then, breathing hard, Applegate galloped toward the door.

Murty slowly lifted himself out of the books. "Now are yah convinced?" he demanded.

Hooker, the hawk-faced detective, appeared in the doorway. His hand was twisted in the collar of Applegate's alpaca coat. Applegate's old wrinkled face looked like a relief map of an earthquake. Two tears straggled down his leathery cheeks.

Murty said, "Yah might as well tell all yah know, Horatio. It'll save us the trouble a' beatin' it outa yah."

Applegate flopped into his easy-chair. "How'd you get wise?" he asked in a tired voice.

"One on the house!" Murty said.

The old man brushed his few hairs in place with a bony hand, and sighed deeply. "Yes, I can see how it would," he said.

"Hey, what's going on here? What's all this about, 'One on the house?'" Hooker demanded.

Murty said, "Easy. Neither Zippy nor Vannie ever gave one on the house unless they'd get something back in return!"

"That's the truth," Applegate broke in,

"both of them were always after me to take one on the house. But they wanted me to give them books the same way. The other day, Zippy pestered me so much that I told him he could have a book. It wasn't until later that I discovered he'd taken an expensive rare edition. Naturally, I asked him for it back, but he laughed and said, 'Take one on the house, professor.' He unloaded one gun and slid one shell into the chamber." The old man's chest heaved with emotion. "I took the gun and shot him in the head!" he said swiftly.

For a long minute, the silence in the book shop was broken only by Applegate's rasping breath. Then he went on, "I figured that I'd be arrested immediately, but no one saw the shooting because it happened so quickly. Vannie, however, saw me come out of the gallery. Later, he demanded that I pay up. I went over to talk to him, and he invited me to have one on the house also.

"That was too bad for Vannie. You see, I had some cyanide that I was going to use on myself. When he turned away for a second, I spilled the poison in his drink. It worked exactly as the label said it would!"

"I have to hand it to you, MacGonigal," Hooker said, "you turned the trick. I'll see that you get the credit for this downtown."

"Ah-h-h, take the cash, an' let the credit go," Murty quoted Omar, the Persian. "I'd rather get a song in the police show!"

Two weeks later, a delighted Murty leaned back, lit up a cigar and said to a neighbor in the audience at the police show, "Them boys is really doing right by my song!" Leaning over, he added importantly, "Johnny Daring does a nice arrangement of it, too!"

On the stage, the police chorus brayed:

"You can depend on the boys in blue,
They'll never let you down-n-n-n,
Day and night, their job they do,
Guarding this great big town-n-n-n."



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My dear, drowned love is waiting for me.
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Yet from the depths her song ascends
As the chiming of a phantom bell.
Let the mermaids call her sister,
White and scarlet coral be her bed;
She shall walk in mystery
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That shining world beneath the foam;
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