

STREET & SMITH'S



DETECTIVE

STORY MAGAZINE

APRIL

DEAD MEN IN WHITE

BY CHARLES HEMINGER

**MURDER:
HOLLYWOOD VERSION**

BY MURIEL BRADLEY

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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.



Bill Conlon was a good sports writer, but when he took to covering society news he was out of his element until he ran smack into a first-class murder, then—wow!

By HOWARD WILLIAMS

Death rides in a photo finish

I.

THE guy's hand on my chest didn't help any. Ever since I'd climbed into the rig I'd felt about as conspicuous as a horsefly on a strip-tease dancer's abdomen, and now I was afraid that if he tapped me on the chest once more, the stiff shirt front would fly right out and slap him crazy. That I would have bought, at another time and some other place. But not now. Too many people would have turned to stare.

Someone was staring already.

She was a flashy brunette in a fuchsia satin evening gown and she'd just come out of one of the rooms at the foot of the curving colonial staircase. Not the one from which the soft strains of music whispered there was a dance floor, but the one where the clink of glasses and the murmur of voices shouted there was a bar. She hesitated a moment, then started toward us. Reluctantly, I swung back to the man at the door.

He was short and thick-set, built as close to the ground as a gorilla and almost as wide. His rented tuxedo was twice as tight as a three-ring circus performing inside a bowling ball and the word "copper" was practically inscribed on it in gilt letters. Any writing on mine would have read "borrowed for the occasion." You don't wear a black tie and dinner jacket to sit in the Press Box at Reynolds Field where I spend most of my time reporting the doings of the local ball club for the *Evening Star*. You do wear one when you go to one of Davidson Taber's high-society parties, however, which is where I was now.

Which is where I was *almost*. This arm of local law didn't seem to want to let me in.

He lifted a nicotine-stained forefinger as high as his eyebrows and aimed it at the top stud on my shirt. I put out a hand and pushed it away.

He didn't like it. Little angry lines squeezed the corners of his eyes and a couple of white patches smeared his ruddy complexion. He rasped, "What was that name you said?"

"Welles," I repeated. "Martha Welles." He had the guest list in his hand and I pointed to it. "Look it up or I'll raise the merriest hell you ever heard."

He didn't like that, either.

While he was rubbing his chin instead of mine with a hairy fist, the brunette in the snug satin drapery hove into port and anchored beside us. She was a trim craft, as that sort of craft goes. Her eyes were dark and humid, like swirling fog seen through a pair of smoked glasses, and she had a figure that rolled under the low-cut, unadorned satin the way Dixie Smith's boogie bass rolls under "Stardust."

Take any woman in her mid-thirties, stick her on a diet, let a masseur work on her, then wrap her in a fifty-dollar girdle and she'll surprise you. Sometimes she'll surprise her own husband. This dame looked like she could do both.

She was wearing a smile of amused interest on her face and an empty cocktail glass in her right hand. An alcoholic breeze billowed her sails and she swayed and leaned into me. I lifted a hand to steady her. My hand slipped on the smooth satin

and slid across a warm expanse of bare back. I guess she regarded that as an introduction. She smiled up at me.

"He's all right, Lieutenant Stevens," she said to the copper. "He's a friend of mine." The edges of her words were fuzzy from the liquor. She said to me, "What's your name?"

Stevens answered. "He says it's Martha Welles."

Her laugh was sharp and brittle. "We'll have a drink and find out." She jerked her head at me and headed for the bar. I looked at Stevens, then started after her.

Stevens shrugged. "Enjoy yourself, Martha," he said.

There could not have been more people in the bar if they'd been giving away free income tax exemptions with each drink. If they had, my brunette wouldn't have had to pay a cent come March. She was plenty tight.

There was a space big enough for one down at the end and we both squeezed into it. Looking down at her, I felt like a peeping-Tom.

"What's this about Martha Welles?" she asked, after she'd snared a refill and I'd latched onto a Scotch-and-soda.

"You know her?"

She nodded.

"Cy Kelton, the managing editor of the *Star*, asked me to cover the party for her. He said she phoned in that she was sick and couldn't come herself."

"Are you a friend of hers?" the brunette wanted to know.

"Not particularly," I replied. As a matter of fact, all I'd ever said to Martha wouldn't have taken up more than a fistful of type and that would have been mostly "hello's." I didn't like her. She was one of these uppity females who'd taken on the airs of the society people she hobnobbed with. The Lady Astor of the *Star* city room. She lived in a house right across the road from the Taber mansion and I thought no matter how sick she was, she could have crawled out of bed long enough to stagger across the street and get the low-down on the higher-ups for her column.

"What do you do on the *Star*?"

"I'm on sports," I said. "Bill Conlon, if you ever look at the sports page."

She shook her head, then said, "You probably know my husband, Jason B. Reynolds. I'm Corinne Reynolds."

The tight squeeze suddenly became too tight and I pushed away from the bar. Jason B. was the Reynolds of Reynolds Field, the owner of the local ball club. I'd heard about his wife. Some of the scribes said she never came out to see the team play because she was too busy playing a game of her own with any likely male between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-

five. I qualified there, but I was disqualifying myself fast. A job's a job.

"It's been nice knowing you," I murmured.

"Scared?"

"A little," I admitted. I glanced at my watch. "I better amble around and pick up some news. This'll be my first shot at a society column. What do I say, who was seen with whom?"

"Hardly. You'd lose your job." She emptied her glass and picked up another that the bartender had waiting. He must have been on her list, too.

"Tell you what," she said, leaning close to me confidently. "Meet me in the library in half an hour and I'll match them up for you."

I pointed my nose at her glass. "In your condition?"

"I'll probably be a lot worse."

"O.K. If none of your husband's scouts are around, maybe I will." I put my empty glass on the bar and turned to go.

"You must be Bill Conlon," a voice said. "I'm Dr. Welles, Martha's husband." He smiled at me and we shook hands. "I was just about to move in on you. You've been monopolizing my star patient."

"How's Martha?" Corinne asked perfunctorily.

Dr. Welles lifted his hands and dropped them. He was a few years older than I, handsome, in a dark way, and, apparently, a very successful doctor. Not the type of doctor I care for, since he was strictly for the upper crust, where the fees are large and the payment certain. Well, almost certain.

"Frankly, Corinne," he was saying. "I don't know. They say a doctor can't treat his own family and I guess I'm no exception." He didn't seem very worried, coming to the party without her. He turned to me. "How are you doing in the social whirl?"

"Just getting started," I told him. "Mrs. Reynolds has volunteered to give me the inside story of the silver spoon set. I'm holding her to it in a half hour from now in the library."

Welles raised an eyebrow at Corinne. He murmured, "Sounds interesting."

"I'll make it interesting."

Welles took the cocktail glass from her hand, raised it in the gesture of a toast, and emptied it. "I think you could, darling," he said. His eyes held hers momentarily over the rim of the glass, then dropped away.

"Pretty cozy," I thought and wondered if this could have anything to do with Martha's illness.

"You'll have to find another rendezvous, however," he told us. "The library's occupied. Beverly Brown is taking pictures in there."

"Is she?" Corinne's voice sounded mildly

interested, but something had dispelled the fog in her eyes. They were clear and cold and hard.

"In the library," she said

I spent some time wandering around the dance floor, rubbing against the mink-coated elbows, then asked a flunky in the zebra-striped vest where the telephone was. Information gave me Martha's number and I called her to find out what sort of dirt she wanted dished up in her column. I let the phone ring a few times, got no answer, and figured she must be sick to sleep that soundly.

I wandered some more, ears extended two inches for tid-bits, but all the men were talking about business and all the women were talking about the pictures Beverly Brown was shooting. At the end of the half hour, I poked my nose into the library.

Beverly Brown had quite a set-up. In the library or anywhere else. It was long and willowy, fitting nicely into a sapphire-blue evening gown with a halter top and a sprinkling of sequins, and it was faintly scented with jasmine. The jasmine was superfluous, at least as far as I was concerned. She wasn't my type.

Her straw-colored hair was drawn back in a knot at the nape of her neck, and the flat planes of her cheeks lent her an air of cold austerity. I introduced myself and she nodded much in the fashion of a remote and untouchable Park Avenue model.

"Why the pictures?" I asked her.

"Mr. Taber wants photographs of all the ladies." Her voice was as cold and reserved as her manner. "Party favors, you know."

"From all the chatter out there"—I jerked a thumb at the dance floor—"not all the ladies are reacting favorably. I heard a few of them say they were *not* going to be photographed."

Then Brown lit a cigarette and watched the smoke float slowly to the high-beamed ceiling.

"I see you don't know a great deal about women," she said after a moment. "They simply feel they don't look their best. This was a surprise of Mr. Taber's. Had they known about it in advance, they would have come prepared. Probably overdressed and overly made up. Mr. Taber just wanted them photographed sitting naturally on the sofa over there. He'll send them copies later."

She indicated a sofa pulled around so it was backed by a pair of open French windows and the dark night sky beyond. She slid a fresh plate into the holder at the back of her Speed Graphic and put a new flash bulb in the cuplike receptacle on the side.

"Now if you'll excuse me," she said

pointedly, "Mr. Taber should be bringing someone in."

I took the hint and turned toward the door. It opened and Davidson Taber brought someone in. Corinne Reynolds. She was higher than a V-2. Dr. Welles was on the other side of her and they jockeyed her over to the sofa.

I thought, "There goes tomorrow's society column, bludgeoned into oblivion by a Murderer's Row of martinis." Davidson Taber took Beverly aside and spoke to her in a low voice. He was of medium height, quite stout, with a moon face hiding behind a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. The sort of a guy who looked like he'd be more at home with the Witch of Endor than a stand-offish blonde like Beverly Brown.

Dr. Welles said to me, "I think you'd better go, don't you?"

Corinne's head came up with a jerk. Her eyes peered defiantly through an alcoholic haze, focused on me.

"I told him I'd tell him a few things and I will." Her hand slid over her bare neck and she summoned up a smile. "Come here and sit down."

"I don't think you can be of much help to Mr. Conlon," someone said. It was Jason B. Reynolds. He was standing in the doorway, a big, quiet-looking man with iron-gray hair, a banker and a sportsman. "You've had too much, dear."

"Have I?" Corinne sneered. "Maybe I've had just enough to know how sick I am of all of you!" Her eyes wavered over Beverly and Taber, Welles and her husband. They lighted on me. "You'll have a column tomorrow. I'll tell you some things that'll curl your hair, young man!"

Beverly Brown's lips were fixed in a derisive smile. "Would you like a picture of yourself?" she asked Corinne.

Corinne pointed a finger at me. "Take his."

"That," I said, "is a fine idea. I'll use it to scare my landlady." I moved over behind the couch, with my back to the French doors, and struck a pose. Beverly aimed her camera at me. I opened my mouth to ask where the birdie was when white light gushed suddenly through the room and my open-mouthed expression was fixed for posterity on the plate. Beverly laughed and pulled it out of the camera. I lifted it quickly from her hand.

"No one's seeing that but me," I said. "I've a strong enough stomach." I dropped it into my pocket and Beverly shrugged and turned away.

Taber was talking to Dr. Welles. "I almost forgot," he said. "Martha phoned and said she'd feel better if you were home." He smiled. "I told her I'd see you left immediately."

"What about Corinne?"

Taber looked at me. "We'll trust Mr. Conlon to look after her." He smiled again and the two of them left.

"Now for the gossip about the mighty millionaires." I sat on the sofa beside her. "Can Miss Brown listen or is she too young?"

Corinne wagged her head. "She knows it already. Don't you, Beverly?"

"I suppose so, Mrs. Reynolds." The malicious smile seemed strangely out of place on her formal face. She busied herself with her camera and Corinne snuggled against me and put her head against mine. I thought for a moment she'd fallen asleep.

"Once upon a time," she began, "there was a big, important lawyer named Davidson Taber who liked to have pictures made, very special pictures. He—"

"Hold it," Beverly snapped. She was pointing her camera at us. "This is one picture I'm going to get!"

There was a slight click and the library was suffused with a brilliant flash of light, followed by a sharp crack. I jerked upright, blinking my eyes against the afterglow of the flare, expecting to find the place full of smoke from the popping of the bulb. The bulb was still in the receptacle and Beverly was staring at Corinne.

Corinne's head was against the rolled top of the sofa and, as I moved, she slumped forward, emitting a long sigh as the air was expelled from her lungs. The light rose of the sofa where her head had touched, was stained a deep reddish-purple. Woodenly, I pressed my finger against it and it came away red.

"She's been shot," Beverly said. Her voice was low and matter-of-fact. Her stunned eyes lifted over me, out the French windows.

The rest was confusion. I know the outside porch seemed to lurch under me and I almost fell on the stone flags of the lawn. Beverly was on my heels. We stopped, listened, thought we heard movement off to the left. I crashed into a lilac bush, out of that to bring up against the trunk of a tree. Only around the edges of the house was there any light, the dim glow from the lights inside flowing from the windows to fade rapidly into the surrounding darkness.

I stopped, breathing hard. This was pointless. We were wasting time. Murder's for the police, and Stevens was probably still on the door. I started back for the house, wondering what had become of Beverly.

I saw her, silhouetted against the light in the library. She was getting up from the ground and she saw me at the same time.

"Any luck?"

"None. What happened to you?"

She stayed stooped, rubbing her knee. The faint jasmine odor sweetened the night breeze. "I guess I tripped on one of the flags. I—look!"

Dr. Welles was in the library. His coat

and hat were thrown on the end of the sofa and he was bending over Corinne. He looked up at our step on the porch.

"She's dead," he said.

Beverly said, "I thought you'd gone home."

"I started to. I was getting in my car when I heard the shot. I came around the side of the house and—"

"Your car?" I put in. "I thought you lived across the road."

"I do," he said patiently. "I always take my car wherever I go. For emergencies."

I snapped a glance at Beverly. "Let's find Reynolds and Taber."

"You and Dr. Welles find them." She shook her head. "I . . . I can't tell them. I'll stay here."

Reynolds and Taber were talking together and we got hold of Stevens and he put in a call to homicide. Back in the library, he examined the body without touching it, and asked each of us a few questions. When he got to me, his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Just who are you?" I told him. "The sports writer?" he asked.

"Yeah. Tonight I was subbing for Martha Welles. Mrs. Reynolds was going to give me some information for the column."

Taber was over by the door, directly opposite Reynolds, who was leaning against the fireplace, his hand on his forehead, talking quietly to Dr. Welles. Taber asked, "Did she tell you very much?"

"Nothing at all," I replied.

Stevens addressed Reynolds. "What about a motive? Can you think of anyone who might have a reason for wanting your wife dead?"

"Not right now." Reynolds' voice was deep, hesitant, troubled. He seemed to force himself to go over to the sofa and look down at Corinne. "Unless it could have been the necklace," he said.

"What necklace?"

"A favorite of my wife's. She always wore it. It wasn't terribly expensive and it certainly wasn't very conspicuous. Just a thin platinum chain ending in a finely cut diamond. Probably worth"—he pursed his lips—"no more than two thousand dollars."

"That's plenty to commit murder for!" Stevens said. He looked closely at Corinne's neck. "It's gone."

Reynolds nodded. "I noticed that."

"We'll get a description of it later." Stevens turned to Welles. "How did you know it was a gunshot?"

"I've heard them before," Welles told him. "This was the sharp, quick pop of a small calibre pistol. Probably a .25." He walked nervously up and down. "From the size of the wound—"

"This your coat?" Stevens interrupted.

"Yes," Welles replied.

Stevens lifted it from the sofa and moved

toward a chair, the coat swinging in his hand. Suddenly he stopped, and his eyes took on a reflective gleam. He swung it again, twice, then reached in the pocket. When his hand came out, it was holding a .25 calibre Colt pocket automatic!

Stevens' lips cut a thin line across his face. "This the type of gun you mean?"

I looked at Welles. His dark, handsome face was a ghastly gray and his jaw sagged.

"I . . . I never saw it before," he gasped.

Stevens juggled the gun in his hand, then stepped toward Welles. "Turn around," he barked. "We'll see what else you have on you." He shoved his hand into one of Welles' pockets, fumbled around, tried the other.

"Ah," he breathed.

A thin white strand encircled his fingers, a bright, shining object bobbing on the end of it.

"The necklace!" Beverly cried.

Welles looked stunned, then a wild furtive gleam came into his eyes. He glanced at the open French doors, then at Stevens. Stevens was examining the necklace.

"Wait a minute, Stevens," I said. "The whole thing's—"

I stepped between them and Welles bolted! He started fast and Stevens was caught flat-footed. Then he lunged for the doors and I lunged with him. We hit them at the same time, crashing into each other, and we both sprawled across the porch. Stevens got to his feet, cursing me, and I heard his footsteps slap on the flags, then thud on the soft grass as he disappeared. I went back into the library.

Taber was eyeing me speculatively through his horn-rimmed glasses. "That was nice timing, Mr. Conlon," he murmured.

"Thanks," I said. "I wish I had a picture of it."

Reynolds appeared dumbfounded. "Welles!" he said to no one in particular.

"I never would have believed it!"

"Neither would I," I told him. "In fact, I don't believe it!"

"An innocent man wouldn't try to escape," he said slowly.

"Maybe not. But a scared man would."

"What about the gun and necklace?" Beverly put in.

"Yes, the necklace." I turned to Reynolds. "How do you know your wife was wearing it tonight?"

"She always wears it," he declared. "I've seldom seen her without it."

"Then you didn't see much of her tonight." I moved toward Beverly, who was half sitting on the library table, her hand resting on her camera. "Mrs. Reynolds was about to give me a story. Now she's given me one. The beginning of one, anyway."

I jerked the camera out from under Beverly's hand and pulled out the plate. Maybe the hunch would curl up on me. If

it did, I'd never set foot in Reynolds Field again. I'd be through. Reynolds would see to that. On the other hand, only a blind man would not have seen this as a frame. There was a story somewhere in all this, and I was going to get it.

I plunged on. "A story with a photograph. The shot Beverly made just as the gun was fired." Reynolds and Taber looked puzzled. Beverly's eyes narrowed suddenly. "If nothing else," I said, "it will show the necklace around Mrs. Reynolds' neck. Or it won't show it."

Taber tried to get in my way, but I straight-armed him and pushed out on the dance floor. The homicide squad arrived as I left.

II.

MARTHA answered the bell. She opened the door a crack, and I shoved in, saying, "It's me, Conlon," and shutting the door behind me.

"Is your husband here?"

Martha shook her head vaguely. She was small, dark-haired, with a thin face that might have seemed aristocratic in the city room of the *Star*, but here was nothing more than the pinched look of a frightened woman. I pointed to the red dress splashed with enormous white moons that she was wearing. "What party you going to?"

"I couldn't stay in bed any longer," she said, "so I got dressed and I've been sitting up reading. About my husband," she went on hurriedly. "Is there anything wrong?"

I briefed her quickly.

"Oh, no!" she said. "Not my husband. Not Edward! He wouldn't have done it even though—" She stopped.

"Even though what?"

No answer. I grabbed her by the shoulder. "Listen, baby," I growled. "I've stuck my neck out pretty far already. Stevens isn't that dumb! He knows I stooged him so your husband could break away. I called a frame on two of the biggest people in town, Reynolds and Taber! So don't hold out anything on me."

"I know," she said. She ran her hand nervously along her red-and-white belt. "It's—well, my husband was having an affair with Corinne Reynolds. He thought I didn't know anything about it, but I did. Some of our friends saw to it that I heard every detail, even that he'd urged Corinne to get a divorce, promising to divorce me so they could be married." Her thumb snapped angrily off her belt. "I . . . can't say I'm sorry that she's dead!"

"I know," she said. She ran her hand nervously along her red-and-white belt. "It's—well, my husband was having an affair with Corinne Reynolds. He thought I didn't know anything about it, but I did. Some of our friends saw to it that I heard every detail, even that he'd urged Corinne to get a divorce, promising to divorce me so they could be married." Her thumb snapped angrily off her belt. "I . . . can't say I'm sorry that she's dead!"

I waited a moment. "What did Corinne say about the divorce?"

"She laughed at him. And then, in one of her drunken stupors, she boasted about it! That's how it got around. She'll say anything in that condition."

I was beginning to sweat. Martha didn't know it, but she was plaiting the rope that

would go around her husband's neck. She was giving him the best motive in the world, the jealous, discarded lover held up to ridicule by the woman he loves. Stevens would jump at it and say to hell with the necklace. He could get around the necklace anyway. I could almost hear the prosecuting attorney telling the jury that Welles had taken the necklace to make it look like robbery.

Unless the photo proved that Corinne wasn't wearing it.

I could go back and hand it over to Stevens.

I hadn't mentioned the telephone message so I asked her about it. "Taber took the message. He said you'd feel better if your husband were home here."

"Why, no," Martha said. "I didn't phone at all. Do you think he could have—"

"It was no mistake," I cut in. "Taber wanted him out of there then."

"I don't see why," Martha said.

Neither did I. But I knew Stevens wasn't going to get that photo now. Not with all the influence Taber and Reynolds could toss around. The first any of them would see it would be on the front page of the *Star*.

I had to get it to Kelton.

"I'll need a car to get back to town. Stevens probably has a cop on each fender of mine."

She told me I could take hers, then she asked about the photograph. Her face was strained. "Do you . . . do you think it will prove he's innocent?"

"It better," was all the hope I could give her. "I'm going to lock it up in my desk until the photogs get in in the morning." I added, "When Stevens comes over, don't tell him I've been here."

I turned to the door, saw the knob turn, and it was thrust inward. Two homicide dicks stood on the threshold.

"If you're looking for Dr. Welles," I said quickly, "you're wasting your time. I'm from the *Star*." I spoke to Martha. "Thanks for the interview. We'll see your husband gets a break."

"Easy, buddy," one of the cops said. "Better check with Stevens before you print anything."

"That's where I'm going now." I slid past them and out the door. When I got in the car, I gunned it quickly and headed for town.

Like I expected, Kelton wasn't home. But the guy was truthful. His wife knew he was playing poker even if she didn't know where. I hung up, after telling her to have him call me at the office or at home no matter when he got in.

The gas station attendant looked like he thought I owed him a few gallons of gas for the privilege of using the phone, so I had him pump a couple into the tank, then

pressed the button to the floor. I had an idea the sooner I got the photo in a safe place, the better. Someone was likely to be after it. It didn't take any deduction to hit on Taber.

Corinne had been tight enough to talk freely and he knew it. He'd lied to Welles about the phone message and he'd been anxious to know how much Corinne had told me.

The Chevy rocked and swayed, but I only slowed down once, on the narrow bridge over the inlet. The headlights picked out the worn planking, slid along the rail, and were swallowed by the blackness that hung over the sighing water like a cloak. Beyond was the straight highway.

The sports room was empty. I switched on the light, hid the plate in the bottom of one of the drawers, and locked my desk. Then I went down the hall to the city room. Atwood, the night editor, was keeping himself awake playing solitaire, his bald head shining under the single overhead light. He looked at my tuxedo, emitted a low whistle, then said, "I been expecting you to phone in something on the Reynolds murder."

I tossed him the key. "It's in my desk. I've got to get hold of Kelton. Where's he play poker?"

"Most anywhere," Atwood said. He put a black seven on a black eight and I picked it up and handed it back to him.

"Name a few places."

He did and I scribbled them on a piece of paper. "I'm going to the apartment to change, then I'll look for him." I pointed to the key. "What's in that desk is important. Don't give that key to anyone but Kelton or me. Understand?"

Atwood nodded and put the black seven on the black eight again. This time I let him get away with it.

It was twelve-thirty when I pulled up in front of my apartment house. My neck felt raw where the stiff shirt had rubbed against it all night. I thought, "I'll be damned glad to get out of this outfit. Never again." I unhitched the tie in the back, opened the wing collar, and took a deep breath. I took another when the automatic elevator let me off at the fourth floor. I stopped.

Finally I detected the odor of jasmine. "I've been waiting for you," Beverly Brown said. She was sitting on one of the steps of the stairs that looped downward like the stairway in a lighthouse. She'd changed out of the evening gown and was wearing something else in blue that looked just as expensive. She walked to my door with me.

"I don't have it," I said.

"But you can get it. Let's talk about it." She followed me in and sat in the armchair by the radio.

"I'm in a spot," she went on. "The police should have the photograph. If you give it to them, they'll want to know why I didn't mention it."

"Haven't you?"

"Not yet." She reached toward a cigarette box that was empty, so I gave her one and held the match for her. "I thought I'd get it from you, then give it to them."

"Scratch one," I told her. "What's next?"

She smiled fleetingly, then her eyes became troubled and she leaned forward.

"I have to get that photograph," she said.

"I'm prepared to pay for it."

"Much?"

"Quite a bit."

It was my turn to lean forward. "You get the photo and Welles hangs for the murder. Is that it?"

"You're forgetting something," Beverly said. "I was looking in the direction from which the shot came when I took the picture. In the flash, I saw the murderer. It was Welles."

"Maybe you saw him take the necklace."

Beverly sighed. "You're too stubborn. The necklace is a side issue. It has nothing to do with the murder. If you persist, you'll find yourself in a great deal of trouble."

"I like trouble." I put out my cigarette and stood up. Beverly walked to the door.

"You won't take anything for it, then?"

"Nothing," I replied. "Except the trouble."

I didn't count on its starting so soon. As I closed the door behind her I heard a swift movement across the rug. I started to turn, but a lightning bolt crashed into the side of my head. Its brilliant, jagged forks seared at my eyeballs and rumbled into tiny, scintillating gems as lustrous as finely cut diamonds. I tried to push them away, but they slipped through my fingers and formed into a mocking, moon-faced grin, laughing at me.

I sneered back at them. I knew I was still on my feet and I tried to stay there, but the lightning flashed again and the thunder rumbled as my nose dug into the rug. I struggled to sit up, but the floor was a swirling cushion of blackness under me and I felt myself sinking down, down into its folds. Finally, they closed over my head.

A loud, intermittent ringing yanked me out of the depths, like the ringing of an alarm clock on "repeat." I fumbled around blindly, trying to find the clock so I could shut it off and go back to sleep.

My hand banged into something hard and I opened one eye. A round, brown object jutted up past my nose and I turned my head and squinted upward to the seat of a chair, then slowly around for a floor's-eye view of the room.

The insistent ringing continued and my head throbbed with it, a dull, heavy ache that left me weak and gasping for breath. I made out the telephone and crawled over to it.

"Where the hell have you been?" Kelton yelled into the other end. "I've been trying to get you for half an hour! And what's this about something in your desk?"

A hundred thoughts crowded into my mind like a mob of kids converging on a dime in the street. I looked down at my clothes and saw that the coat had almost been torn off my back, the pockets pointing empty into the room. I put my hand to my head and winced as I touched the places where the blackjack had hit me. My hand came away wet and sticky.

"Atwood," I said. "Get the key from him and—"

"Atwood's in the hospital!" Kelton barked. "The nightman downstairs heard a shot and came up. Atwood had a slug in him and your desk was pulled apart. He said Atwood kept mumbling something about your desk."

"It's a plate," I told him. "A plate from a camera. See if it's in the bottom drawer."

"Hell, there's nothing here but a lot of papers." I heard some fumbling at the other end, then Kelton came back. "It's gone. What's this all about?"

"It's about murder. The Reynolds murder. Someone wanted that plate badly enough to shoot Atwood to get it."

"Who knew it was there?" Kelton asked.

"Yeah," I said. "That's right. Who knew it was there— Look, get over to the hospital and hang on Atwood's bed. See if you can find out who shot him."

"The cops are doing that now."

"Then keep them company. I'll call you back. City hospital?"

Kelton said, "Yes," and I hung up on him.

Who did know the plate was there? Martha Welles, but I'd told her to keep it to herself. Had they got to her and squeezed it out of her? Or had they forced it out of me?

I tore out of the tuxedo and threw cold water on my face and shoved my head in the basin while I tried to figure it out.

No, I wouldn't have forgotten that. They would have had to bring me to and—

Then I remembered.

Whoever slugged me had gone off with a plate! The other one in my coat, the one Beverly had shot of me! I'd stood behind the sofa and she'd snapped it and I'd taken it, saying no one had the stomach to look at it but me.

So now Taber had both of them and—

I looked at my watch. One thirty. Whoever had been in my apartment wouldn't have had time to dash over to the *Star* office and plug Atwood, too. That meant someone else was in it beside Taber. Someone else wanted the photo, either with him or against him. Reynolds?

I threw on a shirt and another suit. There was one way to find out. Get hold of Martha and learn to whom she'd spilled it. From there on it would be luck.

I decided to cement the luck, and was on the way to my desk to get the Luger I'd brought back with me from Europe before I remembered I'd turned it in in the drive the police had had.

"No respectable citizen needs a gun," the ad in the paper read.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't know what I needed, but that Luger would have looked pretty good.

The Chevy poked through the late traffic in the center of town, then hit the highway to the Welles' place and jumped out from under me. It wasn't until I tooted it around a curve that the headlights bobbed into the rear-view mirror and bounced away. I held her steady on the straight stretch and glanced behind.

The car was bearing down fast. All I could see were the bright beams of the lights, creeping steadily along the road, nosing closer. I pressed the accelerator to the floor, trying to get the last ounce out of it, and the car behind leaped after me.

My headlights flared out on each side of the road, picking out the trees and the telephone poles dotting the barren countryside. The speedometer was moving, creeping up past sixty-five, passing seventy, but the car behind was hanging steadily on my tail, not trying to pass me, not making any attempt to ram me, just hanging there.

My hands slipped on the wheel and I took them off, one at a time, and dried them on my coat.

The lights from behind were scooping up the road under my window and I could hear the heavy drone of its motor like a monster mosquito awaiting its chance to light.

What was he waiting for? He—

Then I saw it, the bridge over the inlet! Its thin rails sprang into my headlights and I jerked the wheel to the right, stamped on the brake, and hauled on the emergency.

The car behind tried to turn into me, but I skidded up on the shoulder and he bounced away, careering toward the rail. I saw his red tail light jiggling through the cloud of dust thrown up by the wheels, then there was a sickening crash as he smashed through the end pillar. A length of rail was tossed up in the air and the car shot over the side into the blackness below. Spray leaped high and splattered down quietly on the bridge, like rain on a summer night.

The starter perked the Chevy to life and I rumbled slowly over the bridge without looking to right or left.

I turned into the driveway to Martha's place without even wondering whether Stevens had stationed any cops there or not. If he had, I didn't see them. I suppose he figured that would be the last place Dr. Welles would flee to.

The house was dark, but I hadn't rung the bell more than three times before the

light went on and Martha opened the door. We went into the living room and I told her about Atwood and the rifling of my desk.

"The plate's gone," I said. "That was the last thing that would save your husband. You knew about it and I knew about it. No one else."

She had changed from the red dress with the big white moons on it and was wearing a nightgown covered by a housecoat. Her pinched face was dull and gray except for the blue-black shadows under her eyes.

"But they all knew about it," she protested. "Taber, Reynolds, Beverly Brown. You—"

"I mean where it was," I growled. "I told you I was going to put it in my desk. Who got it out of you?"

She wet her lips nervously. "No one," she whispered. "I didn't tell anyone. I . . . I'd forgotten about it. I was too upset to remember anything you said."

"That's fine," I said. If she wouldn't tell, there was no way I could get it out of her. "Your husband as good as has the noose around his neck right now."

"Not quite."

Dr. Welles stepped into the room. The black bow hung limply at his neck and his tuxedo was dirty and covered with green streaks. He moved toward Martha, speaking quietly.

"Where is it?"

Martha shook her head dumbly.

Welles lifted his hand and I started toward him, then stopped. The slap cracked through the room. He slapped again, across the other side of her face.

"Where is it?"

The gray fled from Martha's face and was replaced by a sickly yellow. "It's . . . it's there," she said. She pointed to the bookcase. "Between the first two books."

Welles went to the bookcase and pulled out the books. A camera plate was between them. He held it out.

"Is this it?"

I said, "That may be it."

His dark eyes snapped at me. "What do you mean?"

"There were two of them. I don't know which that is."

"Where's the other?"

"Who knows?" I lit a cigarette, blew the match out quickly when I saw the gun appear in his hand.

"Come on," he said. "You're not pinning Corinne's murder on me."

"Put it away," I told him. "I'm on your side. Maybe we can find it if we go see Beverly Brown."

Welles shoved the gun and the plate in his pocket and headed for the door. I took a last look at Martha. She had shrunk back into a corner, her eyes needlepoints, staring at the two books on the floor.

In the car, I drove silently. Welles gave me directions, and when I pulled up in front of Beverly's place I saw it was a single house, the ground floor covered into a studio with living quarters above. We circled it, trying several windows before we found one that was unlocked. I moved to go in first, but Welles brushed me aside and climbed over the sill.

We were in a hallway. Welles switched on the light and began opening doors, gun in hand.

The first was the dark room. I could see an enlarging machine on a bench on one side and tanks of developer on the other. The next was the studio itself and beyond that was one more. But Welles turned at the stairs.

We went up them slowly, stepping on the outside of each tread, creeping into the darkness. At the top, he found another light switch.

There were four doors. A living room, a bathroom, and two bedrooms. The first was empty.

In the second, Beverly sat up suddenly as the light went on. Her long blonde hair hung over her shoulders and one strap of her nightgown slipped down on her arm. She clutched the blanket tightly, holding it around herself.

"We want the plate," Welles said.

Her frightened eyes flicked from Welles to me. "I . . . I don't have it," She gasped. "Uh-uh," I told her. "That's what I said to you. You have it or you know what was on it. Welles isn't kidding. It's his neck."

The gun in Welles' hand moved slowly. "I want that plate," he repeated.

Beverly reached for a dressing gown, pulled it around her shoulders and got out of bed. "I'll show you."

She led the way down the stairs and into the dark room. On the table, beside the developing tanks, was a glossy print. She held it up.

It was the photo of me. My mouth was open and my eyes were wide, like a pigmy at first sight of an elephant.

Then the plate in Welles' pocket was the right one. I looked at him and he grinned crookedly. "Now we'll find out why they tried to frame me," he murmured.

"I didn't have anything to do with that," Beverly said quickly.

"Someone put the gun in my pocket. The gun and the necklace. You were alone there when Conlon and I went to look for Reynolds and Taber." Welles motioned toward the tanks of developer. "How would you like to have your face shoved into that?"

Beverly looked at the tanks and her lips curled. "That's harmless."

"Not if it's held in there long enough," Welles said. He jerked the gun at me. I hesitated and his eyes clouded with anger.

Things had gone far enough. Corinne

was dead, Atwood was in the hospital and someone was in that car at the bottom of the inlet. We had the plate, so Welles was clear. Maybe the cops could get the rest out of her.

Welles moved impatiently. "If you don't, Conlon, I will."

I reached Beverly and her hands slashed out at me, but I caught them and pinioned them behind her back. I took her by the back of the neck and scent of jasmine from her hair floated up around me.

I thought, "Scare her with it. See if she'll talk."

The ends of her blonde hair had sunk into the tank when she said, "I put the gun in your pocket. I found it outside and put it there when you went out."

"What about the necklace?"

I bent forward, struggling as she tried to push me back.

"No!" she stammered. "No, no, I didn't do that! Reynolds did. He had it and when I told him he slipped it into your pocket."

"But why?" Welles thundered. "Why?"

I pressed her, hard, and suddenly she went limp and the developer splashed over her head and over her hair. She came up choking and spluttering. I let her go and she whirled on us.

Her coldly formal face broke into pieces and the whole vicious story poured out.

It was blackmail and Reynolds was the head of it. He knew who the important people were, who had the money. He brought in Beverly and set her up as a society photographer. And Beverly worked on the pictures.

She cut out backgrounds, blended in other pictures for a result no wife would want her husband to see.

Then Taber came in. He showed the women in pictures, threatened to mail them to the husbands, and collected. Plenty.

Corinne Reynolds found out about it and she began to blackmail them. But they were afraid! They never knew when Corinne, out of anger or in a drunken stupor, would tell the whole story. The best thing was to get rid of her and they seized on the row between Corinne and Welles.

They were to get her in the library. Taber was to sneak out and shoot her, and later they were to plant the gun and the necklace in Welles' house. But when he showed up in the library, they jumped at the chance to plant them on him then.

Beverly's hair was a mass of wet strings around her head. She ran her fingers through them. "Now you know," she sobbed, "so . . . get out!"

We both heard it at the same time. The creak of a board in the hall. Welles jumped to the door and slid behind it as it opened and Taber stepped in behind a 38.

"Welles has the photo," I told him.

Taber moved farther into the room, his

eyes big behind the horn-rimmed glasses.

"You're a liar," he said evenly.

"Ask him yourself." I pointed toward the door.

Taber swung around into the blast from Welles' gun. The gun barked again and the glasses spun from Taber's nose and crashed into the wall. Taber's body jerked and creased in the middle and he thudded to the floor. Welles stared at him, dazed.

"You stay with them," I said. I crossed to him, put my arm around him as if to steady him. My fingers closed over the plate in his pocket. "I'll call the police."

Out in the studio, I dialed the operator and told her to send the cops and an ambulance in a hurry. Then I unlocked the door, got in the Chevy, and drove to the *Star* building.

Kelton was in his office.

"How's Atwood?" I asked him.

"Atwood will pull through." He looked at me as if he were going to divulge the name of the winner of the next World Series. "Martha Welles shot him."

"Yes," I said, "I know." I threw the plate on his desk. "Get someone in here to run a print of that."

Kelton got on the phone; then, while we were waiting, I told him the story. From the beginning, I'd reached the part where the car had tried to push me into the inlet when a man from the photo end came in and took the print.

"Who do you think was in the car?" Kelton asked me.

I shrugged. "Reynolds. He must have missed contact with Taber, been waiting outside my place, and thought I still had it on me."

I parried his next question and took him along, step by step. He was hanging there and I was enjoying it to the full. As managing editor, he'd pushed me around plenty and now I was letting him sweat it out.

He shook his head in disbelief when I told him about the blackmail ring.

"The police will get it all in the studio," I told him. "Now for the photo."

It was coming through the door. The man was holding it in the tips of his fingers, shaking it dry. He put it down in front of Kelton.

"I made a mistake with Martha," I said. "I thought she'd want to help her husband. Instead, she was so full of jealousy from the way he'd been carrying on with Corinne that she wanted him to hang for the murder."

Kelton looked up from the picture and smiled. "As a detective," he said, "you'll make out better writing up double-headers. I think she wanted it for a much better reason than that." He turned the photo around and pushed it toward me.

My eyes skipped over Corinne and me on the sofa to the background beyond. On the edge of the porch, gun in hand, was a dark figure with a thin face wearing a dress splashed with white moons. The flash photo had caught it all.

"By the way," Kelton said. "It's now Saturday. Isn't there a double-header this afternoon?"

I lifted myself wearily out of the chair.

"I don't know," I told him, "but if there is, I guess I'd better go home and get some sleep. I certainly need it."

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Telephone calls for a dead man . . . a gin rummy player who spent his time rescuing "little, helpless things" . . . all against a Hollywood backdrop . . . Hollywood, the town of too many "convenient" suicides . . .

Murder Hollywood version

By MURIEL BRADLEY

I.

OFFICE 311 lay toward the end of a long corridor on the third floor of the Writers' Annex. It was a small square room, its carpet expensively napped to deaden footfalls. It contained a desk, a typewriter, pencils, erasers, bound scripts. There were two straight-back chairs, a lounge chair, a studio couch; in one corner a steel file cabinet and in the other, rigid against the wall, a girl.

The girl was not very tall. She was small, padded out by the deft tailoring of her mocha colored suit. Her skin, except for its present palor, had a nice, even sun-warmed tone, bought recently at Palm Springs. Her hair, thick and dark, was coiled high on the top of her head. Her eyes were brown, almost black. Her teeth were white between full, red, young-looking lips.

The lips moved now, "Listen, Verrity, hang on. Your backbone's clicking like a fist full of maracas. Stop it!" She pushed the palms of her hands against the walls triangling away on either side of her, gave herself a shove forward into the center of the room. "Keep going," she muttered. "Keep going and pick up that phone."

The phone was in her hand and as she waited for Mattie, the operator, to come on, she eyed the Venetian blinds. They were pressed flat. No one could possibly see in between the tightly pressed slats; and the only sound she could hear was the *spat-spat* of the rain on the big glass window,

securely bolted behind the white, ribbed blinds. Terror sparked her up inside like a live electric wire, stiffening each separate nerve end, tensing her unwilling body.

"Dead set," she thought. "I'm a dead set." She eased away in disgust from her own fear. Think of something else then, but not about the telephone calls this afternoon, those strange, one-sided conversations that had turned her into a gibber. Why was Mattie taking so long? What was the matter with the switchboard? Think of something else!

The nameplate on the outside of Office 311 read: GAIL VERRITY. The name was typed on white cardboard stuck into a slot which made for easy removal when the next occupant moved in. Only, Gail's name had been up there six months. She'd put in two months as a junior writer at Prince Pictures but now she was doing dialogue for some of the A scripts. That's how she'd come in real contact with Mark Fleming. Otherwise, she might have eyed him forever from across the restaurant commissary where the junior writers ate huddled together, pretending they didn't care, but all the time staring toward the long A writers' table. When you finally got to the A writers' table you were within kneeling distance of the producers' table, presided over by Pandro Able, head of Prince Pictures. Mark Fleming always sat on Mr. Able's right.

The phone clicked nervously. It was Mattie at last. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Little trouble on the board."

"Trouble?" Gail's hands tightened thinly against the receiver. "What kind of trouble?" She was backing slowly toward the corner again, the telephone cord tautening out in front of her.

"Nothing. One of the girls jammed a key. New girl. Who do you want? Working late, aren't you?"

New girl! It had been a man's voice, though, on the wire this afternoon so this wasn't the one. "Mark Fleming, please. I'm waiting to see him, Mattie. He's in Projection Room B."

"I know, I know." Mattie's voice soothed. "A lot of other people are waiting. Make-up. Wardrobe. Even Mr. Able."

"Mr. Able? Is he still here?"

"Yes. Here's your party."

"Hello? Hello?" It was the *dum-dum* staccato of Red Gandy, Mark's assistant.

"Red, this is Gail Verrity. How much longer?"

"Oh, half hour. At least. Hey, it's seven o'clock. You don't have to stick around."

Don't I have to, Red? Don't I just! "Mr. Fleming said he wanted to see the changes I've made in the final script."

"Send 'em to his office. He'll look at them tonight. He's still got to check Make-up and Wardrobe with Able. Gotta hang up. We're ready to run this next sequence. 'By, honey.'"

So Mark Fleming had no time for Gail Verrity. Well, Gail Verrity didn't have much time either. Maybe she could see Kristin. Kristin might help. If they were all waiting for Mark Fleming as Red had said, there'd be a lot of people in Mr. Able's office right now: Kristin Anderson, Mr. Able's nice secretary, at her big desk outside his door. The man with the Wardrobe sketches. The girl with the wigs from Make-up. Holly Holoby, Mr. Able's gin rummy partner; no, his pigeon. Holly looked like a pigeon, too, with his shining, white hair, his forward thrusting neck, his sleek, curved front. Holly Holoby had been on Prince Pictures payroll without a layoff for nearly six years. No one knew exactly what he did, besides collecting a salary of five hundred per week, but Mr. Able always got to Gin! first.

This wasn't getting her anywhere. She mustn't let her thoughts spin all over the place like the lace signature of a frantic spider. The strange voice had called four times. She must remember that. At first it had asked for Paul Lorentz. "You have the wrong office," she'd answered. The next time she'd been irritated: "No one by that name here. What number do you want?" The voice had replied, "1420."

"That's the phone number in this office, but Paul Lorentz doesn't live here any more. Gail Verrity does."

The third time the somber, echo-sounding voice had said, "Paul Lorentz?" she'd

gritted her teeth. "Look! Are you off the lot or on the lot? I'll switch you to the operator." The wire had deadened abruptly. She'd buzzed Sara, Mattie's assistant. Mattie didn't come on until six. "Some character keeps calling my office, asking for Paul Lorentz." There'd been a silence. She'd waited. "Hello? Sara?"

Finally, Sara had answered. She'd been there all the time, Gail knew: the soft susurration of her breath had reached Gail's ears during the waiting. "Miss Verrity, don't you remember who Paul Lorentz was?"

She'd remembered then. She'd hung up the phone like a shot. Like a shot! Because Paul Lorentz was a dead man! Murdered, some said. She'd been East doing magazine stuff, but even there the whisper had reached. Ugly scandal at Prince Pictures. The papers had played it up. They'd done their best with conjecture and innuendo. But their best was never good enough for Hollywood. Not when they ran up against the blank white wall of the Studio Sodality League; watchdogged by the boys from Public Relations. Oh, sure, it was hushed up. Suicide, it was given out. That was that.

This thing was a mistake, of course. Probably someone who still had Lorentz's old number, someone who'd been away maybe. She shivered and looked around her. It was then, at quarter of five, that she'd drawn the blinds against the rain-drenched twilight outside.

She knew when they'd moved her into 311, it had originally been part of a three-office suite. They'd broken it up like the links in a chain. She hadn't known why before, but she knew now. It was because it had been Lorentz's suite. He was the biggest writer at the studio; he'd rated it, then something happened to him. He was a bound script with "Final Version" written on it. He was dead. So, quick, change the nameplate. In Paul Lorentz's case, change more than that. Switch the backdrop. . . . Erase. . . . Shift the scenery. Put fat Kirk Werczelski in 310. He can't speak English. Put Holly Holoby in 312. He's a prisoner on a retainer; he won't squawk. And then there's little Gail Verrity. Just right for 311. She doesn't know a fade-out from a casting couch. She doesn't know beans. Give her Lorentz's old phone line.

The fourth call had come at quarter of seven, fifteen minutes ago. The hollow voice had sighed, "Paul Lorentz?" Gail had felt her body go rigid. If only she thought earlier, she could have told Mattie to watch her line for the green signal, but she hadn't.

"I—" Her teeth had chattered, her fingers were cold, ugly stubs on the receiver.

"Don't try to talk," the voice had continued. "You've caught on then? You'll do something about it? About Paul Lorentz?"

The connection had closed on that last whispered question, and she'd backed into the corner, shaking. Finally, she'd tried to call Mark Fleming. They wouldn't let her speak to him. That brought her up to right now.

Suddenly, she was laughing. Then, because it was such a terrible thing, to laugh, she had to find a reason for it. It's a practical joke, she thought drearily. Someone's fooling me. Oh, foof yourself, Gail Verrity! You think that's what it is? Really? She moaned and ran from the office.

She met Holly Holoby in the hall. He stared at her and she slowed her footsteps, ran a hand upward to smooth her hair, kept her eyes down so he couldn't read the terror in them.

"Why don't you go home, child, on a night like this? A little thing like you." His attention shifted. "See what I've got here?" He moved his arm. Involuntarily, Gail murmured. It was a kitten. A soaked little striped tiger. She couldn't help it. She loved cats. She stroked the rumped fur and felt herself grow calmer.

"Where did you find it? What are you going to do with it?"

"It was crying by the east gate just now. I'm going to keep it in my office for tonight. It'll have everything it wants, milk, liver, a plushy couch leg to sharpen its claws on." Holly chuckled. A jar full of clean sand waiting for the next day's cigarette stubs stood in the hallway. He pulled a paper bag from his pocket, stopped for a moment by the jar. "Fresh sand—yet." He winked. With a puckered, delighted expression on his face, he and the kitten disappeared into 312. Holly. Good old "Cap and Bells" Holly.

Kristin Anderson behind her executive-secretary desk looked up as Gail approached. Almost lovingly, Gail assessed the wholesome face, the high cheekbones, the straight-looking eyes, the winter wheat hair above the round brow. Kristin is sensible; nothing troubles her. She'll know how to deal with this thing.

"Kristin, let's have dinner together."

Kristin's smile began; her rose-and-white face was lovely under it. "I'd like to. But no telling how long I'd be tied up here. Why don't you go ahead? Tilly's. I'll meet you there."

Tilly's was a cheerful steak house across from the studio. They had marvelous Old-Fashioneds, great chunky filets, good green salads. It wasn't nearly time to expect Kristin. Gail thought she'd drive around a bit. It was a silly thing to do, but outdoors this way she wasn't scared. Certainly, the night was black and wet, but the other thing, the whimpering voice on the phone, was beginning to seem unreal. It belonged

to the office, to the imagination, to the Writers' Annex, to long dark corridors.

The Ford skidded down Culver Boulevard, turned a corner, poked aimlessly forward. So few people out tonight. This was a street she'd never been along before, an alleyway, really. She was starting to spin the wheel and back out when she heard the music. She wasn't sure at first whether it was the clatter of the rain, the soft squealing swoosh of the windshield wiper, or the tinkling of what she imagined it to be, that wonderful crazy kind of Chinese music. She'd loved it in San Francisco at the Chinatown Theater, and now she was hearing it again. She stopped the car.

The flutelike sounds came from an open doorway, thick with strands of shells. She pushed through them and was in a restaurant, tiny and dark, filled with the odor of spice, lichi nuts, incense. Her eyes accustomed now to the shadows, she saw flying silver birds against the dark blue of a far wall. Big shells and fish nets were suspended along the ceiling. Fat-stomached little Buddhas leered at her from shelves along the wall. The blonde woman behind a cash register to the left of the doorway motioned her on. There were a few customers seated in booths and at the tables. On a raised dais in the corner a young, almond-eyed couple touched the *san hien* with loving fingers. They were making the music; there were her pied pipers. Gail loosened her raincoat and sat down.

By the time the sing-song stopped, the martini she'd ordered had slipped warmth and courage through her veins. She wasn't scared any more. She'd mention casually to Kristin that someone was playing a joke on her, trying to hoax her with a scare about a dead writer, part of whose office suite she was occupying. They'd laugh at it together, she and Kristin. Maybe Kristin could tell her more of Paul Lorentz than she herself knew. Strangely, she did know something. She'd even seen him once, she remembered now. When she was at the university, he'd lectured one afternoon on the technique of screen writing. The girls had been excited and they'd asked him ridiculous questions. About Clark Gable. Instead of dramatic dialogue and the time element in scripts. No wonder he'd never come back.

Or maybe she wouldn't say anything at all! This martini was a remarkable transfusion. She felt better, very brave. She twirled the stem of her glass rakishly. Then she choked. She was looking at a ghost!

No. It was a real man, of course. He was sitting at the bar smiling, nodding his head. He waved his drink at her. He came toward her.

"Mr. Holoby! How did you get here?"

"The same way you did, my dear, through the swinging strands into Lotus Heaven."

"Is that the name of this place?"

"Yes. Have you just found it?"

"I heard the music through the rain. It sounded far off, unreal. I had to come in and see for myself." There was a silence. "I've a dinner date at Tilly's."

Holly inclined his head. Without being asked, he sat down across from her.

"How's the kitten?" Gail's voice lifted nervously.

"What? Oh, he's snug and warm. Everything he wants on a night like this. I like to rescue little helpless things. Especially on a night like this."

Gail moved abruptly. "I'm not little and helpless," she thought. She signaled the waitress, turned to Holly. "I must go." He made no comment. She glanced around. She didn't like Lotus Heaven as much as she had fifteen minutes earlier. It was tawdry now; too dark, the odor of incense too cloying. "Do many people from the studio come here? Do they know about it?"

"Oh, no. Just an occasional furtive soul comes here. Or, perhaps I should say, two furtive souls."

A rendezvous, he was intimating. Well, none of her business. Still, she couldn't help a quick look at the nearest couple as she walked out. No one she recognized. Holly had bid her a grave and polite "good night." He was still standing beside the booth looking after her when she glanced back through the shimmering rain-wet curtain shells.

She parked her car near Tilly's and went inside. She wasn't hungry after all and her head ached a little. What she really wanted was to go home and go to bed. What she really wanted was to see Mark. Kristin wouldn't help. She knew all at once she couldn't discuss Paul Lorentz with Kristin Anderson. Why, Kristin, as Pandro Able's competent secretary, had probably been one of the silent bulwarks against which the newspaper reporters had flung their curiosity. Kristin had been part of their defeat. Why should Kristin tell Gail anything of that somber affair of twelve months past? Kristin's first loyalty was to Prince Pictures.

Tilly's cashier called to her, "I was watching for you, Miss Verrity. Miss Anderson from the studio called, said to tell you she's sorry she can't meet you for dinner. She's held up at the office, you'd understand. Want me to have the waiter get you a table?"

"No. No, thanks."

She'd go home. There was soup at home. She'd heat french bread in the oven. Milk to drink. Milk. That made her think of the Witch. He'd beat her up. She was late with his dinner. She grinned and hurried now. She wasn't afraid. Not at all.

She cut up La Cienega Boulevard toward the Sunset Strip. The rain was steady. She was beginning to feel chilled. On a palm-lined street just south of the Strip, just east of La Cienega, loomed her apartment build-

ing. Two stories. Mediterranean style, with vines hanging from the wet pink plaster, and pale-blue lights shining eerily in the bowels of the subterranean garage.

A lot of time had gone by. She glanced at her watch. After nine. The Ford slid down the ramp. No, she wasn't afraid. The night was a villain, that was all, the darkness his cloak, the slapping, flying vines, twisting there against the building, his black mustaches.

She looked around. The attendance was gone. She climbed the winding iron stairway leading from the garage to the first floor of the building. Hurried up the next flight to her apartment. As she fitted her key into the lock, a shadow blacker than the hall shadow detached itself from the wall, flowed around her ankles with an angry purr.

"Baby! Sweetie!" Gail dropped to her knees. The Witch squatted on his haunches, his yellow eyes smoldering. "All right," Gail sighed. "Hi, Slug! Now do you feel better?" The purr rasped an answer: "None of that mushy stuff, none of that baby darling. Just get in there and open me up a can of tuna."

The door swung wide with a slow creak. Gail gasped. A light glowed dimly in her apartment. There was someone in the big chair! The chair's back was turned toward her, but she could see a round outline of head above its fanned edge. "No. Oh, no—"

She knew she was scared, had been all the time. That was why she'd looked for the attendant in the garage below. That was why she'd been almost hopeful Mrs. Perry, the manager, would pop out at her on the first floor with a complaint about the Witch and the patio pool goldfish. That was why—

The figure was rising. There was light, yes, but it was shining toward her; the figure was bulked against it. Paul Lorentz had been a big man. She could see him now. He'd stood in the classroom lecturing, his back to the open window, the light behind him in just this way, his face in shadow.

The room was swirling, gray and foggy, like a Dr. Caligari dissolve. Somewhere far away she could hear a telephone bell ringing. "Don't answer!" she cried. "Don't answer it." The floor rose to meet her with a thump.

She came to with ammonia fuming through her nose into her eyes. A rough tongue lapped her wrist. She squeezed the Witch's muscular neck, dragging him closer to her for comfort, then she looked up at the man.

"Mark." She spoke weakly, struggled to sit up. Gently, he pushed her back against the pillows.

"When did you eat last?"

"I don't know. How should I know? Lunch time, I suppose. Why? Does it matter? How'd I get here?"

Mark grinned. "Watch your dialogue. It should have been 'Where am I?'"

"I know where I am, all right. In my apartment. On my couch. With my kitchen ammonia under my nose. Please, Mark, put that bottle away. How did you get here?" She was remembering, quickly, carefully. She smoothed her face. It was impossible to do the same with her hair. It had rolled down around her shoulders.

"You look fourteen." Mark Fleming spoke irrelevantly.

"I'm not fourteen. Why are you here? Why did you frighten me?"

"I apologize. Humbly. I wanted to see you. I got away from the studio earlier than I expected tonight. I hung around your door for a while. Finally, I went downstairs and routed out your landlady, told her who I was."

"You made it good, I suppose?" Gail rubbed her stinging nose. "She has a sixteen-year-old daughter, you know. You told her you practically run Prince Pictures, of course?"

"Of course. Anyway, she let me in, said it would be all right for me to wait here. I didn't know you'd come home, take one look at my innocent face, and pass out."

"Why did you want to see me?" Gail was wobbling across the room now, experimenting. "I'm all right." She turned.

"That's good. Let's fix you something to eat." He paused. "I wanted to see you because I've had a confidential report you've been running up and down corridors looking like a little ghost."

"Who told you that?" This was important. Gail's hands pressed whitely against the table as she leaned forward. No one. She'd told no one of the telephone calls. Something clicked. "Mark. The phone. The phone rang as I was going under a minute ago."

He hesitated. "No. No, it didn't, Gail."

Her eyelashes swept down. She studied her hands pressing so hard against the table. "All right, Mark. I didn't hear anything." Her tone was even. She walked into the kitchen, halted in the doorway. "Who told you? About me? That I was upset?"

But Mark didn't hear. At least, he didn't seem to. He'd picked up the Witch. He was batting at him. The Witch snarled happily, laced back with a good left jab.

II.

DRIVING to the studio, through a still soggy morning, Gail thought about the night before. Under her raincoat's hood she looked like an alert brownie, but behind her eyes her thoughts were tired. They'd run the same treadmill most of the night. Mark had never come to her apartment before. His excuse had been that he'd been worried about her, but he hadn't told her why. After

he'd filled her up with canned chicken soup and hot cocoa, he'd talked about the script and that was all. He'd left in an hour. Looking at his long, tanned, shut-away face, she had wondered why she'd considered running to him earlier with her tale about anonymous telephone calls.

She didn't know Mark Fleming at all! He'd encouraged her, praised her work, patted her on the head. His gray eyes had glowed at her. The sight of his dark head in the distance down the hall, the easy movement of his shoulders, had given her a clutch of excitement. But she didn't know him. Now she tried to summon up the bare statistics. He was thirty-four. He'd been a writer on the lot before his elevation to producer status a year earlier. Parenthetically, another segment of her mind kept pace: Paul Lorentz had been an important writer on the Prince Pictures lot, too. It might easily have been he, instead of Mark Fleming, who might have become Pandro Able's right hand bower had not a gun gone off unexpectedly.

Lorentz. She went back once more to that long ago classroom. He'd been a big man, vital; she'd had the impression at the time of a lot of muscle even expensive tailoring couldn't minimize. At first his publicity billing had been as Pandro Able's protégé. Not later. When he came to the university, he was far beyond that. He was on his own and he was good. She knew *how* good he was. The girl students had been as much interested in him personally as they'd been in what he had to say. More so, really. The only thing they'd ignored was his appearance counting as part of their journalism course.

But why—she jammed her foot on the brake at a stop signal—had someone telephoned her? Did someone believe, or know, Paul Lorentz's death had not been suicide? If so, it wasn't an unusual surmise. The history of this town held too many convenient "suicides." What did the telephone caller expect her to do, run and tell everyone at the studio? She would be pointed to as a troublemaker, and out would go Miss Gail Verrity. Blacklist her. No more jobs for her in Hollywood.

She was so early that the boy at the Information Desk, assigned to note surreptitiously the hours of toil put in by Prince Pictures' writers, gave her a surprised, "Good morning," and forgot to check her in. She came back, leaned across the desk. "Look, Jimmy. The one time I make it at ten minutes of nine you leave me blank."

The boy wriggled. "Gosh. You're not supposed to know about this record."

"Don't worry. Don't think you're a stoolie. It's your job. Just remember to mark me."

The boy's hand moved furtively across

the sheet of paper under the desk. "It's a tough job. I'll always time you in and out right, Miss Verrity."

"That's nice of you, Jimmy. But don't turn soft; studio managers aren't made that way. You're on the upbeat now. Don't spoil your chances."

The three floors of the Administration Building were cheerful with sound. Gail saw each landing briefly as the elevator door slid open. On the second floor the girls in the stenographers' pool were busy removing galoshes and topcoats, calling greetings. On the third floor, as she stepped out, there was the whirr of pencil sharpeners, the clack of typewriter keys, the up and down of voices. All very normal, all very bright. The stenographers, secretaries and assistants all on time. Nine o'clock. The giant wheel of Prince Pictures beginning its slow expensive turn.

Gail started down the corridor to the left, the one leading to the Writers' Annex. She paused a moment at the big corner window. The sky was still sodden, darkly veined as a bruise; swollen with rain clouds, ominous; She'd expected something different. The briskness which had starched her spirits earlier faded. There was not even a beginning promise of sunshine in the east. As she faced the antiseptic gray corridor stretching in front of her, she felt a chill stirring of air, a cold sigh against her face. She was the first one here. There was no one else, she was sure, behind the closed doors lining this hallway. Her fellow writers would straggle in between nine-thirty and ten o'clock. In the meantime, she was alone. She stood still and closed her eyes. It was a foolish thing to do. Like closing one's eyes to the downward, stomach-wrenching swoop of a roller coaster. It didn't help. Almost she could hear the sob of that unknown voice coming over the wire. The evil-tasting terror of the night before funneled back upon her. She could walk down this hallway, yes. She could enter her office. She could sit at her familiar desk. And then—The phone would ring. She *knew* that. And when she picked it up, she would hear—

Sharply, she turned. She walked down two flights of stairs. She couldn't face the elevator boy; she couldn't face all those clicking typewriters, the sweetly sensible people saying "good morning," nodding their heads, smiling their wide smiles. The wheel going round. She'd been like that herself yesterday. Today? Today was different. Today there was the remembered soft kiss of words: "You've caught on then? You'll do something about it? About Paul Lorentz?"

A spate of raindrops slapped her in the face. She turned up her raincoat hood and stood uncertainly in the side entrance. Then she crossed the studio square, inside the

high wire fence, nodded to the policeman on duty at the east gate. She went by the executives' barber shop, the shoeshine stand, and into the commissary coffee shop. While she waited for her coffee, she stared through the big windows. A studio car was drawn up in front of the Stars' Dressing Room building. She was still interested; she could still crane to see which star would step into the plush interior of the long black limousine, to be driven to a sound stage. Six months at the studio hadn't changed that; nor had the thirteen hours since the first phone call last night.

"Pass the sugar, Miss Verrity, if you please."

The flatly nasal New York whine scratched across the blackboard of her thoughts. Gail started. "Hello, Ruth."

The woman beside Gail glanced down at her toast and jelly. "I was wondering when you'd see me, Miss Verrity. Did I disturb you? Thinking about your script? Mr. Fleming would certainly admire you for being so conscientious. You young writers have to keep a couple of situations ahead of the option lifters, though. But I guess you don't have to worry."

The funny part about it was that Ruth Dexter was a good secretary. She'd been with Mark Fleming five years. The title on her time card had changed from writer's secretary to producer's secretary as she made the upward step with her boss. She was fast, thorough, scrupulous; never got a message or an intonation wrong; could fish for any information it was necessary for Mark Fleming to have; and had a memory neatly docketed and ticketed, apparently without boundary or qualm of any kind. The rasp of her voice and personality was something one had to overlook.

Gail cast a thought upward for guidance and found it. She smiled smoothly as the sugar bowl changed hands. "You always manage to continue looking like a New Yorker, Ruth, yet you've been out here five years. Tell me how you do it? I've done Hollywood already with this tan and no hat." I can think about something else at least while she answers. With a lead like that, she'll go on and on. Otherwise I'll have to talk to her.

"—such a shame to let down, to let oneself go. I always wear hat and gloves, always carry a handbag. I say this is temporary. When I go back to New York—of course, Mr. Fleming's lovely—but when I go back to New York, I don't want to be wearing a pony mane of hair to my shoulders, feet two sizes too big from those flat sandal shoes, a complexion like an Indian. No offense, Miss Verrity. Your tan is suitable to you, Er . . . no offense, Miss Verrity."

"What?" Gail's eyes crinkled in hurried response. "Uh? Of course." She glanced at

Ruth Dexter, then turned, startled, to follow the direction of Ruth's gaze which was arrowing sharply over her own shoulder. The door of the limousine had opened. She'd missed part of the procession into its interior, but seeing the figure on the threshold of Dressing Room A, she knew it had probably included Cara Ramsey's secretary, her personal maid, and her hairdresser. For Cara herself stood in the doorway, small, flaxen-haired; the sweetly fulling curves of her costumed figure denying the existence of bone or skeletal backdrop. She pulled a mink coat across her shoulders. Now, with her body covered, you saw her face; the delicate arch of lip and nostril and brow, the faintly hollowed cheek; the eyes dark-blue and tilting, set piquantly above the rise of cheekbone; the mouth, soft, pouting. A mouth to make a man breathe deeper.

Go on, Gail thought, what else? You couldn't help getting garish about Cara. She made you want to reach around for a lot of fancy fan-magazine words. So, what else? That lemon-colored hair, thick enough to weave a soft rope and strangle a man. Cara Ramsey. Mrs. Pandro Able. Gail sighed. What was the use? She'd taken her lipstick out of her purse. She put it back. She wouldn't even bother.

As the studio car drove off, Mark Fleming's secretary went back to her toast-crunching. "Always like to see her." Then she looked up suddenly, sturdily. "But she doesn't knock you out that way when she's in Mr. Able's office without her make-up; without her pancake, that is."

Gail smiled. "If she can look the way she did just now, even part of the time, I guess that's all that's necessary."

Miss Dexter didn't answer. It was at that moment that Gail got the idea. Kristin, Pandro Able's secretary. She'd decided against asking Kristin Anderson, but what about Ruth Dexter? Ruth with the mind of a photostat. Ruth would be sure to know.

The coffee shop was filling up. Red Gandy came in. Gail wanted to get away from there. She leaned forward, picked up Ruth's check. "Come on, Ruthie." Her voice was gay, pitched too high. "My treat. I have to go back to the office. Let me share your umbrella, will you?"

Ruth Dexter thought complacently: She has a favor she wants to ask me. They all do when they pay your coffee shop check. I'm on to writers' tricks.

Outside, Ruth raised her umbrella. "Thank you, I'm sure, Miss Verrity. Very kind of you. It's still raining a little. An umbrella's something I certainly don't forget in California, along with my hat and gloves."

Gail's mind spun nervously. How can I ask her now? She's going to her office. It can't be there. It's got to come naturally. A red light flashed in front of Sound Stage 2.

"Let's stop, Ruth. See who's shooting. You have time. Mr. Fleming's car isn't in the parking lot yet. He's not the type who calls you from home the minute he wakes up to see if you're at your desk at nine."

"No, he isn't. I've schedules to check, though." Ruth's face had a severe look to it, but she was enjoying pretty Miss Verrity's friendliness. "Anyway, we don't have to go in. There's the call sheet tacked on the door."

"Production 394, Director: McCave. Star: Cara Ramsey. Come on, Ruth. You can spare a minute." Come on, chum, this is such fun, just you and me. What other secretary is so friendly with a writer, even a young, inconsequential writer?

They were inside, stumbling through the darkness over coiled ropes and piled-up furniture and wooden sawhorses. Ahead of them, around a screen, was a blaze of lights. A second assistant director frowned and shushed them until he caught Gail's deliberately rolling eye and over-ambitious smile. "Hi, honey," he whispered. "You new around here?" He dusted off a couple of chairs, moved them back in a recess, and they had a vantage point. As they stared into the brilliantly-lighted corner of a drawing room set, Ruth Dexter sniffed. "Men!"

Gail shrugged. "We can see what's going on at least," she murmured.

"Yes, but can we get out when we want to?"

"Of course. It's slow now, isn't it? They're just setting the lights. I guess Cara Ramsey's in her portable dressing room. There's her stand-in."

"Miss Verrity, I shouldn't have come in here with you. You know how long it takes before they shoot a scene. I have to go back to the office. It's nearly nine-thirty. Mr. Fleming—"

"Don't you love it? Even the smell? Sawdust, greasepaint, new wood, old sets. It's . . . it's romance."

"No, Miss Verrity. I don't. I—"

"I feel sorry for anyone who has to be away from it. For anyone who misses this. For anyone who dies and has to leave it even." She saw Ruth Dexter's dazed look and hurried on. "For instance, like Paul Lorentz, the writer. A man with Hollywood and Prince Pictures in his veins. He rose to the top here. Wherever he is, he'd want to get back, wouldn't he? I know I would." She was talking to Ruth Dexter's vanishing back; she had to quicken her steps to catch up with her. She pulled open the heavy double door of the stage and ran after Ruth. "What's the matter?"

"The way you're talking. Listen, I'd go back to New York right now. Well, to Brooklyn, if you want to be exact. And I wouldn't mind at all if I never saw Prince Pictures again, or Cara Ramsey, or anyone

Except Mr. Fleming, of course. I can make more money and that's why I'm here in California instead of New York. And you shouldn't talk about dead people, Paul Lorentz, anyone—"

"Why not? I'm sorry. Is it anything so terrible? The poor man. He shot himself, didn't he? How could he have done that? Leave a wonderful career, wonderful future?"

They were slashing through the fine rain now, puddles sending dark little streaks up their stockings. Gail was running to keep up with Ruth Dexter's hasty stride.

"I suppose he was a wonderful man."

Ruth Dexter stopped. "Why should you suppose that? Just because a man's big in this industry doesn't make him wonderful. He was talented, but he had all the bad traits that go along with talent. And if you're turning hero worshipper, I'd better put you right. Paul Lorentz was an ordinary man. In fact, more ordinary and more man than most."

They were in the first floor reception room now, waiting for the elevator. Gail held her breath. Her own words had had a frantic squeal to them. But poor Miss Dexter was more of a Californian than she knew, because she didn't seem to realize how crazy all this sounded. They were alone in the reception room except for the blown-up portraits of Prince Pictures' stars lining the wall. The biggest and most spectacular camera study was the one of Cara Ramsey. Wearing a diamond necklace, a white expanse of bosom, and little else. Miss Dexter glanced at the picture shrewishly. "Yes, and when I say more man than most, I mean he narrowed it down to one thing: Blondes!"

The elevator door clicked open. They got in. Suddenly, Miss Dexter looked at Gail. An expression, liplicking and furtive, crossed her face. "If you want the newspaper clippings about what happened to Paul Lorentz, I'll send them to you. I've got them; nobody else has."

It was more than Gail could have asked for. More than she would have dared ask for. As the elevator slipped upward to the third floor, leaving Ruth Dexter scurrying toward Mark Fleming's offices on the landing below, staring at the elevator boy's uniformed back. He turned around unexpectedly, in time to surprise her private smile. His own look was stony. He thought all writers whirly. Take this one, dripping wet, with a big grin on her face, "Writers' Annex. Third floor out."

"Third floor nut house," he intoned to himself as he banged the iron doors.

It wasn't difficult being in her own office after all. Not really. The steam radiator clanked against the wall. The Venetian blinds were drawn, hiding the gray outdoors.

The light overhead shot bright, unflattering cheer into all corners of the room. Gail hung her raincoat on the rack near the file. She sat down at her desk and looked coldly at the mirror hanging on the side wall. Her own reflection, she decided, was pallid and far from attractive. She wondered why the second assistant director had bothered. Little half moons of shadow lay beneath her eyes, against the tan of her cheeks. She got up, walked across the thick rug, locked the office door. There was a brush in the bottom drawer of her desk. She took hold of a swag of hair and brushed fiercely. When it was polished to the dark mahogany sheen of her grandmother's highboy, she coiled it up again across the top of her head, ran a quick sketch of lipstick over her mouth and was ready to face the day.

It consisted first of the morning mail, which someone was trying to push under her door. She freed the lock, greeted the mail messenger, took the papers and envelopes. There was Edith Gwynn in the *Hollywood Reporter* to be read; then she began slitting envelopes. Out of a long inter-office, the newspaper clippings fluttered. "It didn't take Dexter long," Gail thought. She unfolded the printed columns.

There were the headlines: PAUL LORENTZ STUDIO WRITER FOUND SHOT—WOUND BELIEVED SELF-INFLICTED.

There was Lorentz's picture. Yes, as she'd remembered. Face like a storm cloud. An attractive, tough storm cloud. The kind that swarms all over you fast. "I'm really wacky." She put her head on her hand, "Really, really wacky." She read on: "One of Prince Pictures' most able writers—hard hitting melodrama his specialty—a bachelor—former protégé of Pandro Able, famed Hollywood producer."

There was Pandro Able's statement, brief, well edited by the studio's publicity head. There was the testimony of Lorentz's Filipino servant, who'd been away from the house with a well-established alibi of his own. He'd returned around midnight to find his employer on a blood-soaked couch in the library. The gun was there, one bullet fired; the writer's fingerprints had been on it. No reason, the Filipino had said; his boss had been happy, no troubles, nothing.

But there'd been others to testify. Important men to whom the police had been more attentive than to the houseboy. The head of Prince Pictures' story department, for instance. The thin ascetic face of Avery Doss stared up at Gail from a later clipping. Paul Lorentz, according to Doss, had been brooding, preoccupied, unlike himself. The studio gateman added to this. Mr. Lorentz had slammed his car out of the parking lot in a very erratic manner that last night of his life. He'd seemed nervous, upset.

It was very easy, very smooth. The close

knit little studio world banded together. Hush it up, the word had gone out.

The final bunch of clippings fell from Gail's hand, and with it a newspaper cut of Mark Fleming. "Friend of the Dead Man," it is said. Another cut. Cara Ramsey this time. "Star of the Dead Man's Last Picture."

There it was. All of it. For her to add up. Total. Subtract and divide. Could she do it? Who wanted her to do it? All at once she willed the telephone to ring. She'd fix it. She'd say, "Look here. Why are you calling me? What is this? Why should I do anything about Paul Lorentz? He's nothing more to me than a dark shadow pasted against the window of a long ago classroom. Do your own dirty work." Oh, she'd be very deliberate, very firm, very hard.

The telephone didn't ring. Twenty minutes went by. Gail gathered the clippings. Folded them carefully, pushed them across the desk, away from her.

A warning whistle and the door nudged open. She looked up, smiled. "Hi, Freddie." It was the second floor's special messenger. He handed her an envelope. Her name was typed on it. In the upper left hand corner it said: "From Mark Fleming's Office—Rush." The messenger winked and took off.

She opened the envelope. The steam radiator thumped loudly. It was doing its job properly. The office was warm. But Gail was cold, very cold. A second set of newspaper clippings slithered across her hand onto the desk. The brittle paper rattle the dry warning of a snake. Faces. Names. Headlines. She'd seen them all before! She sat quietly, feeling the chill fingering along her spine. She picked up the attached note. "Here's what you wanted," it said. "When you finish send back by special messenger. Ruth."

She was on her knees by the wastebasket, scooping out handfuls of paper. When she found what she was looking for, she sat back slowly. There was no possibility of mistake. She held it up, the plain inter-office envelope, the one that had come with the morning's mail. Anyone, anyone at all, could drop a communication into the box outside the mailroom and know that it would be delivered eventually to— She looked closely at her name on the envelope. Typed, of course. Gail Verrity, it said. Nothing else. This envelope containing the duplicate set of clippings had been placed in the box last night or early this morning; in time, at any rate, to be included in the regular morning delivery. The envelope fluttered to the floor. She watched it. The person who had sent these first clippings, the one's she'd read, was the voice on the telephone!

There were things to be done. One was supposed to be scientific. Fingerprints. That was it! On the anonymous envelope, on the clippings. She swallowed. Of course. There'd

be fingerprints all right. Her own! Anyone else's would be hopelessly smudged. Anyway, where does one go, who does one ask about such things? The type on the envelope. Who could she see about checking every typewriter?

She got up, straight and quick, like a steel tape released from its coil. The telephone call hadn't come from off the lot last night. The person wasn't an outsider. It was someone here in the studio. Perhaps even in this building. No outsider could possibly drop an envelope into the studio mail box on the first floor of the Administration Building. There were guards, fences, police officers, reception room clerks and automatic doors to keep the public out.

One thing she could do. She put the envelope into her purse, locked her office door, sped down the hall. In the first floor corridor she stopped outside the wire enclosure of the mailroom. She showed her envelope, asked her question. No one knew the answer. She wasn't surprised. As she'd thought, the envelope hadn't been a pick-up from an office that a messenger might remember; it had merely been one of many scooped out of the mail box for distribution. They even let her see the pick-up book. No "special" had been picked up for Office 311 that morning except from Mark Fleming's suite on the second floor. She'd received that already, hadn't she, Miss Verrity? Oh, yes, Miss Verrity nodded, she'd received the Mark Fleming pick-up.

She didn't go to the commissary for lunch. She wasn't hungry. The rain was coming down in spurts, jets, gushes, spouts, and finally in a vast gray tidal inundation. Three days of it, five days? She didn't know. She'd lost count. She was also losing the Palm Springs tan. All that fine, expensive, rosy flush was draining away under dull skies, electric lights and fear.

She was supposed to be working. Earning her salary. Not just sitting here at her desk. The only constructive tasks she'd done so far were to return Ruth Dexter's clippings to her by special messenger, to hide the others far back in her desk, and to sharpen nine pencils. Last night the changed pages for the revised final script had gone to Mark's office as per Red Gandy's instructions. So there was really nothing for her to do. She remembered what Ruth had said in the coffee shop about contract clauses. She decided she wanted to go back to New York, anyway, so what was the use of thinking up bright, original story lines to take Pandro Able's mind off her at option time?

Her gaze focused on the scripts neatly piled on her desk. They always started out thinly, with pages gradually added until they were fat enough for a blue cover with the big black word "Complete" stamped on it. That lasted until the white pages of the complete script became interspersed with pink

"changes." Then a new red cover was sent along. This time the cover shouted, "final." There we have it, everyone would sigh, settling back. But they didn't have it. A new team of writers would start making with more changes. The next thing the whole business came back re-mimeographed, with still another cover. Bright green, announcing, "revised final." That was usually the end for a while. The revised final script became the shooting script. It didn't much matter, anyhow, what several sets of writers had sweated over because a three-thousand-dollar-a-week director was supposed to have his own ideas.

III.

GAIL VERRITY leaned back in her swivel chair and pressed her fingers against her closed eyelids. Paul Lorentz's life was like that. They'd bound him up, finished him off, and marked him "final." Everyone had been happy and satisfied with that. But now someone else was coming along and making changes. Pretty soon it would be a different ending than the one so carefully planned. It was going into the revised final stage—and maybe it wasn't going to be pretty.

There was a knock on the door. Unexpected, startling.

Gail lowered her hands. "Kristin!" Her delight was genuine.

Kristin Anderson grinned. "Reaction like that makes me think I should hit Mr. Able for a raise."

"No. I—" Gail was on her feet. She knew in one unsteady moment how close she was to laughing or crying, perhaps both. Resolutely, she took a deep breath. She mustn't go *phiff* like a toy balloon. She must keep up there, bobbing along.

"I came in to tell you I'm sorry we missed our dinner date last night." Kristin swept a pile of papers off the couch and folded downward with a sigh. She stretched her legs in front of her and frowned. "Have to change my stockings. They're wet above my galoshes. Did you get out?" Her brows lifted. Gail shook her head. But she was hungry after all. It must be Kristin's matter-of-factness sweeping like a freshet into the tense atmosphere of 311. Kristin went on. "You're going to eat, for goodness' sake? Have a tray sent over."

"I couldn't ask a commissary boy to come out in this weather."

Kristin shrugged. "Mark Fleming isn't so squeamish. They're all eating off trays in his office, the whole staff. Extra sandwiches probably. Have your friend Ruthie Dexter send you up some, and a pot of tea, too. You look sick. What happened to your tan?"

"That was three weeks ago. It couldn't last forever."

"At those prices it should have." Kristin yawned. "It's close in here, kiddie. Why don't you open a window? Incidentally, has Holly been bothering you?"

"Holly? Bothering me?" Gail felt her lower lip tug downward nervously at the shift in the conversation. She turned away. "Why?"

"He has a cat in his office. I hate cats. Kirk Werczelski said he heard it yowling. Holly's on your other side so you must have heard it, too."

"No, I didn't. It wouldn't have mattered if I had." A little of her liking for Kristin chipped away. "What's the matter with cats?"

"Ugh. I don't know. They make me think of rats, I guess. The way they look, all sleek. The way they feel—"

"Really? I've never actually seen a rat face to face. I've certainly never felt one. I wouldn't know."

Kristin sat up, her laughter exploding. "Oh, Gail. Ouch!" She rose. "You need something to eat. Come on. I still have twenty minutes. I'll wade over to the com with you. We'll forget Mark Fleming's second-hand sandwiches."

Gail was ashamed. She shouldn't have come back at Kristin that way. The other girl was friendly. She ran in a straight line. You knew where you stood with her. Those level ice-blue eyes never pitched a curve.

They were in the commissary now. Kristin untied a scarf from her pale hair. It sprang back thick and strong, curled by the dampness. She ran her hand under the knot at the nape of her neck, lifting its heaviness from her shoulders.

Two men were watching them. Gail knew it and let her gaze sweep across the room. One had the pouncing look of a bright, busy-beaked, silver-eyed bird. That was Holly Holoby. Someone else was over there, too. Bowing and dipping, his fat fingers fluttering convulsively in a feminine wriggle, bald head glistening, dewlaps flapping. Pretty boy! Kirk Werczelski.

Gail gave him a toothy smile and kicked Kristin under the table. "Your friend. Trying to catch your attention." She nodded in Werczelski's direction.

Kristin's greeting was wide and elaborate. She spoke in an aside to Gail, "He's enchanting, the continental touch, even if he does remind one of a baby-faced Beowulf, or maybe I mean werewolf."

"Maybe you just mean plain wolf, and at his age, too!"

"He's only forty. He can't help the skinned effect over his eyebrows. Sometimes they look better without hair, especially the European ones, do you know that?"

"No. Do you? Are you trying to sell yourself something, Kris?"

Their banter stopped abruptly above the beef stew they ordered. Kristin was looking

straight ahead, a frown creasing a line between her brows. Holly Holoby was coming down the aisle of tables. He nodded to Gail, stopped in front of Kristin. His words were for her.

"Something bothering you?"

"No more than usual right now."

"Meaning me?"

Gail stared unbelieving from one face to the other. Kristin relieved the tension. She laughed. "I love you, Holly, you know that."

"You wouldn't put it in writing, would you? Anyway, skip it. This is about the kitten. I hear you don't like the idea."

"It wouldn't be my business, would it, even if I didn't?"

"Bright girl. You figured that out."

Kristin lit a cigarette. "But it could be Haig's business."

Gail pushed her chair back from the table. It was unreal. This tight-lipped pleasant-voiced, acidulous exchange between Kristin Anderson and Holly. It wasn't grown-up bitterness. It sounded like the bad-tempered bickering of children. Kristin threatening Holly Holoby with Haig, the studio manager, and all over a kitten. It was laughable, wasn't it? But, of course, it wasn't, because it dredged deeper than that. It was something more than a kitten. She spoke quickly. "Holly, I'll be glad to take the cat home for a little while. I don't know how he'll do with the Witch, but I'll manage."

Holly didn't look at her, his eyes still held Kristin's. "Thanks. It won't be necessary. I'll take him to my place." Then he was gone.

Gail leaned back. "Whew! Kristin, what was that about?"

"Nothing." Kristin raised a coffee cup to her lips, jabbed out her cigarette in a saucer. It was the first time Gail had seen her do anything less than fastidious. "We kid around, that's all."

"Was that kidding around?"

"Of course. What else could it be? Let's go."

There was a message to see Mark Fleming when she got back to her office. Gail frowned. She felt small and rain-speckled. All she had time to do now was straighten the seams of her nylons, and whisk off the sloping shoulders of her suit. Going down the hall, she let her heels clatter in the dome-ceilinged corridor; the noise gave her courage.

There were so many people around Mark at first. Then, surprisingly, there was none. They all vanished—Ruth, Red Gandy, Eloise, the script girl, a couple of writers. They oozed out quickly and she was there alone, across the big desk from Mark. There they were. Mark. Herself. Boxed by expensive sound-proofed walls into a square of

silence. Their eyes made a bridge for a moment and across it they almost met. Almost.

Mark Fleming smiled. How much bigger and blacker can a pair of eyes get, he thought. Gail Verrity was sitting now on a red leather chair, her feet not quite touching the floor. He saw the small head carrying its weight of high-coiled braids. Tiny and determined, she was. And something on her mind. "What is it, Gail?"

But it was impossible to put into words after all. The phone call last night, the unknown voice. This morning the envelopes of identical clippings: one from Mark's secretary—she couldn't expose Ruth's confidence—the other from whom?

"You sent for me?" She spoke lamely.

He was disappointed. He'd wanted something more. She knew that by the way he turned away toward the window, and jiggled the cord of the heavy curtains. But what could she tell him when there were things he wouldn't tell her. The telephone now at her apartment last night. She'd heard the ringing. Well, then, who and what was it? Why hadn't he told her the truth about it?

"I liked being at your apartment last night, little Gail. Did you mind my showing up that way?"

"No. Not exactly. How could I? Except that you took me by surprise."

Mark Fleming threw his long body into the swivel chair behind the desk. With a nervous gesture, he tugged at the thick strand of hair above his forehead. "It was business, of course. I don't want you to think I'd take advantage— Oh, hell! Business!"

Gail looked up. "We got that last sequence straightened out. From the dissolve to the end. You don't want to go over it again, do you? I thought, from where the girl finds out about the wife—"

"No, no, it's all right," he interrupted her. He was sorting the papers on his desk rapidly, his eyes lowered. "Will you have dinner with me tonight, dancing? The Mocambo, if you'd like."

If I'd like? If I'd like? To go with Mark to that candy-striped, bird-filled, perfume-scented darkness! Forget this other thing, forget the death shadow of a man I didn't know. Suspicions—

"I—"

The secretary's buzzer hissed simultaneously with the inward thrust of the office door. A woman stood in the opening, head tilted, a brilliant smile turned on with the full effect of an Otto K. Oleson flood-lighting system. The illumination blinkered just a shade as it caught Gail Verrity in its beam.

"Cara. Hello. You know Miss Verrity, one of our writers."

"Miss Charity? How do you do. I hate to interrupt, darling"—the tilted blue gaze

was on Mark with the quick pendulum swing of a steel wrecking ball making contact with a recalcitrant skyscraper—"but a man from Publicity came on the set with a yarn about my doing a story written by someone called Walter Polini. He said the studio just bought it for me. Well, what's it about, and whoever heard of Walter Polini?"

"A few of us have, Cara. This book of his is strong and important and exciting." Mark paused. Gail knew he winced under his own words, but these were the popular-at-the-moment adjectives Cara Ramsey would understand.

Cara pursed her lips. "Is it on the best seller list?"

"No. Polini's the kind who climbs slowly. It'll be all right, really, Cara. Don't worry. It's terrific, vital. We were lucky to get in on the ground-floor ahead of the others."

"You mean no other studio even bid on it? Listen, what kind of stories are they giving me now? What about Lennie York? Will he do the screen play on it? Lennie gets thirty-five hundred a week. If Lennie, or someone in his bracket, does the adaptation I might consider it. I'll speak to Pandro." Cara turned. "I don't know what you do, Miss Uh . . . uh, but stay out of this business. It's fight, fight, every foot of the way. Of course, sometimes the infighting isn't so bad. Know what I mean?" Her smile pressed Mark's hand. "I'm going to talk to Pan. Maybe he'll call a conference on this tonight. I want it taken care of right away. Here—" She reached over to the inter-communication system on Mark's desk and knicked the buzzer marked P. Able.

"Wait a minute, Cara, I—"

"Sssh. You love your work. You didn't mind late hours once." Cara Ramsey's eyes were suddenly shrewd. "You didn't mind what you did on the way up, remember, Mark?"

The air was still in the office. Nothing moved. Gail pressed backward in her chair. The two figures stood before her. Mark, his face grim, older-looking than his thirty-four years. Cara, yellow-haired, beautiful, faintly tired under the pale-brown make-up. They were like a modern frieze, something ornamented and unexplained. Two people who knew each other very, very well.

P. Able's voice barked into the silence of the room. "Yep, Mark?"

"It's me, dear, Cara. I think we should talk about this Walter Polini thing tonight. I'd much rather do that new serial running in what's-its-name magazine by that man . . . you know . . . who won the Pulitzer Prize. He lives on a Middlewest farm or something."

"He lives on something is right," Pandro Able grunted. "He lives on the three hundred thousand we paid him last year for that dud-novel of his. All right, Cara, we'll

talk. O.K. with you, Mark? You there? You hear me? Eight o'clock in my office."

The communication system died sharply. Cara was in the doorway, legs pressed gracefully close together. She poised there for a moment. "Get on with what you were doing."

The door closed. Mark looked at Gail. Gail leaned forward. "Has she always been so intense about her stories? Paul Lorentz used to be her writer, didn't he?" It was out just like that, easily, quickly.

"Yes. He was. Gail, our date's off but I've got to meet you for dinner. It will have to be some place close so I can get back here by eight. Tilly's? No." She watched the thoughts behind the gray eyes. "No chance to talk. Whole studio gang goes there. Where else is there down around the lot?" He wasn't asking her, but she answered and was surprised at herself again.

"I know a place." She gave him the address. He'd never heard of it.

"I'll be there," he said.

IV.

GAIL arrived first at Lotus Heaven. It was just as she'd remembered. The blonde woman at the door gave her a close look. She rose from her station behind the cash register. "You were here last night?"

"Yes." Almost the woman didn't seem to like her coming back.

"You enjoyed the music?" the woman continued. She was walking with her to the same curtained alcove.

"Why, yes." Gail glanced toward the raised platform. The Chinese girl was playing alone. The man, like a beautiful immobile carving, was watching Gail. A light shining dimly from somewhere among the nets and shells caught his slanting eyes. They glittered blackly in her direction.

"I'll take your order," the woman said. Gail looked at her more attentively. She was in her late thirties, with a face that once had been pretty, but now was sharpened to two thin arcs of black pencilled eyebrows and a too heavy cut of red mouth.

"Someone is meeting me here. I'll wait." Gail's breath came thickly. Something in the woman's stare, absent yet intent, set up an alarm clock clamoring of nerves. She felt under her handbag for the envelope with the clippings. She'd brought them along for safekeeping. They were there. The woman turned abruptly and left the table. Gail wished now that she had learned to smoke. This was the time to relax behind the impersonality of a cigarette. For the man had left the dais and was coming toward her. He stood above her and she saw that he was extraordinarily handsome.

"My name is Philip Chiang. I own Lotus Heaven. I welcome you. There is something you want to hear, something special?"

Gail wanted to laugh. The nightmare was coming back. The scene had shifted. It was the night before. Only the rain was not battering outside and Holly Holoby was not at the bar. Or was he? She craned to see. No one was there. And she was sorry, because the Chinese continued to regard her gravely. She knew it all now, and it was cheap, improbable. The blonde was Chiang's wife. She didn't like unescorted young women who came to Lotus Heaven two nights in succession, who seemed to be interested in the music, music they couldn't possibly understand. Was it the music? Her eyes met the man's. It was almost time for Mark to come.

"I don't care," she muttered. "Anything. It's very nice—anything you play." Just go away. Just go away quickly.

"I will play. I will pick something out. Something for you."

He knew she didn't care. He knew she wasn't flirting. He was doing it for some uncanny purpose of his own. He picked up a lute, motioned his dark-haired partner away, and sat alone on the stand. The music began. He was laughing at her, of course, through that throbbing tinkle of sound. It was the East Wind dancing around a porcelain tower till all the bells jingled. It was the East Wind sighing in the trees, desirous. It was faintly indecent. She hated it. What would it do, to the blonde woman glaring at her from the doorway?

A moment later she wasn't surprised to see the alcove curtain half drawn, held there by stiff, curled fingers. She watched a diamond flash on the woman's hand while the voice came down to her. "You look innocent enough. But I know what you're after. Stay away from him." The hand let the curtain go. It fell closed behind them both.

Gail started up. This was too much. She couldn't be hidden away from the bar and the little tables, alone with this woman. The diamond on the hand seemed to be coming nearer. Slowly. In reality it moved quickly. She put her own hand to her stinging cheek. "No," she said, and stared at the woman.

"Get back to your desk!"

The plucking strings had stopped a second earlier, Gail knew then. The man stood there. The woman turned away, her shoulders trembling, her face scarlet.

Gail stood up. "Your wife struck me."

"I am deeply sorry. It was unprovoked."

"Of course it was. *You* know that."

"Tonight I will deal with her."

Gail paused, her shaking fingers stopped their numb gathering in of her purse and the clippings which sprawled from their envelope. "Is that why you let this thing happen? So you could 'deal' with your wife in a way you might enjoy?"

"Perhaps." The expressionless face suddenly lightened. "You are wise for so young a lady. The punishment must fit the offense."

"And if there's no occasion for punishment, you make one?"

Philip Chiang didn't answer. He didn't need to. He bowed imperturbably. Gail edged by him. He was bending now, picking something up, a short furl of newsprint. Gail reached forward. Already the black eyes were studying the picture. He handed it back to her. "A friend of yours?" Gail didn't answer. "A friend of many young women, I should say. Too bad."

"You knew him?" It was Paul Lorentz's picture.

It was more than chance that had drawn her to this obscure café the night before. There was a connection, some way. The Chinese shrugged. "He came here. He met a lovely lady here. Very fair."

If it were Cara he would know, wouldn't he? Everyone knew Cara Ramsey. "Who was it?" Her own urgency was tell-tale.

The man's expression blanked. He stepped aside. "I am sorry for the rudeness you met with tonight." He was gone.

Chiang's wife was not at the register. Gail went blindly through the swinging shell curtains to come face to face with Mark Fleming.

"I'm late," he said. "What's the matter? Isn't it all right, this place?"

"I've changed my mind, Mark. I'm going home. I can't have dinner with you tonight."

"Just because I'm late?"

"No." They were walking toward her car. "You know I'm not like that, It's something else."

"Look. If I can get away from Able early enough, let me come by your apartment. I have to talk to you."

Gail paused under the street light. "And I have to talk to you—about Paul Lorentz."

She didn't know what she expected. She'd mentioned Lorentz's name earlier to Mark in connection with Cara Ramsey and his expression had not changed. Now he stopped suddenly and held her arms hard; his face lowered down at her as he stood there, his grasp half lifting her from the pavement. She felt the woeful scrape of her heels along the damp sidewalk and, remembering the too-recent indignity of Philip Chiang's wife's hand against her cheek, she burst into tears.

He was shaking her then gently, "Gail, my dearest." He was putting her into his car, wiping her eyes, pulling her coat around her. "I'll have the man at the parking lot pick up your car here. We'll go back to the studio and have some food sent to the office. We'll make time for it and for our talk."

But there was no time. It was nearly eight o'clock and you don't keep Pandro Able waiting. Over her protests, he ordered a tray from the commissary for her. He stood in the doorway, his gaze worried and

intent. "As soon as you finish, go downstairs. I've told the boy to have a cab for you. I'll end this Polini thing as quickly as I can and I'll see you at your apartment." He reflected wryly, "I'll break it up as soon as Pandro will let me, that is." His grin was quick and searching. He meant its warmth to reach out and touch her. It did. And it held as his footsteps wore out of earshot down the hall.

She pushed the tray aside. The office was quiet and only dimly lighted by the desk lamp. Its boxiness was comforting again, for the first time since the phone calls of the afternoon before. A joke, she thought dreamily, a joke. That's all it is. Mark will make it right. Mark will make everything right. He called me "dearest." I should have told him before. There's nothing sinister. Paul Lorentz wasn't murdered and I was crazy to think it. It was never any business of mine. I just had to know about Mark, the truth about Mark.

She sat up slowly. Why?—the nagging intrusion came. Why the truth about Mark? Because if there were any dark involvement it would surely touch Mark. Mark, Cara Ramsey and Pandro Able. And who else connected with them?

She was staring at the empty coffee cup. Her subconscious caught the sound first, delicately balancing it against the preceding silence and then making its decision. Gail's fingers flattened against the desk edge. Her eyes, the pupils blackening and distending, held the rim of the cup. With the slow frozen precision of a listening bird, she raised her head. There it was again, the soft swish and cut of movement. It was outside, far away but coming closer. She swallowed. A watchman on his rounds, of course, ready to put his key in the time lock. She rose, advanced to the door bolt.

"Crazy," she thought, "Crazy. I'm all right. Remember Mark. Remember he'll make everything all right."

It was there, she knew, just outside the door. It had come swiftly, spongily, down the hall. Her legs were shaking, and her hands. For there was darkness in the outer hall and she was standing outlined in the light from her desk lamp, outlined against the frosted upper part of the door frame.

Like silk the door blew inward, slowly; the closed Venetian blinds behind her sighed and fluttered their bone-white length gently against the window pane.

"Hello-a?" the voice said. "Do I disturb you?"

"Mr. Able!"

Non-existent eyebrows rose above bland blue eyes. Gail followed the upward spasm of the forehead's crease. It seemed incapable of stopping until it met the thinning hairline. Then the ripple of loose skin ceased its movement abruptly. That was the

end of surprise. Next came the Important Man. The little mouth pursed forward, wrinkled and pink fleshed. The blue eyes narrowed into a mesh of shrewd lines. "You are working late, Miss—"

"Gail Verrity."

"Oh, yes. Mark Fleming spoke about you. You did some good work on the changes for the 'Troubadear Trail.' Mark is tied up with the writing in my office. Which is Holoby's office?"

"312."

"Ah, right next door to you?"

"Yes." She saw the slip of paper in the well-manicured hand. Without looking down, Pandro Able's white, plump fingers re-created the sheet against any prying gaze. Gail flushed.

She spoke hastily. "Could I do anything, Mr. Able?" For all the world like a flunky! But that was how Pandro Able affected one. You bowed, pulled your forelock and did his bidding. Even Mark. Yes, even Mark had qualified his plan to meet her, dependent on Pandro Able's early dismissal of the conference. A conference the Important Man wasn't attending, or, at least, one he found easy enough to walk in and out of at will.

"No. Thank you. You'd better run along, hadn't you? It's late. No overtime now." He shook a finger at her, but he wasn't amused. Gail turned away. She saw the flash of a thin gold chain, heard the click of a pass key. Inside her own office once more, she stood silently, and as she pressed against the door she felt her heartbeat pound all over her body, in her throat, in her breast, in her stomach and in her knees.

The taxi was in front as Mark had promised. Gail got into it and stared back at the quiet bulk of the big building she was leaving. There were lights here and there, a row of them in the executives' wing where Pandro Able's suite was. Several cars stood in the parking lot, her own among them. Well, why didn't she drive it home? She knew the answer. It was because Mark had told her to do this, to take this cab, and she wanted to feel cared for, she wanted to feel she was following plans he'd made for her.

Twenty minutes later they were in Hollywood. The rain had stopped here, too. As she ran across the apartment courtyard, the young palm tree at her entrance showered down some of its waiting burden of raindrops, and a wet sleek streak landed at her feet. Gail jumped aside, then scooped up the tight, well muscled body. It relaxed in her arms and she lugged fourteen pounds of brawn up two flights of stairs. As soon as they reached the top, the Witch made a spraddling leap to the floor, padded across the landing, and turned to greet her at the doorstep.

"Oh, I get it. You've been waiting here all the time. Is that it?"

The Witch rolled a yellow eye. "Food, woman! Cut the comics!"

"Your dialogue's ragged," Gail told him, "but I love you anyway. I'm renewing your contract."

There was something so blessedly normal about the kitchen. The white stove with all its little gadgets lighting up like a pin ball machine. The frigidaire with its faint comfortable snore. The blue-and-white curtains. She stood, one hand against the sink, watching the Witch tie into his dinner. He was hungry, but he ate like a gentleman. She bent down and patted his black back. He went on eating, but the plume of his tail curved in acknowledgment. Gail felt all right now. Pandro Able had frightened her an hour earlier, but why shouldn't he use a pass key to leave a note in Holly Holoby's office. After all, he ran the studio, didn't he? And Mark would be here soon.

She turned the water on in the sink then, very loud. That didn't help, so she started to swing the kitchen door shut. But what was the use. The long peal of the telephone bell reached out again and again. Besides, it might be Mark calling her. It didn't have to be the other!

It was, though. She'd known it would be. That was why she'd steadied herself against the wall before lifting the receiver. That was why on her way across the living room she'd let her footsteps drag, hoping the insistent prodding of the bell would end. Now, as she said, "Hello," in a coarse rasp so unlike her own voice, she steeled herself to the expected whisper; and it came, crazily. "You like that little place, don't you, the place with the music? Ask the Chinaman then, who was with Paul Lorentz those last few times he was there. No one ever asked the Chinaman before. Lorentz's companion was clever. Clever enough to only shoot once. More than once would have given it away."

The voice was gone. The line was dead.

She was going to do now what she should have done in the beginning. She found the sheriff's office number in the telephone book. She wrote it down. Next she dialed the Maydale Apartments and asked to speak to Kristin Anderson.

"Kristin," she said in a flat voice, "I wasn't sure you'd be home."

"You sound glad I am, honey. P. Able didn't need me. They have a regular conference secretary taking notes tonight. What's on your alleged mind? If I'm fresh, pardon me all to you know where. I've just had two martinis in rapid suction." There was a pause. "I'm not being very funny, am I?" Then, "What's the matter, Gail?"

Gail told it. She told it from the beginning and when she'd finished, there was

silence. Finally, Kristin was speaking, rapidly and clearly. "Listen to me. Do just what I tell you. Don't call the police. Don't call anyone. Don't talk to anyone. Don't answer the phone, Gail. . . . Gail, are you there?" A faint affirmative came over the wire. "I'll be at your apartment in ten minutes. We'll decide what to do. . . . What? Yes, yes. But call the sheriff's office after I get there. I want to be with you, Gail, when you do. Keep the upper lip rigid. I'm on my horse!"

It wasn't much longer than ten minutes before the knocking began on the heavy door. Gail moved toward it slowly. Kristin's voice came from the other side. "It's all right. It's Kristin."

Gail swung the door open. Kristin's face was pale, her yellow hair streaked back, her eyes almost shockingly blue in her wide-boned face. She stared at Gail. "You've been carrying this thing around with you for two days? You didn't tell anyone, anyone at all? Why, Gail? It might have been dangerous."

"Isn't it now?"

"No. Of course not now. We'll get the police. You tell them everything you've told me." Kristin stopped. She frowned.

Gail sighed. "I know what you're thinking. I'm surprised you don't say it to me. It all sounds so confused and crazy. Maybe it is someone's bad joke."

"Do you think so?"

"No. You see, Paul Lorentz was meeting a woman at Lotus Heaven at the last. Chiang, the owner, inferred as much. All anyone has to do is go back and make him tell who the woman was."

"Why do you think it was a woman who shot Lorentz? What kind of woman would it be who could put the gun in his hand afterward? It was found in his hand, you know."

"A passionate woman. A strong woman who was completely sure of herself. She must have loved Paul Lorentz very much once, and suddenly she hated him just as intensely as she'd loved."

"Little Gail. Where did you learn all this? Out of books?"

Gail moved her head tiredly. "Kristin, it happens that way. And do you know the mistake this woman did make? She shot only once. If she'd let herself go, if she'd done what a jealous, angry woman would instinctively do, she'd have emptied the gun chamber into him. The voice on the telephone said as much. It said 'Lorentz's companion was clever. Clever enough to shoot only once.'"

"Why should anyone want to kill Paul?" Kristin's voice was insistent, pulling Gail back to the sweet, sane shore of reason. "He was an attractive guy, very charming. Women could love him and hate him, yes, but as for killing him, well—"

"I don't know. But that's what happened."

"You believe this voice on the phone is a buddy of Paul Lorentz's who thinks he knows something and wants to see justice done, shall we say?"

"It sounds bad and corny, Kristin. All right, I agree with you. Still it's there, it happened. And I'm going to Lotus Heaven again. If I can dig out of Chiang who Lorentz squired there the last few times, I'll also be able to find out who's been calling me. It must be someone who frequents the place, too."

"This time you will go down there with the police, Gail. Don't argue with me. You're shaking, you're a wreck. Where's the sheriff's office, near the county line on Fairfax?" Gail nodded. "I'm going to see them. I'll tell them everything and they can take care of it. You say Mark Fleming is coming here? Good, he can hold your hand. I'll be back and let you know what happened. Ouch! That damn cat!" Kristin stumbled. The Witch flicked his tail angrily and puffed his whiskers out.

Gail watched Kristin go, saw the apartment door close. She didn't feel better, she felt worse. Thirty minutes later she heard footsteps on the landing. It was Mark. His face was tired, his jawline jagged and startling Gail thought numbly, "What's the matter with everyone tonight? Kristin, and now Mark, look as though they've both seen ghosts."

Mark Fleming gazed down at Gail Verity. He saw the dark curls cresting her head, the too-large black eyes, the pale, small face. He was crazy about this one. He thought about the man he'd found skulking outside her office door at the studio, and he caught his breath and sat down hard.

"Mark! What's the matter?" Gail's fingers were holding tight to the tweed of his coat sleeve. "What is it?"

"I went by your office just to make sure you'd left. Someone was in the corridor. He wasn't quite himself. I was surprised, I guess, at his being there. I handled him a bit roughly and he told me something funny."

"You don't mean Pandro Able? He was there. I saw him. He was leaving something for Holly Holoby."

"This?" Mark held up a crumpled piece of paper with the figures 239 on it.

"Yes." Gail touched it tentatively. "At least, I think this is the same. But what does it mean?"

"Listen. The man in the corridor was Holly and he told me that was why he'd come back to the office, just for this. I didn't believe him so I brought it along. If you say Pandro did leave it, it's O.K.

It's just what Holly owes him at gin rummy for their last session."

"Oh."

"But there were other things he said, Gail, did you have a phone call here tonight?"

"Yes."

"You had one the other night, too, when I was here and you passed out. You did hear the phone ringing then, all right. I didn't want to say anything. I answered it and the message sounded like a nut. I thought it was a mistake, or a joke. Gail, did you know Holoby traveled in vaudeville years ago, sort of third-rate ventriloquist?"

Holly! So it was Holly who had called her. Gail turned and walked unsteadily across the room to the window. She pushed the curtain aside and stared out into the blackness of the court. Holly hated someone. She thought back slowly and carefully. Holly frequented Lotus Heaven, and he hated Kristin Anderson. She spun about. She talked quickly in a breathless staccato. It was a very simple explanation, wasn't it? Then why was her heart pounding so? Mark stared at her. "He's out of his mind, of course," she finished weakly. "He's always been odd, you know that, but now, well, Kris had been needling him, I suppose, and he wanted to get back at her, so he made up this fantastic—"

Mark got up suddenly. "I hope so," he said. "I hope you're right."

"You don't think I am?"

He didn't reply. Gail went to the phone.

"No. Wait—"

She turned in surprise.

"There's no use calling the police. That's what you were going to do, isn't it?" He went on, "I don't think anyone has spoken to them tonight about this. I don't think they'd know what you were talking about."

"I told you, Mark, Kristin went to the sheriff's office after leaving here. She said she was going."

Mark shook his head. "I don't think she went near the police."

The trembling began then far down inside Gail. She didn't want to cry so she let anger explode instead. "Why do you say that?"

"This is going to be horrible for you to face, I can understand that, little Gail. But it ties in too well with all the strangeness of Paul's death. I just didn't know who—"

"No! It's not true, Mark!"

They were driving back through the night toward the studio. They were going fast along Culver Boulevard, turning off into an alley. They were too late, of course. An ambulance and a police car were parked in front of Lotus Heaven. The shell curtains were shredded and stripped back to make room for a stretcher being carried in. Gail

felt the shells crunch underfoot as she and Mark went toward the entrance. The policeman at the door waved them away, but when they caught sight of Holly, stooped against the bar, his hands pushing against his closed eyes, the policeman said, "Do you know him?" They said, "Yes," and he let them go through.

Philip Chiang was there, too, his fine black hair streaked across his sweat-shiny forehead. Amazingly, the glint of steel cuffed the hands in front of him.

The detective in charge walked up to them. "It's Mr. Fleming from the studio, isn't it?" Mark nodded. The man gestured toward Gail. "She shouldn't be here, Mr. Fleming."

Gail moved away quickly. She hesitated in front of Holly. He looked up at her and started to speak, his eyes more eloquent than his lips. "I came to stop it. I was too late. I'd seen her here with Lorentz. No one else knew about them. I did. Lorentz was getting tired of the affair. After all, she was just Able's secretary, just another good-looking blonde. But she wasn't one to let a man step away that easily, not Kristin."

Gail was crying. She couldn't help it. Two white-smocked men from the ambulance were carrying a covered stretcher from the rear of the restaurant.

Holly went on, his face haggard, "With Chiang it was self-defense. They'll know that. His wife can tell them. I can tell them." Gail didn't hear the rest of what he was saying because Mark came up. He put his arm around her. He led her outside.

"In the morning," he said, "will be time enough to talk to the men from the department. They'll want to hear what you have to say. Don't cry, Gail. Don't feel sorry for her. It would have been Holly next, after she took care of Chiang. She had a gun, but Chiang used his knife first, to defend

himself. The ironic part for Kristin is that the Chinese probably never would have mentioned her association with Lorentz, even if he had put the puzzle together."

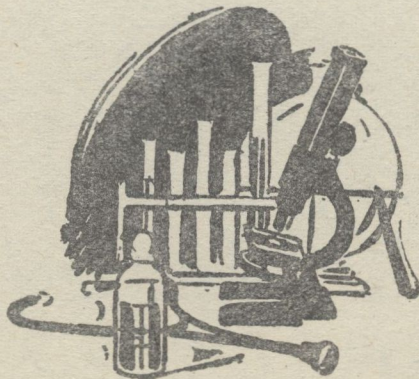
Gail looked out of the car window. "It was Holly who guessed the truth and because Kristin had taken a dislike to him, because he was afraid of losing his soft touch with Pandro Able, he wanted her found out."

"That's it. Holly wasn't interested in right or wrong, in a murderer being punished. He simply wanted Kristin out of the way. You were there, young and impressionable, so he tried his scheme out on you. He started the ball rolling with his phone calls, sending you those clippings. He thought if he could scare you enough, you'd go babbling to everyone. If it hadn't worked, he'd have tried something else; anything to get people stirred up about the Lorentz case again. Being part of a make-believe industry, and a little touched himself, he took the long way around to do it."

They were at Gail's apartment door. The key turned in the lock. He stood outside, looking down at her. "Will you be all right tonight, alone? You won't think too much about this?"

Gail's lips tightened, her head shook resolutely. Abruptly, Mark bent down. He picked up the Witch who'd been peering blackly at him from the open crack in the door. "Take good care of your mistress," he said. "I love her!"

The Witch didn't like what happened next, didn't like it at all. He was being muffled now between a tweed chest and his mistress's soft front. He managed to cock a yellow eye upward. Oh, well, he guessed he could stand having the breath squeezed out of him a while longer because his Gail seemed to be enjoying what was going on. Hm-m-m, it was in a good cause, he could see that.





BY

PAUL TWITCHELL

The new order

Ned Slaughters had been in the newspaper racket too long to kow-tow to the new blood coming into the field. However, he had one job to do before he quit.

THE staircase to the second floor news room wound upward in a gloomy, crooked vacuum. Only a meager light on the landing above lighted the dingy, yellow walls, but Ned Slaughters knew by heart every stain on the rickety stairs, every notch on the loose, shaky rail. He had climbed these stairs for thirty-five years.

It was a usual thing for him to make the landing in a fast, steady clip. But tonight he climbed slowly, caressing the fly-specked rail with the touch of a man who had suddenly become sentimental about this big, gloomy barn with its dizzy routine and clamoring presses. Tonight, he realized that only a few more days stood between his retirement as editor of this old rag.

At the head of the stairs, he stopped and wiped the sweat of the spring heat from his gaunt face. From the open door, on his right, came the staccato thumping of a typewriter as Jack Bronson, young publisher, dictated the editorial.

Ned turned to the door and saw that Bronson, a big man under thirty, with crystal blue eyes and wearing a frayed sports jacket, was alone with his secretary. Times had changed since Ned had started work here as copy boy. Now he was editor of the finest newspaper in this part of the

state. But old Mike was dead, and Ned was alone and too tired to fight the whelp to whom Mike had left his paper.

Jack Bronson stopped dictating abruptly and leaned over his secretary. But she saw Ned, on the threshold, and pulled back.

Bronson turned quickly. "Howdy, Ned," he said casually. "I was thinking about you. This is sort of a celebration for you, thirty-five years with the *Herald*. Let's have a drink."

Thirty-five years of deadlines and paste pots whirled past Ned's eyes as he stepped into the richly furnished office. Time moved slowly since fate had snatched old Mike out of the bloom of life and left Ned to carry on the *Herald's* editorial policy.

"Thirty-five years is a long time in this game, Jack," he said; then, "I overheard your dictation—"

Bronson took the copy from the girl. "Yes, sure. This editorial ought to boost our circulation, Ned."

Old Mike's son was always doing something crazy to make money so he could have more to gamble with. This looked like the craziest stunt yet. Jack never had had any sense of editorial responsibility. Ned's voice was bland. "I don't see how the *Herald* can back Janakos as candidate

for alderman in the election. He's the biggest gambler in town. And if it's ever proven he is peddling reefers we'll have to print the story."

Bronson picked up a glass letter knife from his cluttered desk. The knife's handle was shaped like a coiled snake. Its blade had a razor-like edge. "Let Bess Howard do a story on Janakos. And if she comes back with anything dirty, I'll give you a hundred bucks and kill the editorial."

Ned watched the light twinkling along the knife's keen blade. As a kid, he had known a country superstition about a glass snake which disjointed itself upon striking a victim. Something creepy about snakes that gave him a queer feeling even to look at a glass one.

"Not Bess," he said, glancing at Laura Howard. The girl's back had become stiff and square. "If she got into Janakos' club, she'd come back drunk."

A flush crawled out of Bronson's collar. His blue eyes hardened. "I'm still running this paper, Ned," he snapped. "And I'm ordering you to print this editorial in the morning run."

"Not me, Jack." Ned spoke softly. "Thirty-five years in this business is enough. I'll turn the desk over to Collins and collect my pay."

An overhead light spread its murky glow over the cluttered news room, and vapid odors of paste pots and ink puckered the vials of fury charging through Ned's veins. Bess Howard, cigarette dangling from thin lips, pecked away at her copy. She was older and thinner than her sister Laura, and she had a flat, pasty face and stringy blonde hair.

Ned was jerking his personal junk out of his desk drawers when her coarse voice reached across to him. "I don't blame you for quitting. This is a lousy outfit to work for."

"I'd be retiring in July, anyway." He cracked the words like a bull whip snapping, and jerked up his head. His glance went past her to the open door into the publisher's office where Bronson stood, both arms around his secretary.

Bess Howard wheeled, then swung back, her face lighted with a savage expression. "I don't get it," she snapped. "Why do all men go for my kid sister?"

"I wouldn't know either," Ned said coldly, swiveling in his chair and staring out at the dark street. Old Mike would haunt him for this act of disloyalty when the *Herald* was going through its greatest crisis.

The rotary presses roared through the room as the composing room doors swung open. Collins, the night editor, came in with a handful of proofs.

He stopped beside Ned. "Just heard the bad news about you quitting, Ned. I don't like the idea of the paper trying to white-wash Janakos, either."

"I had only one job to do before leaving," Ned said, loading his pipe. "And that was to prove those dope addicts the police have been picking up bought their reefers from some of Janakos' gang."

"Say! Here's another arrest. The cops found another kid smoking a goof stick." Collins thrust a galley sheet at him. Something queer about Jack Bronson wanting to back Janakos in politics.

The night editor left and Laura Howard came out of her office and crossed the floor to Ned's desk. When she spoke her voice had a husky, vibrant urgency.

"I'd like to have a talk with you privately, Ned. You mind coming to my hotel room after eleven?"

Ned leaned back in his chair, surveying her curiously. "What do you want to tell me, Laura?"

"I can't talk here," she murmured, her black eyes glancing nervously about the room. "It concerns Janakos and that editorial."

"I'll be there at eleven," Ned said softly.

Without a word, Laura Howard turned and walked back, slender hips swaying. She passed her sister's desk, dark head lifted proudly, defiant.

Bess slammed at the keys with a half-dozen thumps, then stopped abruptly and jerked open a red leather purse. Taking out a hand-rolled cigarette, she pushed it between tight lips and lighted it. Ned grinned sourly, and went back to his job.

In the bottom drawer he found a glass snake letter knife. Jack Bronson had given it to him several days before. Thrusting it into his coat pocket, he gathered his things and rose to leave.

He was moving reluctantly toward the door, a guilty feeling pushing through his brain, as if old Mike were there cursing him for desertion, when Bess Howard said something. He turned and looked down. Her eyes were ominous veils of dark hatred. She spoke in a harsh whisper. "You're a damn fool, Ned Slaughters! A damn fool!"

Inside his small, well-furnished apartment, Ned peeled off his clothes and hopped under a hot shower. Afterward, he stretched out on a couch and began to dope out answers to harrying questions. But he was tired, so tired the moment his eyes closed he was asleep. When he opened them it was almost eleven o'clock. Jumping up, he got into some clothes and hurriedly left the house.

He was at the corner of Sixth and Broadway, opposite the hotel, when he remembered the glass letter knife in his coat

pocket. Pulling it out, he stopped under a street lamp and inspected the sharp blade. Why had Jack Bronson given him such a thing? Then the sudden urge to be rid of it caused him to drop it down a gutter drain. It would be in the river within five minutes.

The dimly lighted lobby was empty except for a lone figure huddled in a corner chair, her face buried in hands. But his customary habit of close observance failed this time. Instead, he glanced at the clock over the news-stand. The time was a quarter past eleven.

"Third floor," the elevator boy announced, looking at Ned. He clanged the door open, clanged it shut again. Ned was left standing in the dim passageway. Straight ahead, a third of the length of the corridor, the door was bleak and ghostly. It was ajar when he knocked. The elevator whined up the shaft and ground to a stop somewhere above. It was passing the third floor, going down, when he rapped again. This time when his knock went unanswered, he reached out and gently pushed open the door.

A slight wind was tugging at the curtains of an open window. Beyond the thin splash of light from a table lamp was a maple bed. Across it, lying face down, was Laura Howard, arms flung out. The light twinkled on the shattered handle of a glass snake letter knife thrust into her back.

Heart-sickening nausea choked him, but he fought it down. Closing the door quickly, he tiptoed around the bed, scrutinizing every detail. Whoever had driven the knife into her back had entered the room as an intimate friend, for her face showed little agony and her clothes were not mussed. It had taken the strength of a man to have driven the murder weapon that deeply.

Ned went to the bureau and rummaged through the drawers. Nothing was there. But in the bathroom he found a cigarette butt under the wash basin. This was wrapped carefully in his handkerchief. Instead of calling on Jack Bronson first, he would go to see Janakos. The gambler might hold some of the essential parts of this puzzle.

He was closing the door when the elevator stopped at the third floor and a bell-boy came down the corridor with a package. Ned stepped behind the nearest passage corner just in time, for the boy came up to the dead girl's door and rapped sharply. After a few moments he called, then twisted the door knob.

Ned backed down the hall toward the fire exit.

At the street corner, he hailed a cab and directed the driver to Janakos' night club. As the cab rolled down Broadway, he was too busy examining his own precarious

position to notice the buildings etched boldly against the sky. Bess Howard had overheard him accept the invitation and had seen him pocket that letter knife. The elevator boy could testify that he had got off at the third floor.

The police wouldn't be satisfied with his explanation about the disposal of his glass letter knife. A hunch was taking him to Janakos', a desperate, threadbare hunch.

Janakos' night club occupied a gloomy building on the mud levee overlooking the river. Ned told the driver to wait and went inside where a dimly lighted floor was crowded with dancers. He asked the bartender for the gambler and was directed down a dark corridor to a metal door. A loud voice answered his rap.

Ned Slaughters was never capable of withholding emotion. A cold repulsive shiver ran down his spine as his eyes came to rest upon the sharp features of the stocky man behind a big ornate desk. The gambler looked up and the stolid expression in his eyes changed quickly to a subtle gleam.

"Well, Slaughters"—he spoke in a hard voice—"what do you want?"

Ned glanced about the room quickly, fumbling for his pipe. On a small window was a heap of cold cigarette ashes piled in an oddly shaped but familiar pyramid.

"You know Laura Howard pretty well?" Ned asked.

"Sure. I do." Janakos frowned. "I brought her here from Cairo two years ago to sing in my club."

The tiny desk clock said it was past midnight. Within three hours the press would start rolling. By morning Janakos would be a candidate for public office. If such a thing happened three years before, old Mike would have torn down the *Herald* with his big, hairy fists.

Ned puffed at his pipe. "You like her, eh?"

"She has everything that makes a good band singer, figure and voice." Janakos made a circle with his thumb and forefinger against the desk surface. "But we had an argument over that boozy sister."

He made a flourishing circle and poured himself a drink. "Then Bronson sold Laura on the idea that the newspaper racket would pay off better. About that time I got interested in raising corn on my river-bottom farm, and forgot about her."

Ned let his glance slide across to the ash tray, then back to that cold, olive mask. "Laura Howard is dead," he said quietly. "Somebody pushed a knife into her back. Got any ideas about it?"

Janakos pulled down the right side of his mouth until his pale, heavy lips slanted at an angle across his swarthy face. It was a sign he was going to explode. Springing up, he shouted, "I don't know anything!"

He stopped and choked. "But I'll tell you this much"—his voice more controlled—"she and Bronson had a battle at the crap table tonight. I threw 'em out."

"Were they fighting over anything in particular?" Ned's eyes narrowed, watching the rage climb up Janakos' thick neck. "Anything that concerns your political ambitions?"

The gambler leaped forward like a Bengal tiger, one fist smashing the desk. "No, by God!" he yelled. "It had nothing to do with me! She was a dirty slut. Now get out! Get out, before I throw you out!"

As the cab was pulling away from the night club, Ned saw a police car drive up behind. He ducked low in the seat and waited until the cab had sped along for several blocks before looking back. Nobody was following.

Leaning forward, he ordered the cabbie to drive to Janakos' river-farm. It was a link in this grotesque chain of circumstances.

Within half an hour they reached the edge of the river-farm. A barbed wire fence running parallel with the road glistened in the moonlight. Dark corn fields stretched westerly to the levee, and beyond was the river, deep in its plummy willows. Ned stopped the cab and got out.

He crossed the ditch and laboriously crawled between the wires, as barbs reached for his clothes. Plunging down a furrowed row of corn and bushy plants, he walked until deep enough to be hidden from the road.

Stopping, he pulled out his knife and cut the tough green stalk of the nearest bush and held it up in the bright moonlight. It had long, slender saw-tooth leaves and thick, sticky clusters of seeds that gave off a resinlike odor.

He was studying it when a series of pop-pings not unlike that of Chinese firecrackers startled him. Outside the field, the taxi suddenly roared away. Springing forward, Ned raced to the fence. The road was empty, lonely in the moonlight.

Lead whined by his head and thudded into the ditch. A realization that somebody was shooting rooted his feet to the moist earth. Then rapid thumping of brogans striking broken ground, nearby, accelerated him into action. He flung himself over the fence, unaware of the barbs ripping flesh and clothes.

Beyond the road bend, he limped to a halt, his chest heaving like feeble bellows. Deep in the shadows he smiled; the pieces were fitting together.

Entering the woods, he finally came out on the highway near the bus line, tired and sore.

Ned left the bus within two blocks of the taxi stand. Staying in the deep shadows, he

walked rapidly toward the glowing lights of the squat brick building. But the driver of his late cab was not there. The checker said the man had gone to the police station to report the incident.

Ned was crossing the street, in the direction of the *Herald* office, when a car pulled up and a voice called to him. Stepping to the curb, he peered down at the haggard face of young Jack Bronson. Then his glance went across to the far seat and the red leather purse.

Without speaking, he followed Bronson's curt order to get into the car. Opening the door, he pushed back the handbag, spilling its contents. He leaned over and picked up several handmade cigarettes and put them back, all but one.

This one he slid into his coat pocket. "I'm out of tobacco," he explained. "Bess won't mind if I borrow a smoke."

"She left her purse when I drove her back from the hotel." Bronson took the purse and faced Ned. "You're in hot water, Ned. Chief Nolan has sent out orders to bring you in on a murder rap."

Ned looked at the other man steadily. "I'm not going to appear at the police station until I know some answers. You should be able to give me one of them, Jack."

"Well?" snapped Bronson.

"Has Janakos got something on you that is making the paper back him for public office?"

Quivering with rage, Bronson spun around. He raised one fist. Suddenly he slumped, the fight gone out of his big body. "I owe him ten thousand dollars," he muttered. "It's all for gambling debts, Ned."

"I guessed it," Ned said softly. "But right now you'd better figure out an alibi in case Nolan asks you to produce your glass letter knife."

He got out of the car quickly. "Meanwhile, I'm going to run a test on this cigarette."

Ned walked swiftly toward the brick bus building on the street corner. A patrolman strolling across the street caused him to halt quickly. Pulling his hat low, he hurried into the dark driveway and across the loading platform. At the other side of the building he peered up the street, and saw that the policeman was gone. He hurried over to the *Herald's* back door.

He picked up a telephone at the mail counter and dialed the FBI, but an empty buzzing sound caused him to hang up. The clock over the door said the time was twenty after one. The presses would be starting the first run within an hour.

He lifted the phone again and got the composing room and asked for the copy boy. When the boy answered, Ned asked that an encyclopedia he brought down from the editorial room.

A few minutes later Ned laid the book on the counter, switched on the overhead light and pulled from his pocket the broken stalk and leaf gathered in the cornfield.

He opened the book to a section on Indian hemp and compared notes with the broken stalk. Everything checked with his theory so far. Only the testing of the cigarette remained.

He lighted the handmade cigarette and drew deeply. It almost choked him, but he managed to smoke half of it before dropping it. Head whirling, he rushed for the window, leaned out and vomited.

The press gang watched him stagger back and gather up the evidence. Head still spinning, he went to the back stairs and tried climbing. But his legs were too weak. He tried again. This time he went up slow, but shaky.

Stopping on the top step, he looked down the long row of linotype machines into the news room. Bronson's office was dark. He walked forward into the news room on unsteady legs to where Collins was making up the paper. Surprise lighted the night editor's face.

"The police have been here looking for you, Ned," he cried. "You've got to hide. They'll be back soon."

Ned shook his head. He tried to focus his eyes upon Collins while fumbling for his pipe. "I'm not going to hide."

"But you can't stay here."

Ignoring the younger man, Ned dropped into a chair before a typewriter. He typed a line, then looked up, a gray little man with tired eyes and gaunt face. He said, "I'm going to write my last story."

He let it go like that. Collins stared a moment and walked toward the composing room, shaking his head. The hands on the clock showed it was now forty-five minutes until the deadline. He was dead tired; if only he could sleep. He began to punch wearily at the keys, trying to put his story together.

Inertia crept through his body. Somebody was cursing him. It was that big Irishman, Mike Bronson, standing there, mouthing curses. Ned tried to shout back. Nobody was going to call him names. He had self-respect.

He opened his eyes. He was sick, never so sick in all his life. Jumping up, he ran over to the cuspidor and heaved. This made him feel better. Coming back to the desk, he sat down again, his mind upon the glass snake letter knife. Suddenly, everything became clearer.

He hurried within fifteen minutes and rushed into the composing room where he flung himself into a chair before a linotype machine. He was finishing when the shop foreman came by. The foreman took the copy and listened to Ned's instructions,

then picked up a wrench. He started tearing down the front page.

Ned had returned to the news room when Bronson rushed up the stairs, followed by Bess Howard and the police chief.

The young publisher's face wore an angry scowl as he scattered papers from his desk and rummaged through the drawers. He stopped, looked up and saw Ned in the news room.

Bronson charged into the outer office, roaring like a bull. Springing out of his chair, Ned tried to duck but the blow stung his cheek. He managed to dodge the next haymaker and lashed back angrily. His fist smashed young Bronson's jaw.

The publisher staggered against the steel cabinet. His face was painted swiftly with hatred. "You're a dirty double-crosser, Ned Slaughters!" he shouted. "You tried to frame me. You telephoned Nolan a few minutes ago, told him it was my letter knife used to kill Laura."

"Break it up," ordered the police chief, stepping between them. He turned to Ned. "You're under arrest, Slaughters."

"Did you tell Bronson that I phoned you such a story, chief?" Ned demanded.

The police chief nodded. "Somebody who identified themselves as you called. Said the murder weapon belonged to Jack Bronson. He admits having a letter knife."

"I didn't phone," Ned said, shaking his gray head. "I've been here for the last half hour working on a story. Collins can vouch for that."

Bess Howard mumbled something about murder weapons. Ned wheeled quickly. She was swaying drunkenly, her face sickly pale, her eyes glazed. From her lips dangled a cigarette.

The composing room door slammed. Collins ran in, waving a copy of the first edition. "Look, Jack!" he yelled. "Ned Slaughters pulled your front page editorial. He planted a story accusing Bess Howard of the murder of her sister."

The news room hung on a bright hook of silence. Ned was watching Bess. So were the others. He said softly, "There is your killer, Chief. Murdered her sister while under the influence of marijuana, just as my story says. Jealousy was her motive."

Bess licked dry lips. She backed against the wall, her eyes fierce as a sheep-killing dog. "Yes, I killed her!" she screamed. "But I wasn't in it alone. Janakos . . . he planned it. Gave me the fags. Tried to frame you, too, Ned, with that phone call, you dirty little snob."

She stopped. Her eyes rolled wildly. "I hated her! The two-timing slut! I hate all of you, hate everybody!"

"Sure. You hate everybody, Bess," Ned said very quietly. "But it isn't entirely your fault. You were only a tool in the hands of a vicious person, Janakos. He's been

feeding you those goof sticks and inflaming your hatred for Laura. She knew too much about him.

"When you witnessed the love scene in Jack's office tonight, you went crazy. You also saw me pocket a letter knife similar to the murder weapon, and overheard Laura making that date with me. It certainly fitted into Janakos' plans to get rid of her.

"I knew that you had been to the night club because the cigarette ashes in the table tray were piled in a round heap, a habit of yours, Bess. Janakos gave you more goof sticks and fired your hatred for Laura to a killing point. When you were drunk enough from smoking those fags, he sent you to steal Bronson's letter knife and to kill Laura."

"What did Laura want with you, Ned?" Jack Bronson cut in.

"She was going to give me the connection between your editorial and Janakos."

The police chief said, "Go on with your story, Slaughters."

"Bess stole the letter knife, went to the hotel about ten-thirty and walked upstairs to avoid detection. She came back the same way after killing Laura. I found one of those handmade cigarettes on the bathroom floor. Knowing Laura didn't smoke, I went to see Janakos on a hunch.

"Unknowingly, he tipped me off about his farm. There I found some suspicious looking weeds inside his cornfield. I checked and learned those weeds were Indian hemp, or more commonly known as marijuana.

And the only way I could test the cigarette I had was to smoke it, to see if it made me sick."

He took out the evidence and handed it to the police chief. "Here is the proof, Nolan."

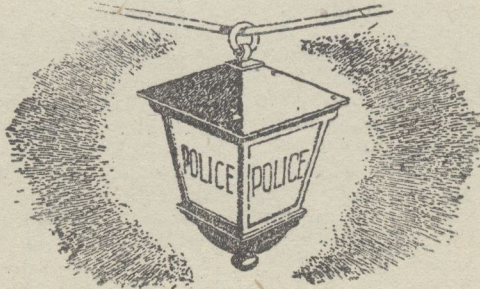
They were gone now. Bronson stood straight, like a man who had just received a blow that finished him. His haggard eyes lifted to Ned's face. "Ned," he said in a voice choked with emotion. "You saved me. You switched that editorial just in time. The *Herald* would have had to close its doors."

Ned relighted his pipe. "I knew Bess would crack the minute she saw the story. Except for a few minor points it hit everything right." His eyes narrowed a little. "It's going to be tough for you to explain about that gambling debt to a jury."

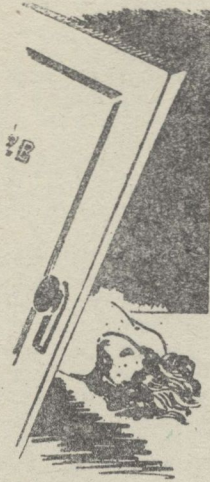
"I know." Bronson thrust both hands into his pockets. Dawn's red glow filled the windows. "But I'll do the best I can." His voice went lower. "Ned, will you take over the desk again? Run it like you did for dad?"

Ned took the outstretched hand. "You're taking your medicine like a man, Jack," he said. "But I'm too old for the paper now. You need new blood, like Collins. He's a good man."

He walked to the door. "I'm going to enjoy a long vacation, son, for I won't have to worry about you now. The *Herald* is going to be rock-solid with you at the helm. Old Mike would have been proud of you, mighty proud."



*They had lived together for three miserable years . . .
they had been divorced . . . then she came back*



Home to die

BY
WILLIAM CAMPBELL
GAULT

I.

It was one of those picturesque days that occasionally come to a big city in winter. Lazily falling snow, a clean comforter of snow covering the bare trees and harsh outlines of the houses and apartment buildings in my neighborhood. It was light snow, packing to nonexistence under foot, eddying at the slightest breeze.

It wasn't the kind of winter day to depress even the sun-worshippers, but depression was the mood I'd lived with now for over a year. And it was on a day like this that Ellen had left me.

We'd been married three years when it happened, three childless, bickering years with very few moments of happiness. There wasn't any reason I should miss her. But when a person's lonely, he's likely to convince himself that he's lonely for a particular individual. I may not have missed her, but I certainly thought about her enough.

It was a year and a month since the divorce; it was a month since the divorce had become final. I'd kept the apartment, the same one we'd shared for three years. Where Ellen had gone, I didn't know. I'd heard a rumor or two, but nothing substantial.

I turned in, now, at the walk that led back some fifty feet to the apartment building. This was an old place, and the builders hadn't been so obsessed with the urge to use every available inch. This was a solid,

comfortable place, and I was content to spend most of my evenings at home.

The bushes banked along the front, below the first floor window, were snow-white against the red brick of the building. I went up two steps into the tiny outer lobby, and up three more to the first floor hall.

It was warm in here; a radiator hissed and sputtered next to the south wall. A woman stood near the radiator, struggling with a jammed zipper on her stadium boot.

A young woman, and slim, wearing an expensive-looking fur coat, a black dress, a short string of pearls that could have been real. She looked up, as I entered, and her warm brown eyes were filled with fear.

"Ellen—" I began.

No words from her for a moment. Her eyes seemed to be trying to read mine; her petulant, soft mouth set grimly.

Then, "Bob . . . I've got to talk to you— Can't we go upstairs and I'll tell you what—" She shook her head vexedly. "Oh, Bob, I'm in trouble—"

"If I can help, I will," I broke in quietly. "Let's go up, and you can tell me about it." I was waiting for some emotion, some hint it was Ellen I'd been missing. All I could feel was the old annoyance, an emotion that should bring me shame, considering her fright. But the chances were it was nothing serious. Ellen could make a crisis out of nothing; her life was a series of minor crises.

We went up the stairs to the second floor without another word. I had just closed

the door of the apartment when she said, quickly, "Bob, I need money."

I looked at her fur coat, at the pearls, and she must have noticed the significance of the glance.

"I mean *now*, Bob, this minute. I have to get out of town. A couple of hundred will do it. You'll get it back. As soon as I can get to a place where I can sell something—"

"Tell me about it, Ellen," I answered. "You said, downstairs, that you were going to tell me something."

She shook her head. "No, Bob, I don't want you mixed up in it."

"Perhaps," I said, "it's not as serious as you think it is. What kind of trouble is it, Ellen?"

"It's murder," she replied. Her face was deathly pale.

My heart was hammering. "Not— You're not— You didn't—"

"Oh, no, of course not. But I know who committed it. I mean, I saw somebody who left this club—" She broke off, and faced me squarely. "I'm not going to talk about it, Bob. I could be a witness for the police, but I don't want to. I want to get out of town."

"Don't," I told her. "You've been running all your life, Ellen. From poverty, first, and then from work, and then from boredom. Don't run from this. Tell the police what you know, and rely on them."

Her mouth was working again; I expected a tirade. But after a moment of obvious struggle, she said quietly, "I won't bother you, Bob. I should have known what to expect from you."

I said, "The banks are closed, and I don't know anyone who would cash a check for two hundred dollars, not anyone who'd be likely to have it."

"How about Al Pritchard?" she suggested. "He usually has a lot of cash. But, Bob, if you should go to him, don't tell him I'm here. Don't tell him it's for me."

I should have been surprised at learning she feared Al, but in the three years I'd learned never to be surprised at Ellen. I said, "I can try him. You wait here, and I'll be right back."

Al lived only a block and a half away, in a new apartment building on Stratford. Ellen was sitting by one of the front windows when I left, nervously smoking a cigarette.

The snow was falling more heavily, now, and I turned up the collar of my overcoat against its wetness. For some reason, I looked back at the window where Ellen had been sitting, but she was nowhere in sight; the lights from the living room were on, and I'd have seen her if she still sat in the same chair.

The man selling papers on the corner was holding up an eight column head:

MYSTERY WITNESS SOUGHT IN DOAN SLAYING. The subhead read, Cab Driver Describes Woman Passenger Who Knew Killer.

I bought a copy, and crossed the street, before turning, on Stratford. Mystery witness. Woman passenger. I remembered Ellen's saying, "I saw somebody who left this club—"

She'd come home, all right, but I knew it wasn't her I'd been missing. She'd come home—and brought murder with her.

The white front of Al Pritchard's apartment building looked ghostly in the whirling snow. A man was out in front shoveling the snow from the walk as I turned in. There was a light on, in Al's apartment, I could see.

The man with the shovel said, "Look's like a blizzard coming."

I said I hoped not, and went into the outer lobby, to ring Al's bell. I stood waiting for the door to buzz.

But it didn't buzz. I tried again, and still received no answering buzz. I went out to where the man was shoveling.

"I've been trying Mr. Pritchard's bell," I explained, "but there's no answer. He wouldn't go out and leave his lights on, would he?"

"Mr. Pritchard? Yes, he went out about two minutes before you came. Probably went out to eat. He usually does, about this time."

"Know where he eats?" I asked. "Is it in the neighborhood?"

He shook his head. "Sometimes he goes downtown, and stays down until late. You can never tell, with Mr. Pritchard."

There wasn't any other place I could think of where I could cash a check for that kind of money. I walked back to the apartment, wondering if I could convince Ellen this was a dangerous move. And wondering, too, if I wasn't obstructing justice in helping her.

The light in my apartment was still on, but there was something different about it now, though I couldn't figure out what it was.

I went up the steps, framing some words in my mind, some words that would help to dissuade her from running away. The door was locked; it's a spring lock, but I had the key in my hand, so I didn't ring.

There was an odor in the air, like something acrid burning. It was a few seconds before I recognized it as gun powder.

Ellen wouldn't run any more. She was sprawled in the center of the living room rug, a nasty hole directly over her left eye.

After the first moment of shock, I went to the phone to call the police. But somebody had beat me to it. For an officer stepped into the living room as I was completing my call. He had a revolver in his hand.

"The big man, the sergeant said, "Even if you didn't kill her, Wilson, you've got a nice rap staring you in the face. The cabbie's identified her as the woman we've been looking for. And you were going to help her escape."

I closed my eyes against the light, and said, "I didn't know she was the woman you were looking for. I was going to talk her out of leaving town."

"You didn't know it?" another voice said. "You had the paper. You can read, can't you?"

Before I could answer that, the sergeant said, "Don't you usually eat downtown, after leaving your office? You came home early today, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"To meet her, huh? Maybe she was blackmailing you."

"I didn't know she was there," I answered wearily. "Why should she blackmail me?"

"Because you were jealous of Doan. He was her boy friend, and she was your former wife. He broke up your marriage, didn't he?"

"No," I replied. "I never heard of him. I don't know who he is."

"You don't read the papers?"

"Sometimes. I didn't read about Doan, though I saw the name in the headline, tonight."

The other voice again. "If you didn't know we were looking for her, why were you going to talk her out of leaving town?"

"She only told me part of the story," I explained for the tenth time. "She didn't tell me the police were looking for her." The figures around me were getting hazy now: I was hungry enough to feel weak and sick.

"Your neighbor, across the hall, has told us enough to convict you, Wilson. You might as well give us the straight story. You're keeping all these men from their supper." His voice became matter-of-fact. "Here, have a cigarette, and tell us all about it. I can't say as I blame you, from what I've heard, but we've got to do our duty, you know, Wilson."

"I don't want a cigarette," I told him. "I want something to eat. And if it's the truth you want, I've told you all I know." I rubbed my eyes. "How long are you going to keep this up?"

The voice was rough again. "Until we get some kind of story that makes sense. Look, the man next door hears a shot, and comes out in time to see somebody running down the steps. He knows you're home, so he figures something must have happened to you. He phones the police. When the patrolman comes into your place, you've still got your coat on, as though you just came in. You give us this tall tale about going over to see a friend, a friend who

conveniently isn't home. But nobody saw you over there, did they?"

"Yes," I remembered, "somebody did. The janitor was out in front shoveling the walk. At least, I think it's the janitor. Anyway, I talked to him. I talked to him twice."

"Oh, and what did you say?"

I told him the entire conversation.

"O.K., we'll check that." He talked to one of the other officers.

Five minutes later I was in a cell for the first time in my life. Ten minutes later, I was given some stew, and I was hungry enough to eat it. After that, I sat and smoked. How long it was, I don't know, but it seemed like hours.

I was just finishing the last cigarette in the package when I heard footsteps along the corridor, and presently the bulk of the detective sergeant, the man named Loepfe, was outlined against the dim light.

"We're releasing you, Wilson," he said. "Don't get the idea you're in the clear, though. But that neighbor of yours has given us a pretty sound description of the man who ran down the stairs, and you don't fit it."

The turnkey was there now, opening the door. Then Loepfe and I were walking up the hall together. "There's no doubt in my mind that you know more than you're telling," he said. "If I had my way, you'd sit for a while, and think things out."

I didn't argue with him. I asked, "Did you check that janitor?"

"Hm-m-m. And we checked that Pritchard, too. I thought, as long as you were a pal of his, you'd have a record. But it seems you're an architect, right?"

"That's right." I rubbed my eyes. "You could have checked me through my employer, I suppose. But you didn't give me much chance to speak for myself."

"We've checked with your employer, and you'll get all the chance you want to speak for yourself before this case is finished." He paused beside a door leading into a small office. "Some papers to sign, before you go." He gestured me into the room.

It was cold when I left headquarters and went out in search of a cab. The snow had stopped, and the stars were clear and sharp. I stood on the corner a moment, hoping to spot a cab, and a small convertible pulled up at the curb in front of me.

The door on my side opened, and Al Pritchard leaned over from his position behind the wheel. "Hop in, Bob."

I got in, and put my feet forward next to the heater. "A bad night to be out," I said. "I suppose you've heard what happened, Al."

"In detail," he said. "I'm sorry about Ellen."

"I am, too," I said, "but not as much as I should be, I'm afraid. It seems like—oh, predestination, Al. She seemed to be headed for tragedy, even since I've known her."

"Don't talk like that," he answered. "You give me the shivers. How can you be so cold about it?"

"I guess I'm kind of a cold guy, now," I told him. "You see, a part of her curse was that she carried tragedy to others, too. Her dad went broke trying to educate her and buy her the kind of clothes she thought she should have. Her first husband wound up in the penitentiary trying to get her the money she wanted."

Al took his eyes from the road a moment. "First husband? I never knew she had one."

"Most people didn't. She was seventeen, then, and he was eighteen. A home-town swain. He only lived with her for seven months. I think her dad broke that up. He supplied the information that sent the boy to jail, and the money that sent Ellen to Reno and then to Europe."

"Well," Al said, "she didn't ruin you, anyway."

I didn't say anything to that. But I remembered back four years, to when I'd been the fair-haired boy with the firm, when I'd almost got the Cathedral commission. That was before I'd started to miss a few days here and there, before I'd started the constant requests for salary advances. Before I'd started to drink.

Al said casually, "What was her first husband's name?"

"Jackson," I said. "Bert Jackson. I understand he's out West, that he went to California after he was released. Ellen talked about him, quite a lot. Especially, when we'd have a quarrel."

Al shook his head. He continued to watch the road, as he said, "I guess you know I worked for Doan, Bob. Maybe, by this time, you know that's one reason the law was giving you a bad time." He stopped for a traffic light.

"Doan?" I said. "The man who was murdered?"

He nodded. "I thought you knew it. I run his big poker game. I used to run one of the wheels, but I've been promoted."

"That's why Ellen warned me—" I began, then stopped.

The light changed, and the convertible moved forward in low gear. "Warned you about me?"

"That's right. She needed money to get out of town, and she thought you'd be the logical man to have it. But she warned me about mentioning her."

Al was silent for two blocks. The tires made a crunching noise on the new snow, and the heater whirred creakingly.

Finally, Al said, "What's more, I'll move up another peg, now that Doan's dead." A pause. "That give you something to think about, Bob?"

I'd known Al through high school. I'd caught his pitching in high school, and in the fall I'd caught his passes. We had the league title in football and in baseball our senior years, and most of it was Al's work.

"I'm not thinking anything you don't want me to think, Al."

"Thanks," he said simply. "I think you need a drink, Bob. I know I do."

"I haven't had a drink in thirteen months. But I guess I could use one now."

He turned down Thirty-seventh and traveled it for two blocks. In the middle of the next block, he turned the convertible up an alley entrance, and from there into a small parking lot.

We went in through the rear entrance, through a room containing a large poker table and seven chairs, to the bar proper. Beyond the bar was a larger room filled with booths and tables.

The bartender at our end said, "Evening, Mr. Pritchard. What'll it be tonight?"

"Scotch," Al said, and looked at me.

I ordered bourbon with seltzer.

Al was smiling now. "Good to see you in a bar again. The way you've been hibernating this past year, I was beginning to worry about you."

"I was getting out of debt for one thing," I told him. "And trying to make up for three wasted years with the firm."

"Oh. And how's it going now?"

"Fair enough. I'll never set the world on fire, Al."

"Don't be too sure," he said. "We never figured to beat Clinton High either." Our drinks were here now, and he lifted his in a toast. "To Sergeant Loepfe," he said. "May he wind up on a beat again."

The whisky was warming. The whisky relaxed something in me that had needed relaxing for some time. After that first one, the second one seemed even more invigorating.

After the third, I told Al about my work, my current job, which was to design five-room houses for war veterans that could be built within ten thousand dollars of their budget.

Some time around the fourth or fifth drink, Faith came in. Faith is Al's sister, and I hadn't seen her since she was thirteen. I'd been seventeen then, and any female of thirteen was just a horror. I wasn't seventeen now and she was no horror.

The carrot-colored hair was a sort of burnished gold, the skinny legs were now slim. The boldness I'd detested was now poise. She said, "Any friend of Al's is no friend of mine, but I'll make an exception in this case. How are things with you, Bob?"

"Just fair," I replied.

"Faith doesn't read the papers," Al said. "She works for one of those news magazines, and doesn't need the papers."

She was silent now, looking from Al to me, and back.

"A drink?" I suggested.

She nodded. "Please. An Old Fashioned." She looked at her brother. "When you told me you'd meet me here, I thought it was good news. I thought you had a different job. But it's not that, is it?"

He shook his head. "No. Honey, forget it. I should have realized, when I called you, that you rarely read the papers. Ellen's been killed, Faith." He paused. "Bob was being held by the police. So was I, for a while."

Faith stared at me. "They think you— But that's ridiculous."

"It happened in my apartment," I explained. "I was going over to get some money from Al, to get her out of town. It happened while I was gone."

She said quietly. "First Doan, and now Ellen. Oh, Al, you can't associate with people like that—"

"Why don't we have a drink now and argue when we get home?" he suggested. "I've had enough of a dressing-down from Loepfe."

"A deal," she said, and looked at me. "Since I've come to town and moved in with Al, I've been heckling him night and day." She smiled. "And he pays most of the rent."

"A little heckling won't hurt him," I told her. "As I remember Al, he could use some discipline."

He grinned at us. "You two should join Loepfe's lodge. Why don't we get drunk?"

"Not me," Faith said. "I'll be the mother hen."

We worked at it, Al and I, but it was work all the way; we didn't have our hearts in it. My mind simply wouldn't dull, though my legs were in bad shape when we finally left. Outside, the snow looked whiter and the stars nearer. Everything had a special clarity.

The traffic noises seemed louder; all my senses seemed sharpened by the alcohol. But my legs— I felt Faith's hand under one elbow, Al's the other.

I said, "I hope I don't oversleep tomorrow. I don't want to get started on the wrong path at the firm again."

"I'll phone you in the morning," Al promised. "Think you can make the door, or should I come up with you?"

The convertible was slowing. I suddenly realized we had traveled some blocks from the bar. To my right was my apartment building, and fifty feet of sidewalk to be traversed.

"I'll make it all right," I told him, and got out.

I made the fifty feet of sidewalk all right.

I think the cold helped me there, stiffened me, and maintained my mental clarity.

But the warmth of the lobby hit me. The bright light overhead seemed to be swinging, and I put a hand on the wall for support. The numbness in my legs was spreading upward. The stairs seemed insurmountable.

I paused for a moment on the bottom, fighting the haze that was settling on my mind. Then I started up slowly, grasping the banister for support. When I got to the last step, the light overhead was whirling, and there was nothing to grip. I took only one step in the hall up there before I crashed.

II.

WHEN I came to again, there was a cold, wet cloth on my forehead, and my collar was open. My coat was off, and my shoes. It wasn't my apartment, I saw.

George Boyd, my neighbor across the hall, was sitting in a chair near the couch on which I was lying. He was changing the cloth on my forehead as I opened my eyes.

He smiled at me. "I'm making some coffee. I thought the roof was caving in when you toppled out there in the hall."

"It's the first time in months," I apologized. "I thought I had one coming."

He nodded.

"Thanks for clearing me," I said. "That Sergeant Loepfe told me you'd described the man who ran down the steps, but he didn't tell me the description."

"A short, thin man," he said, "wearing one of those sheepskin-lined storm coats. I thought of knocking on your door first, to see if everything was all right, but then I smelled the gun powder." Boyd shook his head. "I described the man to Sergeant Loepfe before you came back; there wasn't any reason for him to haul you downtown."

I tried to rise, and the throbbing in my head intensified.

"Wait'll you've had your coffee," he said. "It should be about ready now." He rose and went out to the kitchen. He was wearing a robe over his pyjamas; I realized I must have wakened him when I fell.

He came back into the living room in a few minutes, a steaming cup of coffee in one hand.

I half rose, and he shoved a pillow behind my back to brace me in that position. I sipped the coffee gratefully.

"This man in the storm coat," he said. "He was standing outside there, I thought, after you left. Do the police have any idea who he is?"

"Not so far as I know," I answered. "But the police wouldn't be likely to let me in on any trade secrets." I sat more erectly.

"You saw him after I left with the police? In the building?"

He shook his head. "Outside, standing next to a big Buick Club. Of course, those coats are pretty popular. I might have been mistaken."

"I think I can navigate now," I told him after a while. "Thanks a lot, Mr. Boyd. You know, you've lived here almost as long as I have, and this is the first time I've ever been in your apartment. You've never been in mine."

"That's a big town for you," he said. "I'm glad I could finally be a good neighbor."

I rose slowly so as not to disturb the rocks in my skull. I made it to the door without too much pain, and across the hall to my place. I was halfway through my living room when the nausea came.

Twenty minutes after that, I was ready for bed. I set the clock, turned out the lights, and went over to open the window.

Standing in that dark room, I could see very plainly out into the white, clear night. I could see the Buick Club parked across the street. Its lights were out, and I couldn't see whether the car was occupied or not.

I should have been frightened, but I was only weary. I fell asleep only a few seconds, it seemed, after my head creased the pillow.

It was a bell that woke me, but not the alarm. It was the telephone. It was a voice I didn't recognize.

"Mr. Wilson?"

"Right."

"My name is Pegis, Paul Pegis. I don't think you know me."

"I don't, Mr. Pegis."

"It doesn't matter," the voice said. "I'll explain about that later. But I think it would be to your interest to see me this morning. Shall I come to your place or would you prefer to meet me somewhere?"

"If you'll tell me your business, Mr. Pegis—"

"It's about your wife, and it's about you and me, Mr. Wilson. It's about murder."

"I'm not married," I said, "and the police would be interested if you have anything on my former wife's death. They're available any time." There was a throbbing in my head, and my voice was sharp.

"That's a stupid attitude, Mr. Wil—"

But I didn't listen to any more. I hung up and went back into the bedroom. My stomach was touchy, my head aching, my mouth fuzzy. The alarm went off as I considered climbing back into bed.

I wasn't going to work today. I'd been prompt and punctual for thirteen months; I'd had no vacation this year. I had a day or two coming.

I called the boss at home and told him, "I don't think I'll be down today, Ned. It's been a bad night."

"I can imagine it has, Bob," he said. "I'm sorry about what happened." A pause.

"Why don't you take a week? You haven't had a vacation this year."

"Thanks," I said, and hung up, knowing I might be the fair-haired boy again, if his tone was any indication.

I went over to close the window in the bedroom, and there was the Buick again, across the street. I pulled down the shades and prepared to take a shower.

I had my robe on and was heading for the bathroom when the bell rang. It was the front doorbell this time.

George Boyd had said, "standing next to a big Buick Club," in describing the man in the storm coat, the man who'd run down the steps. I paused for a quiet moment in indecision, and the bell rang again.

I went over to press the buzzer release, and then waited in the open doorway. The man who came up the steps was a short, thin man with a grave, well-modeled face and dark, alert eyes. He was wearing one of those knee-length, sheepskin-lined twill garments known as "storm coats."

He asked quietly, "Mr. Wilson?"

I nodded.

"I'm Paul Pegis. I want to talk to you."

"You told me that over the phone," I answered. "And got my answer."

He shook his head. "It's guys like you give people like me bad reputations. All I want to do is talk, Wilson. But I can do more than that if you're going to be stubborn."

A small man, and thin. A respectable-looking citizen. But his voice was different now, and I didn't for a moment doubt his implied threat.

"Come in," I said, and stood aside.

We went into the living room. He settled himself on the davenport and looked around the room. "It happened in here?"

I nodded.

"You were out when it happened?"

Again I nodded. "Maybe you'd better tell me something about yourself, Mr. Pegis." I paused. "Like what makes any of it your business."

He smiled and shrugged. "This Doan, this Greg Doan, was my boss. But he was a little more than that, too. He's the man who gave me a job when I was a poolroom punk, who trusted me, and went to bat for me when the D.A. got ambitious. As a matter of fact, I'm married to his younger sister. His business is my business now. Anything that happens to him automatically becomes my business. I guess you heard what happened to him."

"I heard. You think I—"

"I'm not thinking any way, just yet. Your former wife was putting the squeeze on him, on me and on some others. Not directly, you understand. She had a stooge for that. Only one man ever saw this stooge, and that was Greg Doan. He had a date

with him the night he died. I figure this stooge kept that date."

"I don't follow you," I said.

He eyed me speculatively. "Ellen knew us. She knew us all pretty well. No offence to the dead, understand, but it's a fact. And she knew some things the D.A. would be glad to hear. About two months ago, Greg started getting some calls from a gent who figured he had information to sell. We weren't worried too much about him, but we were worried about finding the leak." He paused. "We decided it was Ellen."

"And that's why she was killed?"

"Not by us. We don't kill women, Mr. Wilson. We run them out of town once in a while, but we don't go in for murder."

I said, "I got the impression from Ellen that she was running away to save her life."

"After three years of marriage," Pegis said, "you should know that Ellen wasn't always truthful."

The phone rang at that moment, and I went to answer it. It was Al. "Rise and shine," he said. "Didn't I promise I'd call?"

"Thanks, Al," I said. "Say, who's your new boss?"

A pause. "Why, Bob?"

"Just a personal check," I said.

"Fellow named Pegis. He been bothering you, Bob?"

"No," I said. "I just wondered."

"Well, don't let it go any further. He's smart and quiet, Bob. But so's a black widow spider."

When I pronged the receiver, Pegis said, "Al? That'd be Al Pritchard?"

"Could be," I admitted.

He smiled. "I don't worry about Al. He's Grade A in my book. Friend of yours, isn't he? You played football with him in high school."

"You checked me pretty far back, didn't you?" I answered.

He shook his head. "Al often talks about you, especially this last year, since Ellen started to travel with the gang. Al thinks a lot of you."

"That's why you came to see me, to tell me how much Al thinks about me. You've told me quite a lot, Mr. Pegis, but you haven't asked me much. I can't believe you came here just to talk."

"No," he admitted, "I didn't. I came here to ask you one question. But I wanted you to know the background. And here's something else. This cabbie didn't tell the police all he heard. He talked to me though. He told me the name of the man who left the club the night Doan was killed. The name Ellen called out—" He rose now, his hands in the slash pockets of his storm coat, and stood there looking down at me.

"That's the question you might answer. The name she called was 'Bert.' I thought you might know who Bert is."

"Bert . . . Bert Jackson," I said. "Her

first husband was named Bert Jackson, but I understand he's out West somewhere."

"First husband? She was married before?"

"When she was seventeen. It didn't last long. He went to jail and Ellen went Reno."

Pegis' voice was matter-of-fact. "I suppose I could check that." His eyes were skeptical. "Bert Jackson, you say? She never mentioned him, did she?"

"Only to me, the way it looks," I answered. "But I've heard enough about him to last me the rest of my life."

"She have a picture of him?"

I shook my head. "But the police should. The police in his home state. He was about a year older than she was."

"The police," he said. "I wouldn't be likely to ask them for any information."

My doorbell rang at that moment.

Pegis looked at me questioningly. I rose and went to the front window. There was a police car parked at the curb. Pegis was suddenly standing beside me.

"You call 'em?"

"No. Why should I?"

"They're here."

"They're here to question me again probably," I said.

The bell rang once more.

"O.K.," Pegis said, "let 'em in. I'm clean."

I went over to press the buzzer, and then waited in the open doorway. Behind me, Paul Pegis stood in the center of my living room, his hands still in the pockets of his coat.

It was only one policeman, the big one, the detective sergeant, Loepfe. "Pegis here?" he asked as he came down the hall. "That's the monkey I'm looking for."

I turned to look at Pegis, but all I saw was his back. He was heading for the kitchen.

Loepfe said, "Well," and then he was in the doorway, and he must have caught a glimpse of Pegis scooting for the rear door.

Loepfe brushed past me, pulling at his gun in its shoulder holster. "Stop!" he shouted. "I'm warning you, Pegis."

I heard the back door slam as Loepfe disappeared through the archway. I heard the back door open again, and Loepfe's feet on the rear stairs, and then I heard the shots. They seemed to shake the building.

I went out into the back hall and down the steps. Loepfe stood over the prone figure of Paul Pegis at the bottom of the steps.

"I was aiming low," Loepfe said, "but I guess I hit him in the spine. Not that it makes any difference."

Doors were opening in all three back halls now. Behind me, George Boyd said, "What happened?"

Loepfe said, "It's the man in the storm coat, isn't it? It's the man you saw yesterday?"

"It looks like him," Boyd said. "But I can't be sure." He was pale, and his eyes went away from that still body at the foot of the stairs. "All I saw was his back, the coat and his general build. I never saw his face."

Loepfe said meaningly, "You can be sure it's the same gent. It would be smart to be sure."

Boyd looked at me, and back at Loepfe. "I'm just about sure," he said finally.

Loepfe looked at me. "Call headquarters and tell them what happened. I have to stay here. We'll get this cleaned up this morning, now."

"I'll call them," I said. "But you haven't cleaned up anything. You couldn't clean up a plate of beans."

I don't know why I should suddenly become the indignant taxpayer, unless it was the heat he was putting on Boyd. Or the bad time he'd given me yesterday. I went into the apartment and phoned headquarters.

I said, "Your Sergeant Loepfe has just murdered a man in the back hall here," and I gave them the address.

The place was a beehive in five minutes, a quarter-block of cops and technicians, reporters and neighbors, curious passers-by. Boyd and I went down to headquarters with Loepfe.

In Boyd's statement, he definitely identified Pegis as the man he'd seen running down the steps after Ellen was killed.

Then Loepfe got to me. There were just three of us in the room he took me to. Loepfe and I and a uniformed officer. Loepfe had my statement with him. He was looking uglier than usual, and just as official.

"This business about Bert," he said. "Who the hell's Bert?"

"That's the name Ellen called out from the cab to the man who was leaving Doan's night club at four in the morning," I answered. "At least, that's what the cabbie told Pegis."

"He didn't tell us that," Loepfe said. "Any reason he shouldn't level with us?"

I shrugged. "I'm just telling you what I got from Pegis. I can't make up a story."

He looked at me questioningly. "Make up what kind of story?"

"Like the kind you had Boyd tell. Maybe the cabbie was afraid of cops, too."

"You aren't though, are you, Wilson?"

"Not yet," I replied. "But I haven't had much experience with them."

He didn't say anything for seconds, appraising me. Then, "All right, who's Bert?"

"Mrs. Wilson's first husband was named Bert," I said. "Bert Jackson. She hadn't seen him for years, but you could get a picture of him. He was sent to the penitentiary."

"Sure," he said. "We don't have to go that far back, though, Wilson. Somebody else in this business is named Bert, too. I'm going to check that cabbie again. If he tells the same story you claim he told Pegis, we'll pick this Bert up and work him over."

I didn't say anything, though it looked like Loepfe expected me to.

"Your buddy's named Bert, too, you know, Wilson."

"My buddy?"

"That's right. Al Pritchard. *Albert Pritchard.*"

"As long as I've known him," I said. "nobody ever called him anything but Al."

Loepfe's smile was purely muscular. "Maybe your wife had a pet name for him. Maybe she liked Bert better."

I was released, after about a half hour of indecision by Loepfe. I was still there when the cabbie was brought in, and I saw him go into the same small room with Loepfe, only this time the uniformed man wasn't with them. The cabbie looked as frightened as Boyd had looked earlier.



I went home and took my long delayed shower. I shaved and ate a cheese sandwich, and tried to forget the smile Loepfe had worn when he left me. He was out for Al, the smile told me. With the help of the cabbie, he might build up a case against Al. And the cabbie had the look of a man who would swear to anything. He'd made the mistake of not telling the police *all* he knew when he had the opportunity. That was something Loepfe could use as a sword.

After I'd dressed, I went over to knock on the door of George Boyd's apartment.

It was almost a full minute before his voice came from behind the still-closed door. "Who's there?"

"It's Bob Wilson, George," I said.

He opened the door cautiously, and relief came to his face when he saw me. "I thought it might have been a trick," he said. "I'm frightened, Wilson."

"Why?"

"It's a gang, isn't it? This Doan and Pegis. They'll be after me next for identifying Pegis."

"That's what I came to see you about,"

I said. "You weren't sure about him, were you? You let Loepfe scare you into being sure about Pegis."

"I suppose. In court I won't have to say the same. You're not a friend of his, of this Pegis, are you, Wilson?"

"I never saw him before today," I replied.

He expelled his breath. "I see." He looked at me questioningly. "But you think I shouldn't have identified him?"

"I didn't say that. I think you shouldn't have let Loepfe scare you into a lie."

"Maybe . . . maybe. But this Pegis is dead. I'm almost sure that was the man, Wilson. The chances are he was the man."

"He might have been," I admitted, "but I'm sure he wasn't the man who killed Doan. And it's reasonable to expect that Pegis might have been here that afternoon. Because he was checking on Ellen."

He was quiet, and then he looked at me with some annoyance. "Look, this is really police business, isn't it? We shouldn't be messing in it. All we can do is co-operate with them as much as possible."

"All right," I said. "But if they hold a coroner's inquest on this, I'm going to give them that dialogue in the back hall, that dialogue you had with Loepfe."

"You'll have to decide that for yourself," he said. "I've made my decision."

The door closed.

He'd made his decision, and the cabbie had probably made his by now. Ellen had carried trouble with her always; I hadn't expected it would continue after her death. But Pegis was dead, and Al was going to get the full Loepfe treatment probably.

The paper I'd bought last night was still in my living room and still unread. I picked it up and read about the case prior to the death of Ellen.

This Doan, according to the resumé of the case, had been waiting all alone, in this night club he'd owned, waiting for a man who was attempting to blackmail him. Whether he was waiting to pay off in money or in lead, the paper didn't state. No one had seen the man who'd come at four in the morning, an hour after the club closed. No one, that is, but Doan, and this unidentified woman (Ellen) who'd been driving by in a cab. The woman had called out to the man as he was leaving the club, though the cab driver was vague about what she'd called. The cabbie hadn't turned to look at the man; he'd never have remembered the incident if he hadn't read next day about the murder.

His memory would be prodded now; he'd remember things he hadn't seen or heard.

It was confused enough, all of it, to make a lot of suspects, all with sound motives. Pegis, because he'd be the top man then. Al, if he could frame Pegis for it, would

move up another notch. Even I had something to gain. I would no longer need to pay alimony.

Loepfe couldn't expect to spend his life on the case; what he wanted was a fast conviction on the most likely suspect. I'd been that at first, but Al had taken my place now.

At two o'clock I went out to eat. At three-thirty I was back, and my phone was ringing. It was Faith Pritchard.

"They've arrested Al," she said. "He phoned me, Bob. This Loepfe person seems to think he has a case."

"He'll make one if it isn't strong enough now," I told her. "Al's got a good attorney, hasn't he?"

"I don't know how good he is," she replied, "but he's about the most expensive in town. Oh, Bob, can't we do something?"

"We can try," I said. "Let's go down and talk to Al."

I arranged to pick her up at her office, and then phoned for a cab. There wasn't much, there probably wasn't anything, we could do. But it didn't seem the proper time to tell her that.

She was waiting in front of the Guaranty Building when my cab pulled up there, some fifteen minutes later. She was properly attired in the "new look," but even that couldn't spoil her beauty.

As we started out from the curb, again she asked, "How serious is it, Bob? Al was so casual about it over the phone. He told me there wasn't much to worry about, but that I should let you know."

"It's serious," I told her. "Al's innocent, we know, but it's serious because of Loepfe's determination."

Her hands were in her lap, and they were trembling. "You mean, he might be—"

"Railroaded," I finished for her. "I don't want to frighten you unnecessarily, but Loepfe is determined to clean this up quickly, and there's nobody he'd rather nail for it than Al."

We were silent the rest of the trip.

At the station, the desk sergeant was doubtful about permitting us to see Al, but it was only a token resistance, and soon we were walking down the clean, bright corridor. There was the smell of disinfectant in the place, and a less tangible aura—futility.

Al seemed chipper, but it was all front. He was alone in his cell and greeted us with a smile. "Loepfe's around," he said, "but it's only the first."

"Al," Faith said, and could say no more. "Not 'I told you so,' please, honey," he said.

"Of course not. Oh—"

"Don't worry," he told her. "Please don't worry. And you were right, Faith. If I—"

When I get out of this mess, I'll be your boy again. I'll sell vacuum cleaners or roofing or magazines—"

"That's a promise, Al?"

"That's a promise."

"If we could only do something." She looked at me. "Bob, can't you think of something—"

"I've done nothing but think about it all day," I told her. "One thing I can do. If it comes to a trial, I can tell how Loepfe put words in George Boyd's mouth. But the district attorney might not ask for my testimony about that."

Al's smile was cold. "That taxi driver had a sudden attack of memory. He did look at the man Ellen called to, he claims now. And the guy was me or my double. He wasn't even sure Ellen was his passenger at first, but he's a man of conviction now." He shrugged. "One of the boys could get to him, I suppose, but I'm through with all that."

"We could talk to him," I suggested. "We might be able to do some good."

A voice said, "I'd leave him alone if I were you, Wilson. I'd hate to nail you for attempting to suborn a witness."

I turned to face Loepfe. He was looking at me appraisingly, as though wondering whether to lock me up with Al. I didn't think it would be a tactful time to suggest that subornation was his trade, not mine.

I said, "You've made no attempt to look up Bert Jackson, of course. That would be work."

"I've got Al," he said, and smiled. "I don't need another suspect right now. And I don't need any help from you. You've got two more minutes here." He stood there, making no move to leave.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I told Al. "And if I get anything, I'll see that your lawyer gets it and the chief of police. I'll tell your lawyer about this other business, too, about Boyd." For Loepfe, all this, but he gave no indication that he'd heard.

Faith and I left after that, as Loepfe came over to talk to Al. Outside, the snow was falling again, fat, lazy flakes that clung to our clothes as they melted.

The light was on over the station entrance, and its brightness attracted my eyes and a thought chain was provoked, for some reason. It was only a little after four-thirty and dusk was still some minutes off, but that wasn't what provoked the memory in my mind. But what I was trying to remember was elusive, the half-seen picture melting in my mind, as the snow was melting on my overcoat.

"What are you thinking?" Faith asked.

"Nothing, nothing but nonsense, I guess. I'm thinking of a hissing radiator and a stuck zipper and a too-bright light. My sub-

conscious mind is trying to tell me something."

She looked at me curiously. "You really meant what you told Al, didn't you? I thought you were just trying to cheer him up, but you do have some ideas on this mess?"

"I haven't anything definite," I told her. "But there's an angle we've all overlooked somewhere, and it keeps prodding me." I turned to face her. "Would you like a drink or something to eat?" I asked.

"Some coffee, maybe." She was still regarding me curiously. "Why did you marry her, Bob?"

"Because she was beautiful."

"That's not enough, is it?"

"No. But it took me some time to discover it. Will you stop staring at me as though I were a bug on a pin?"

Her smile was dim, but warming. "Let's go and get some coffee."

I had the coffee. She had a sandwich and some soup, along with her coffee. We were having a cigarette when the angle began to nibble at me again.

Some instinctive compulsion made me say, "I'm going back to the apartment. I've got the damndest feeling that the answer's back there."

"I don't want to interfere," she said, "but can I go along? I'm frightened, Bob. I don't want to be alone."

"You'll be safer if you're alone. You'll be all right, Faith. I wouldn't leave you now, but I've got a feeling that time is important in this. It's just a hunch, an intuition. But I feel very strongly about it."

"All right," she agreed. "I think I'll go to a show. You'll call me later, won't you? You'll let me know if anything develops?"

"I'll call you later," I promised. I smiled. "I'll probably be calling you a lot from now on, if that's all right with you."

"I'd like that," she said.

There was a show right around the corner, a movie she hadn't seen, and I left her there. I took a cab back to the apartment.

The scene was almost a replica of the evening before, the falling snow, the dusk, the lights going on in the apartment building, the dim lights of the table lamps, the bright lights of the hall.

The brights lights of the hall. It isn't customary to have bright lights in hallways. But what was that trying to tell me?

The bushes in front were still heavy with snow. In the lower lobby, the radiator was hissing and pounding, and it was hot. Ellen had stood there struggling with a jammed zipper on her stadium boot.

Then it came. There'd been no snow on those boots. There'd been no puddle at her feet, no puddle of melted snow. And she wouldn't take off her boots down here; she'd wait until she was upstairs. Ellen was going out, not coming in!

She'd already been to one of the apartments. She hadn't expected to meet me in the hall. I'd come home earlier than usual.

And now the significance of the lights came home to me. And another thought hit me and made me wince. *He'd* lived there a long time, for three-quarters of the time that I was married to Ellen. Through those years we'd quarreled, but I had never even dreamed of infidelity. But *he'd* lived there, right across the hall.

I went up the stairs slowly and knocked at his door.

Silence for moments, and then his voice.

"Who's there?"

"Wilson."

The door opened cautiously. Boyd's face was pale, his eyes apprehensive. "What's the matter? Something gone wrong?"

"For you," I said. "I want to talk to you."

A pause. His eyes trying to read mine, his face hardening. Then he opened the door wide, and I went in.

And, as the door opened, I saw how the bright light from the hall fell into the dimly lighted living room.

Through the open door to his bedroom, I could see an open valise on a chair. "Going somewhere?" I asked.

"A little business trip," he replied. His eyes never left my face.

"Last evening," I said, "when I left Ellen, I happened to turn, and look back at the front windows of the apartment. They were brighter than they should be."

He continued to watch me, his face revealing nothing. "Well?"

"The light from the hall was coming in, through the open door," I went on. "And the light from the hall was coming into this apartment, too. Both doors were open."

"So? Maybe you were wrong about that."

"It's possible. She had just left your apartment, before I met her in the hall downstairs, hadn't she?"

"You're talking about Ellen, your former wife?"

I nodded. "And your former wife. All along, you were the boy, though, weren't you? You were the first and last, with her. But you didn't have enough money. Black-mailing Doan would be one way to get it. Only he doesn't scare. When you went to collect, he threatened you. You killed him."

"You're insane," he said. "None of this makes sense."

"It's a good story, though. Ellen was waiting for you, outside the club, in the cab. She didn't expect you'd commit murder; she didn't know it, when she called to you." I paused. "You ignored her call because you didn't want that cabbie as a witness. When Ellen learned you'd murdered Doan, she got frightened. She came here to get some

money to get out of town. She knew that gang better than you did, and she knew Pegis wouldn't rest until he'd found out the truth. You stalled her, one way or another, and as she was leaving, she met me. She tried to get the money from me, and you realized a frightened witness could send you to the chair."

Boyd was standing perfectly motionless. "It's all a wild guess."

"We'll know, when the police get a picture of Bert Jackson. She must have loved you a lot more than you loved her. You murdered her, when you realized she might break down to Pegis. But you were still right in the middle of it, as a suspect, just because of your nearness to the scene. So you came in as a witness, throwing the police off. You gave them a description of Pegis, as the man who went down the stairs. You thought that would slow him up and it did. And gave Loepfe a plausible story. Pegis never had a chance to establish an alibi before he died."

"How far do you think a story like that would go in court?" He was still pale, but how much of it was fright I couldn't tell.

"Once you're identified as Bert Jackson, it will go all the way to the chair," I answered. "You can take a trip, but they'll find you. Taking a trip will only help to convict you, Jackson."

"The police," he said softly, "don't even know about Bert Jackson. They're not interested in ancient history. They wouldn't look up her background."

"Maybe not ordinarily," I told him, "but I've already told them all about Bert Jackson."

He seemed a statue, now. I'd realized the danger of telling him that, but I'd also remembered how long he'd lived here. I wasn't as rational as I should have been.

He took one glance at the open bedroom door, and my own gaze was attracted there for a second.

That's when he threw the right hand.

It landed high on the jaw, but my head went back into the door jamb, and my brain rattled. Dimly, I saw the next right hand whistling toward my jaw.

I twisted my head clear of that, and his fist crashed into the door. I threw a wild right of my own that landed, and he went stumbling backward.

I should have got away, then, but I wasn't quite sane, remembering. I followed him swinging like a windmill, landing on his chest, his face, his neck. He went down, and I went down after him, reaching for his throat.

His knee went into my stomach, and he twisted out from under me, scrambling along the floor. I was still down, as he rose. The room seemed filled with thunder, and I thought I heard shouting.

I was still down, as something crashed behind my ear, and I rolled over on my back, fighting oblivion.

I must have been seeing visions, I thought. For that looked like Loepfe in the doorway, a gun in his hand. I saw the small vase in Jackson's hand, now, a small, metal vase. I felt it, too, right at the side of my eye. And then I didn't feel anything.

My head was still throbbing painfully, and it was too hot in Loepfe's small office. The cigar he was smoking smelled like burning rags. He was reading my statement.

When he looked up, there was something like a smile on his face. "This makes a better case. I'm glad we sent for that picture when we did. I'm glad we got it in time."

"Sure," I said. "You sent for it, I'll bet. The chief probably sent for it. Al would go to the chair, if you had your way."

He grinned at me. "My boy, Al? Why,

I've been trying to straighten him out for years. I've tried to hang all kinds of raps on him, just to scare him back to the straight and narrow. This time, it worked. I wouldn't let Al go to the chair. I wouldn't have any reason for working, if Al wasn't around."

"You kill me," I told him. "If you weren't so big, and you hadn't saved my life, I'd be tempted to hang one on your lantern jaw."

"You had all you could do to handle Jackson," he taunted me. "You did a better job on him with your brain than your muscles. It's a long way back to high school, Wilson. You're soft."

"Maybe you're right," I said. "I'll do the next best thing, then. I'll buy you a drink."

"A good idea. What are we waiting for?" he asked.

"First," I said, "I want to make a call. I want to call my . . . my girl. I promised."

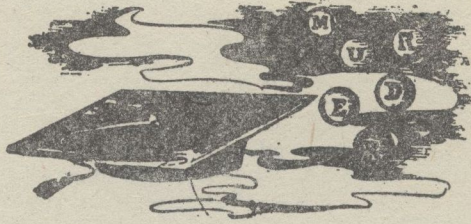


Epitaph for a Terrier

So suddenly he went,
 It does not seem he can be gone,
 Save for the poignant silence,
 And we who were his friends
 Would not have him lonely
 In fair, elysian fields,
 Where he and all his kind
 Can play, forever safe;
 And so we make a plea
 That he may have a place which
 He knows to be his own,
 Where he can lie and wait for us,
 And when perhaps some day
 Our feet, hesitant and uncertain,
 Will turn that way,
 His joyful bark will welcome us,
 To greet us as of yore,
 Then we shall not feel strange but simply
 That we are coming home once more.

MARY HOGE BRUCE.

Blood



on the campus

By C. M. KORNBLUTH

"Death by misadventure. An easy way to cover murder and scandal in a college town."

JOE HAINES and I used to set up pins in neighboring alleys, but one day he went to college and I joined the police force. I got out of the force a few years later to start my own agency, but Joe never got out of college. He collected degrees until they made him a professor. We didn't have much left in common, but we'd kept in touch with each other.

I hadn't heard from him for six months or so when a telegram came from Witterberg College in Pennsylvania, where he was Professor of Mathematics. It was a two-hundred-dollar wired money order; the accompanying message said.

COME AT ONCE STOP WIRE
TIME OF ARRIVAL

I cashed and deposited the money order, wired him and caught a train. Witterberg is on the outskirts of Reading and is an incorporated town on its own, consisting of the college and nothing else. Maybe you read the *Digest* article called "Jed Witterberg's Schoolhouse Pays Its Own Way!" It tells about the system which sounds silly to me.

Joe met me at the Reading station in a suburban wagon with the school crest painted on its panels.

"Won't do you any good to beg," I said, climbing in. "The money's spent and you can—"

"That's O.K.," he said. "You'll earn it."

I need a bodyguard. Somebody's trying to kill me." He started the wagon.

"Have you seen a psychiatrist?" I asked. "Go to hell. I mean it. His name's Edward Wakely, head of the Physics Department."

"What's it all about?"

He lit a cigarette from the dashboard gadget. "Ever hear of Kober Hall?"

"Nope. Who is he?"

Joe gave me a pained look. "Kober Hall," he said, "is the building that houses the maths section of the New Haven Institute for Advanced Research."

"And what's that?"

"The best theoretical minds in the country, the world. They have a permanent staff that even you would know by name: Eiselman, Schminck, Petrier, Ball, and lots more. And each year they tap twenty promising mathematicians to spend a year working with and under the big shots. It's the highest honor in my trade. It's been the making of some good men. I was tapped, and I leave on Friday, if I'm still alive."

We passed between a pair of red brick pillars with a gatehouse set back from them. "Who'd kill a little stringbean like you?" I asked.

"Wakely would. He was selected as my alternate. In case I declined or became unable to go, he takes my place."

I thought it over. "You sure you don't want to see a psychiatrist?" I asked. "I think you've got a duplex complex with a sunken living room."

The wagon pulled up at a row of red brick cottages, very clean and pretty.

He parked the suburban and led the way to his cottage. Pretty or not, it was jerry-built. The floors shrieked under us. He took me into the kitchen and got three quart jars from the refrigerator.

"Exhibit A," he said, handing me one. It was empty, I thought: then I saw the corpses of half a dozen mosquitoes lying in it.

"*Anopheles stegomyia*," he said, "Released in my bedroom three nights ago. They were stolen from the bacteriology lab, where their jar was clearly marked: 'Yellow fever carriers—danger; do not handle or release!' I had an aerosol bomb handy and I got them all before being bitten, I think."

"Tell me more," I said.

"Exhibit B." He handed me a jar with a half a dozen salted almonds in it. I sniffed, and they seemed to smell more like almonds than almonds should.

"My favorite brain food," he said. "I keep a bag in my study. The night before last somebody needed them with a drop of prussic acid, which, in minute quantities, is the essential flavoring oil of almonds. I happened to think their smell was a bit off, so I analyzed them."

"I take it back about the psychiatrist, Joe," I told him.

"Thanks," he grinned, handling me a third jar. It was nearly full of orange juice, looking a little grayish and cloudy. "That stuff tests out as a vigorous young culture of the deadly *bacillus botulinus*," he said. "I squeeze my breakfast juice the night before. Last night somebody slipped some bacterial soup into it, enough to kill a horse, to say nothing of a mathematician."

"Those almonds are evidence," I murmured thoughtfully. "The other two are possible accidents, but the almonds can start off a sheriff's investigation. Do you want me to get it in the works?"

"Nope," he said positively. "Our deputy sheriff is the campus policeman we've had for twenty years. I don't especially want Wakely in jail. I just want him to stay alive until I get to Kober Hall. Will you take the job?"

"Delighted. But do you think Wakely's crazy?"

Wrinkling his brows, he squinted and finally said, "No, I don't think so. I might have done the same if I'd been *his* alternate."

I looked at him with a new respect.

We had some dinner out of cans—I checked them first—and then went to his study. I smoked while he scribbled and punched a machine like a tiny upright piano, but with twenty-five little windows arranged over its sounding board. Tiny letters popped up and down as he tapped keys; every once

in a while he'd copy them onto a specially ruled form.

He sat back, rubbing his eyes.

"What is that thing?" I asked.

"Jevons' logic machine," he said, studying a form. "It solves logical equations in two values."

"Wonderful!" I said. "What won't they think of next?"

He gave me a look. "Mr. Jevons," he said, "had the misfortune to live and die in the Victorian age, and this machine was in use before you were born."

"Oh," I said, and kept my mouth shut for the rest of the evening.

I stuck to Joe like a limpet the next day and the next. I didn't learn much, but I met some interesting people. Once in the corridor between classes a tall, disreputable-looking man waved at Joe and yelled, "Hi-ya, Haines!"

"That was Wakely," said Joe afterward.

"Informal, isn't he?" I asked.

"Part of his pose. He calls co-eds 'cutiepie' and dresses like something out of Harold Teen. It's permissible, considering his very real talent."

"And the guy's trying to kill you!" I marveled.

"That," said Joe coldly, "is no reason why I should chose to ignore his professional ability."

I gave up trying to understand him and concentrated on keeping him alive. I did all the obvious things like checking food, watching for funny business in the mail, sleeping in his room and breaking up his daily schedule as much as I could. But the guy who thought up that mosquito stunt—I hoped he wouldn't bear down like that again.

Joe spent long sessions in the evening and between classes "at work." That's what he called it, and it seemed to come hard, but all I ever saw him really do was scribble a little, punch his machine around and smoke a lot of cigarettes with his eyes shut. I asked him once what it was all about, and he got a helpless, baffled look on his face and began to talk about things he called "possibles" and the difference between a "necessary" and a "sufficiency." Mathematics has certainly changed since I took plane geometry. I protested that it wasn't much to keep a man busy, and he got mad. He said that I made him nervous and would I for God's sake go out for a walk.

I locked everything up, told him not to talk to strange women and went out. It was three in the afternoon.

Old Henry Cullet, the campus cop, spotted me at thirty yards and hailed me. I'd been introduced to him the day before and had almost recovered in the interim. He gave me a pain.

Old Henry put his arm on my elbow and

told me how some of these "perfessor fellers" thought they was right smart, but how plain hoss sense was what you needed to git along in the world. He then talked about how he'd got a new stove for his gatehouse from the Board of Trustees and sold the old one back to them. He then talked about what he'd said to President Wilson in 1919 and what President Wilson had said to him.

I tried to shake him in the Campus Coke Shoppe, but he followed me in and told me that it was all politics in this country and that all the politicians was crooks, but that ol' William Jennings Bryan had had his points. He then explained the Free Silver Question to me, with quotations from Bryan's Cross of Gold speech, which he knew by heart. He then asked me if I wanted to see their atomic bomb.

"Hah?" I asked, spraying coffee on his vest.

He told me they kept it in the basement of the Physics Building in a lead-lined room.

By careful questioning, I decided that he was talking about a very small cyclotron that Witterberg had invested in seven years ago. I did want to see it, even with old Henry for a guide.

He took me to the building and into the basement. The lead-plated door was impressive with signs: "DO NOT ENTER WHILE RED LIGHT IS ON" and "DANGER—HIGH TENSION" and "RADIATION LABORATORY—UNAUTHORIZED PERSONS KEEP OUT." The red light wasn't on and Henry had the key on his ring. He unlocked the door and it took both of us, heaving, to start it swinging open. As it did so, a light clicked on automatically.

It shone on a lot of wires and glassware with white gunk plastered over it. It shone on a theatrical-looking switchboard and a twelve-foot disc lying on its side. It shone on the twisted body of Joe Haines.

I tried to speak up at the inquest, which was held the same evening after dinner in a faculty room. A Dr. Bunce of the biology department was the assistant coroner for the town of Witterberg. The president of the college was there in his capacity of mayor and Henry Cullet was there in his capacity of chief of police and deputy sheriff. Professor Wakely was there in his capacity of murder suspect—as far as I was concerned—and officially as an expert witness. He and Bunce got along beautifully, like this:

Q: Professor Wakely, what, in your opinion, was the cause of Professor Haines' death?

A: Unbelievable stupidity and negligence.

Q: Thank you, but I mean physical cause.

A: The cyclotron was turned on at full power without a target. The deceased

apparently stood in line with the stream of neutrons which the machine is designed to emit. The neutrons entering his body caused nervous traumata—

Q: Thank you, professor, but I think we'd better hear the rest of the testimony from a medical man. Dr. Quillen, will you please take the stand and tell the jury what, in your opinion, the effect of the stream of neutrons was

A: As Professor Wakely was, I am sure, about to say, the neutrons caused a coagulatory process to take place in the neurones of the deceased, inhibiting the involuntary functions of the body. Death was probably instantaneous upon the cessation of the nervous system's activity.

Q: Thank you. The next witness is Mr. Al Singer of New York. Mr. Singer wishes to volunteer some information. Now, sir, what have you to add to the testimony?

A: To the physico-medical stuff, nothing. But I'd like the jury to know that there have been three attempts previously made on Joe Haines' life this week. I'm a detective and Joe retained me as a bodyguard. It seems I didn't do so good at it.

I was wasting my breath. They listened owlshly to me, then filed out and were back in two minutes with a verdict of "death by misadventure."

The president of the college shook my hand fervently and said they'd been delighted to have me visit them and there was an excellent train out of Reading at eleven-fifteen in the evening.

I went to their law library and read myself into a headache looking for a way to take the case to the shrievalty, but couldn't find one.

I phoned the county D.A. and we had an interesting chat. He told me that the endowments of Witterberg College amounted to nine million tax-exempt dollars and that he, for one, was not the man to buck nine million tax-exempt dollars over a dubious lab accident. Now if it had been a rape case—

One of the college cabs took me to the station in Reading. I learned that there wasn't any eleven-fifteen train and hadn't been for several years. The next through train would be along at nine in the morning.

"What's a good hotel?" I asked.

The information clerk snickered and told me that the annual convention of the Benevolent and Fraternal Order of Beagles had come to town and that if I could find a room tonight I was a magician.

I wasn't a magician so I slept in the waiting room. At seven in the morning an excited young assistant professor of English shook me awake and hustled me into his car. He said the president wanted to see me.

Henry, the campus cop, was in his little house by the gate. He climbed on the running-board and rode us to the Adminis-

tration Building, where a lot of lights were burning. Dr. Bunce, the coroner, was there and he almost embraced me.

"We sent a man after you," he said emptily. "We're going to retire that old fool Cullet. Will you accept the position of chief of police?"

That one finally woke me up. "Sure," I said. "Why?"

"Didn't they tell you?" he marveled. "Professor Wakely's been murdered!"

I got my appointment from the mayor-president of the college town and went to Wakely's house on Faculty Row to see the body. It was a mess.

It was lying at the foot of a tall, old-fashioned wardrobe clad in slippers and underwear. One hand was clutching a dressing gown. He had been struck down from above and a little behind as he was taking the gown from the dresser. The weapon was gone, but I didn't anticipate any trouble in finding it.

His head had been bashed in with one terrible blow of a huge, roughly spherical mass. I guessed a twelve-inch boulder at the very least.

How can you hide a twelve-inch boulder? I was so sure of it that I sent Henry to look for it. He came back empty-handed, not that he could have lifted it, and reported no dice. I looked myself and found nothing. I tried the rock-crusher they had in the geology department, but it hadn't been used for weeks.

I personally dusted with talc and an air-gun every vehicle on the campus, but didn't develop any large, round depressions. I dug up three suspicious-looking patches of ground and they turned out to be squirrels' hoards of nuts.

After lunch I sat down with Wakely's manservant, an honest old Uncle Tom type that you don't see much of any more and sweated him for two hours. He was dignified and positive through it all and stuck to his story, each time with enough minor variations to convince me thoroughly that the truth was being told.

Wakely had come home from the inquest at eight o'clock and gone upstairs to his room. At six the next morning Uncle Tom had tapped gently on his door. At six-fifteen he had not heard Wakely stirring so he'd opened the door and looked in. At six-twenty he'd recovered consciousness and reported the killing by phone to the college president.

The room was hopeless, of course. Everybody had been trampling around and about it until the carpet was threadbare. But I tried powder anyway, and got nothing for my pains.

I wound up the brilliantly successful day by attending the Inquest No. 2, on the late Professor Edward Wakely, Ph.D., S.T.I.F.F.

Bunce was in pretty poor form. He got testimony from the man-servant, a medical opinion and an expert opinion from me. The jury found that death had resulted from a blow on the head from a blunt instrument—but *blunt!*—wielded by a person or persons unknown.

The county sheriff dropped in to deputize me and cut up a few touches. He was a shrewd, practical politician first and an able cop second. He was very glad the killing was in my lap instead of his. He gave me a good cigar and left. I polished the deputy's badge, pinned it to my vest and whistled a sad and lonesome tune.

The president of the college wanted to know who done it, and was astonished to find that I didn't have the slightest notion in the world. He had the flattering idea that because I was a New York divorce snooper by trade I could solve premeditated homicides between smokes.

"You realize," he threatened, "that your appointment is definitely *pro tempore*?"

"I'm terrified," I said. "Your threat reduces me to a quivering jelly. For your information, Mr. Mayor, I accepted this job because I'd like to find out who killed Joe Haines. I thought Wakely did it until he got killed himself. Since you don't usually have two murderers in the same county at the same time, the chances are they were both done in by the same guy. I'll tell you about him.

"He was burly, able to lift a heavy boulder. He was light on his feet because Wakely didn't turn while he was sneaking up on him. The killer had access to the departments of biology, chemistry, bacteriology and physics. He knew Joe Haines' taste in nuts. And he's a smarter man than I am, because I can't find where he ditched the murder weapon."

The president shrugged. "You might as well keep working on it," he said. "I'll bring it up at the trustees' meeting next week."

"Do that. Incidentally, if both the alternates chosen for Kober Hall are unavailable, who gets the appointment?"

"That's happened a couple of times," said the president. "The answer is 'nobody.' Good day. I wish you luck."

He waddled out. I lit a cigarette and wished me luck, too. I needed some. I went to sleep and dreamed of a burly man who was light on his feet and could make a twelve-inch boulder invisible with a wave of the hand.

The next morning I did some surly, random grilling of the faculty and got nowhere. I went to Faculty Row and let myself into Haines' house. I didn't have a search warrant, but I went through his private letters and papers with a reckless hand. Much of it was mathematics and meant nothing to me. I was still looking by noon.

I gave up and wandered into his study for a smoke. This was where I had left the little stringbean at three in the afternoon; in an hour he had been dead in the cyclotron room. He had been working on the Jevons logic machine—

I went over and looked at it. All the tiny windows were blank. There were twenty-five keys at the base, in one long row. The two outside keys had the colon sign (:) engraved on them. The thirteenth key, in the middle, mysteriously said "cop." I'd asked Joe about it and been told that it stood for "copula," which stood for "is" or the equals sign in arithmetic as well as a number of other things. The other keys to the left of "cop" carried the alphabet up to "k"; on the right they carried the same in reverse order.

I punched a few at random and watched letters bob up in the windows and wondered what it was all about.

I pressed the "cop" key.

There was the faintest little sizzle. I'd heard it before, half a dozen times, in the bleak winter fighting through Belgium. It meant that you'd stepped on a *schuh* mine and had about a tenth of a second to throw yourself on your face and roll away before your leg was blown off at the knee.

I threw myself on my face, beginning to marvel: "But why—"

The blast pushed solidly against my back and a chunk of something smacked my knuckles, which were locked at the nape of my neck.

I waited for plaster to stop raining down and got groggily to my feet. There were a few people in the room. Their lips were moving and they looked excited, but all I could hear was a tinkling buzz in my ears.

I yelled at them and heard my voice, as though at a great distance: "I'm O.K. Clear out of here!"

They cleared out and I broodingly inspected the remains of the Jevons machine. It was a tangle of rods and plates and cams, opened out like a flower. The blast had knocked the pictures from the walls. One of the pictures was lying face down, a slip of paper wedged behind one of the nails that held it to the frame. I picked out the paper, smoothed it and read, in an illiterate pencil scrawl:

"Got yore cole stuff doc will deliver 3:15 today shore is hevvy."

I sat down with that note staring me in the face and thought for one solid hour before it came together. As soon as I realized that "cole" had to mean "cold" I was on my way.

Three hours later I summoned the sheriff,

the college officials and the Keystone cop to the faculty room. They filed in and took their seats glancing suspiciously at one another. They all read detective stories and were pretty sure I was going to say: "Gentlemen, the murderer is in this room!"

I had a surprise for them. "Gentlemen," I said, "the murderer is guaranteed not to be in this or any other room."

"All right," said the president testily.

"Who killed Haines and Wakely?"

"They killed each other," I said.

"You're crazy," said the president.

"Here's what happened: Wakely made three attempts to kill Haines and they all failed. He determined on a fourth, booby-trapping the Jevons machine first chance he got. That turned out to be when Haines left his house at three-thirty the other day Wakely sneaked in and connected his explosive charge.

"What he didn't know was that Haines had left his house at three-thirty to booby-trap Wakely's tall, old-fashioned wardrobe with a huge chunk of dry ice.

"Wakely, his little errand finished, ran into Haines on the way back and probably decoyed him into the cyclotron room with an argument of some kind. While there he lined him up, turned on the machine and killed him. His next job was to disarm the Jevons machine, but he was tied up by the inquest. That evening, while changing clothes, he yanked open the wardrobe door and a couple of hundred pounds of dry ice fell six feet or so and bashed in his head. He died without a whimper and wasn't discovered for ten hours, by which time, of course, the ice had evaporated."

"Got any evidence for that?" asked the sheriff skeptically.

I passed him the note from the picture. "With that lead," I said, "I rounded up everything I needed. The dry ice was supplied by the busboy at the Campus Coke Shoppe. He was told to keep his mouth shut as a practical joke was being planned. I've got the basket Haines carried the dry ice in. I've got witnesses that saw him carrying it. You just have to know what to look for in this racket."

"Not bad," said the sheriff.

"Here," I unpinned the deputy's badge and tossed it to him. "The legal details are all yours; I hereby resign. I'm going back to New York and divorce cases, where a cop's a cop and not an equal sign."

I did, too. The next morning a Ph.D. from Columbia came into my office wanting me to guard a thesis he was writing against a rival from Fordham who had tried to steal it. I threw him out on his tail.





Dead men in white

By CHARLES HEMINGER

Why don't you get wise to yourself, doctor? Everyone in the hospital was asking the same question. It was the old story: The operation was a success but the patient died.

I.

CROSSING the brick-paved quadrangle from the Residence Annex, I took a shaky deep breath of the soft morning air. It was going to be a nice day. I decided maybe that was a good omen. You get like that when you've been stretching your nerve a little too far.

I was a little bit rubber-legged, but I had a right to be. Fifty major surgical operations in a single night. That's rough, brother. Fifty separate times I had made my conservative incision into the peritoneum and gone in after a gastric ulcer. I got so good they were all standing around cheering. I was whisking out the diseased tissue like a cork out of a bottle. And every time Holloway, the skinny intern doing anesthesia, would look up and say, "I'm sorry, doctor, but your patient is dead." And they would all repeat it, like a Greek chorus.

At three in the morning I had given up, switched on my bedside lamp and taken down the big *Syllabus of Surgical Pathology*. Dawn was starting to gray in the east when I put out the last butt in the overflowing ash tray and clicked off the light.

Shaving that morning, I'd had a scare. For a moment I'd thought the slight tremor of the hand I'd brought back from the Evac Hospital on the Canal was coming back again.

The hand looked steady enough on close inspection. I'd grinned relief at the lathered face in the mirror.

Cushman Memorial Hospital, Main Building, was a dumpy pile of red brick and grimy sandstone in the morning light. I skirted the loading dock, slipped down the outside stairs to basement level and along the dark corridor past the morgue and the maintenance rooms. I didn't want any breakfast, but if the dietician hadn't been raising Cain lately you could get coffee in the diet kitchen.

The serving room is a windowless basement vault. From the kitchen you heard the clatter of crockery and some dishwasher singing at his work. Three people at a corner table cut their conversation when I joined them. I got three separate self-conscious looks.

"Good morning, Dr. Judd," Gavin spoke up, a little too loudly. "How's the boy wonder this morning?"

"Still wondering," I told him. I straddled a chair and nodded around to the women.

"I don't blame you," Gavin said. "If I were you I'd be wondering, too."

Very carefully, using both hands, I set my cup down and looked at him. Dr. Carl Gavin was our ace pathologist. A wiry little guy, he was the hyperthyroid type that keeps his mainspring wound too tight. He had great liquid dark eyes, a sallow dish-face and a small hairline mustache. He was supposed to be three kinds of hell on wheels with women. Don't ask me why.

Right now he was wearing a loose-lipped grin like he always did when he was stick-

ing pins into people. The grin was sloppier than usual. I sniffed the air. *Spiritus frumenti*. Dr. Gavin was quite a little bit drunk.

"How do you get away with it?" I asked. "You know how Dr. Ben is about booze." It was true. I'd seen him scalp an intern who showed up with no more than a slightly nervous hangover.

Red crept into Gavin's face. "I'm not afraid of Murdock," he said. "I do my job. I haven't lost a patient in years." He underlined the "I."

On my right, across from him, sat Helen Rejack, chief surgical nurse. She gave me a little shrug of apology. In surgery, Rejack is the best nurse in the world. She has the cold, impersonal efficiency of a piece of operating-room furniture, and she attracts about as much attention. But I wouldn't want her nursing me. With her the milk of human kindness came in bottles, sterilized. A thin angular woman of forty, she has that washed-out look. She wears her colorless hair drawn severely back under her black-banded white cap.

Gavin said, "Don't you think Dr. Judd looks run-down, Miss Jerome? Don't you think he needs a vacation?"

Across from me, the girl hesitated. I got it now. Gavin was showing off for her benefit. Ginny Jerome was something new. Fresh out of nursing school, she's one of Rejack's girls in surgery. A trim brunette who moves with the lithe grace of a healthy young animal. The kind that is bound to cause trouble in any outfit until everybody gets her figured out. She goes around with a wide-eyed look like she thinks everybody around a hospital is a little bit nuts. She is right, of course.

"Look, Carl," I asked, "why don't you lay off me?"

"Purely a friendly interest, my dear fellow. I hate to see you making a mistake."

"Such as."

"I hear you're operating on Colonel Beel's ulcers this morning."

"Well?"

"No, no," he sniggered. "A thousand times no."

"You're drunk."

"Conservative treatment is what you want, doctor," he lectured me. "Diet and Sippy powders and alumina gel." He spread his hands, appealing to the women. "It's the heart, doctor. The heart."

"Nuts. His heart is as sound as one of his own stock-tickers."

"You can never count on it in a man of the colonel's age. Not for an operation that might run overtime."

Gavin paused. He got his coffee to his lips, spilling a third of it. "Anyway," he added, "you hadn't better lose him."

"I wasn't planning to."

"Your big chance would go blooey, wouldn't it?"

"Let's skip it, Gavin."

"Oh, come off it, doctor. Everybody knows Ben Murdock is too old for chief of surgery. He'll be retiring. The job'll be between you and your friend Henry Earl. And everybody knows the trustees are probably still on your side, especially Colonel Beel. Better keep him alive, or else—" The little pathologist sliced his finger across his throat.

I got a grip on myself. It was silly to let this screwball get under my skin. "Sure, I could carry him along with Sippy powders until those ulcers start perforating. Then I could operate, if he hadn't gone into peritonitis or bled to death."

Gavin pursed his lips. "It's your patient, doctor. Far be it from me to interfere. I just don't want him to be *my* patient."

"Carl!" came Rejack's flat voice. "We'd better go."

He ignored her. He was enjoying himself. "Let's see," he added on his fingers, "there was your brain tumor. And that head wound the police brought in. And even a simple appendix. They all ended up in drawers in my little cooler, Dr. Judd. Three out of your last four major operations." He turned to Ginny. "Don't you think he ought to have a vacation?"

Ginny looked scared.

My lips were stiff, and when I got the words past them I could hardly hear them myself. "It does happen," I said. "Every surgeon knows it depends on the breaks, to a certain extent. You have a bad stretch. Then it averages out." The words sounded familiar. They should have. I'd been saying them to myself for a week.

"Of course, doctor," he said with pleasant malice. "Bad luck. To be sure. Oh, certainly. But it's hardly fair to the patient to operate when you're having a streak of bad luck. You could even call it criminal."

"Dr. Gavin," I said, spacing my words carefully, "get the hell out. Now."

Rejack laid a hand on his arm, but Gavin angrily shook her off. He scraped his chair back, made me a drunken bow. Then he turned to Ginny. He gave her his best leer. He said, "Are you going upstairs, Miss Jerome?"

"Why, I suppose so," Ginny faltered. She glanced at me.

Gavin led her to the door. He turned for a last look at me. "You damn butcher!" he said thickly. "Why don't you get wise to yourself, doctor?"

I gave them a minute to get out of the hall. Beside me Rejack sat bolt upright. In her withered hand she still held her coffee cup, held it so tightly the knuckles showed white. Rejack has a grip like a man's. She has a grip on herself, too. Her face was frozen.

I was almost to the door when she grabbed my arm. She broke out, "Why don't you keep her away from him?"

"What?"

"That Jerome girl. He was only . . . only like that because she was here."

"Boloney. All pathologists are crazy. It's common knowledge."

"Keep your girl away from him. Please, Don."

"My girl? You're all wet, Helen. We've been out together a few times. That's all."

Her pale eyes seemed to burn me. "Haven't you ever seen the way she looks at you? Don, are you blind?"

"Helen! Stop it!"

She gave a harsh, unsteady laugh. "Or are you wedded to your work like Murdock and Carl?"

"Helen!"

She stopped short. She closed her eyes and swallowed. The professional mask went back on her face, completely deadpan. Her voice came, cold and correct. "I'm sorry, doctor. I forgot myself. It won't happen again."

In the main hall I passed the telephone switchboard room. Viola Peterson, a leggy blonde, was absorbed in putting on her face. She is a good kid, only they should never have let her out of high school at her age.

"Who wants me?" I asked.

Viola squealed in surprise.

"The annunciator," I said patiently. "My number is showing."

"Oh, that. Dr. Murdock wanted you."

"When?"

"Maybe an hour ago."

I winced. "Of course, you never thought of switching it over to the Residence."

She screwed up her face. "Dr. Murdock isn't a nice man. I don't like him."

"O.K.," I said. "I'm glad it wasn't anything important. I was afraid you got stuck on your crossword puzzle again."

That reminded her. "You're so smart on the hard words," she said, with a melting look. "Large rodent. Three letters."

I spelled it out for her: "G-A-V-I-N."

"But that's too long."

"Joke, Viola." She laughed dutifully. I told her to try R-A-T. Then I heard about her ma, who had done just like I said and now her leg pains are all gone, doctor, and how she had to work the switchboard two shifts today because Marie was getting married, and—I beat a retreat. Up in surgery I looked into Murdock's office, but Dr. Ben was busy. I went on to the locker room off the surgeons' lounge and started to change clothes.

You know how it is when you find the pack is empty and you don't have a spare. Maybe you've just thrown one down, but suddenly you're dying for a cigarette. I even looked in the ash trays for a good butt.

Then I remembered Earl usually had a carton in his locker. Lockers are not locked at Cushman Memorial. Candy bars and magazines are borrowed back and forth. Nobody minds.

It is amazing the amount of useless junk the human pack-rat collects. I was going

"tch-tch" as I dug down through the various layers, but when I got to the bottom layer I didn't go "tch-tch."

It was a .45 Colt army automatic.

There was no reason why Earl shouldn't have one. He'd been in the Medical Corps, too, even if he'd never got any further than Letterman General.

I balanced it in my hand. Two and a half pounds of blue-steel trouble. The clip held its full seven rounds.

I don't like guns. I've tried to patch up too many of the holes they put in people.

A shoe scraped outside. By the time Earl walked in the gun was back in place.

Dr. Henry Earl is a small-framed guy, with thin blond hair and a pink baby complexion. His thick rimless glasses and prominent teeth make him look like a self-important rabbit.

If he'd seen anything he didn't show it. He said, "Don, I looked over your patients on the ward."

"Well, thanks. Why so generous?"

"Oh, I thought you might have enough on your mind this morning."

"Yeah?"

Earl was changing into fresh whites. He got cigarettes up for me and said, "How do you feel?"

I didn't answer him. He shot me a side-long glance and said, "Don."

"Would you like me to do your operation on Colonel Beel this morning?"

"I would not. Why would I?"

"Well, you've been working pretty hard and you're getting kind of edgy and maybe you need a rest."

I boiled over. "Dammit, Earl, you, too! Everybody's treating me like I'm under a curse. You just hold up your end on the assist and we'll be all right."

"Sure, Don," he said mildly. "Just trying to help." So I felt like a heel.

"I do need to relax," I admitted. "Maybe Ginny and I will hoist a few beers tonight. Want to come along?"

He said slowly, "Don, I'm taking Ginny to a show tonight. Did you have a date with her?"

"Well, no. But I just sort of thought—"

"You don't mind?"

"Oh, no," I said. And tried to think I meant it.

I had meant to ask him about the gun, but, somehow, I didn't. I did ask if he were having any trouble collecting bills from his patients lately and he looked blank and said she wasn't.

II.

COLONEL ROBERT R. BEEL was sitting up in bed. Grizzled and thin in the white hospital gown, he didn't look like a big-shot financier. He looked like any old man in the world.

"She won't let me have a cigar," he complained.

I grinned at him. I really liked the old tyrant. He didn't scare me. His nurse brought his chart.

"Sure you want me to handle this job?" I asked him. "I really specialize in brain surgery, you know."

"That's all right. My wife says I have all my brains in my stomach, anyway."

He fixed me with his hawk's eye. "I always get the best. Which reminds me. I'll be wanting you for chief of surgery."

"Well, thanks, colonel. But the superintendent will have a say on that."

"Nonsense. The super's a figurehead. Murdock really runs Cushman Memorial." He smiled significantly. "But I'm not chairman of the board of trustees for nothing."

Before I left I gave him a final going over.

A young woman burst out of Dr. Ben's office as I came down the hall. Her face was lobster-red, her expression outraged, and she was pursued by the voice of Dr. Ben Murdock, booming and profane. That was his second new secretary this month. I reflected how a man with Dr. Ben's knowledge of anatomy can do so much better at obscenity than the ordinary mortal.

The chief was growling into a dictaphone mouthpiece. He flagged me down with the other arm.

It was easy to see why Dr. Ben had collected such nicknames as "Big Ben" or the "Bull of the Woods." Not a tall man, he weighed over two hundred pounds. With his barrel-chest and short, heavy arms, he looked like a big shuffling bear. The tip-off on any surgeon is his hands. Dr. Ben's were true bear's paws, furred on the back with black hair, but the stubby, powerful fingers could be delicate as a woman's when they held surgical instruments.

He wore his hair in the shortest possible crew-cut. It fitted his large skull like a white velvet cap.

Finished with the dictaphone, he leaned back, scratching his jaw reflectively. "Fool woman ran out on me," he said, grieved. "I was just writing a letter to a feller."

"I heard you. But you can't send stuff like that through the mails."

"Humph!" he growled. "Mebbe I did cuss a little." Almost buried in the heavy slab of his face, the tiny eyes twinkled.

In most hospitals, you approach the chief on your knees. Not here. Ben Murdock burned with the single-minded passion of his devotion to surgery, and to him everything else in the world was so much fluff. People, to him, were either other surgeons or possible patients. Even the janitor could insult him by his front name and he would roar with laughter, but in the operating room he would have no mercy for his own mother.

Even *Who's Who* didn't know his age. But he'd been a major in World War I.

I remember how pleased Henry Earl and I had been to be picked to intern at Cushman Memorial. Murdock's name had been in our text-books. And it was really something when he'd decided to keep us on his staff. Cushman, with its two hundred beds, is no Mayo Clinic, but we have our own reputation.

Right now he was still grouching. "Women! Clutter up a feller's life. Stay away from 'em, Donny. A doctor's got to know his own mind."

I got him off his favorite subject. "You wanted me?"

"I called, didn't I?" He glared suspiciously.

"You were busy," I excused.

He let it go. That showed he had something on his mind.

"Now, Donny," he began. "You sure you're in shape to work on Beel this morning?"

Here it was again. I clenched my hands.

"I . . . um . . . I could do it for you."

"But, Dr. Ben, you don't operate much any more. I can—"

That was the wrong thing to say. The big bear roared. I added new words to my blue list. He calmed down with, "I'm too old, is that it? Why, you puppy, you'll see the day when I operate on you for hardening of the arteries!"

Finally, he let me go. I could feel his tiny eyes glittering on my back as I went out.

Ginny Jerome came into the scrub room. She brought the mask I'd forgotten. I held still while she tied it on me.

She was worried. "Dr. Gavin was here till a minute ago, Dr. Judd."

"It's Don, remember?"

"Well, Don. Why does he hate you?"

"You mean that riding he gave me this morning? Forget it. That's the medical-student idea of humor. He never outgrew it."

Ginny gave me a shy look. She said, "I'd like to kind of cheer you up." She was only a kid, really. "You don't have much time for girls, do you, Don?"

My mind was elsewhere. I said absently, "This is a tough business, kid. It takes all you've got and a little bit more."

She snorted. "You sound like Dr. Murdock," she said. "That . . . that pincher."

And as she stood there beside me, I began to be aware of something. Something deep and electric and eternally feminine. It welled up in her and I sensed it like magnetism. Some women have it. And the innocent ones who have it are dangerous like nothing else in the world.

With an effort, I put all this out of my mind.

It was zero hour. In the white-tiled

operating theater they were waiting for me. In honor of Colonel Beel, Rejack herself was passing instruments. I looked from her cold, impersonal stare to Earl's mild eyes, rabbitly behind his thick glasses.

From then on I didn't see anything but a square of skin, shaved and painted brown with iodine and framed with snowy towels.

Rejack slapped a Bard-Parker knife into my rubber palm. It caught the blaze of light from overhead and glittered silver. I closed my eyes briefly and took a deep breath.

Glistening wet scarlet, the wound smiled open under the knife.

It was like a miracle. I had been working very slow, double-checking everything. And then it came over me like a warm flash. I had my nerve back. I *knew* I couldn't lose. The old confidence, the magic touch that makes a real surgeon out of a dub.

I even let myself get cocky. I looked up and grinned through the mask at Rejack. "Get a load of this," I said. "I'm going to do one for the book. I'll have this guy eating nails in a week."

You could see everybody relax. Earl and I were clicking along like the team we were. I had my finger through the gastrohepatic omentum and behind the stomach, ready for the sutures. The intern handling the anesthetic droned a warning and I almost missed it.

I had a quart of saline running into the vein as a routine safeguard. Maybe this was a reaction, so I ordered the saline stopped. Falling blood pressure. Quickening, fading pulse. I could hear the sound of breathing growing ragged and shallow.

What the hell?

I did everything I knew. I called for oxygen and carbon dioxide and started to close up in a hurry. I even shot adrenalin directly into the vena vaca.

Then Earl's hand closed over mine and it was all over.

The patient was dead.

I was cold all over. I was staring at my hands like I'd never seen them before. The only thing in my mind was Carl Gavin's voice, repeating over and over, "Why don't you get wise to yourself, doctor?"

Rejack must have steered me out to the scrub room. Earl would finish up, she said. I stripped out of gown and gloves.

Moving like a mechanical man, I went to the surgeons' lounge, got out of my clothes and climbed under an icy shower. I was still under the water when I heard the door open and Murdock's heavy shuffle came into the room.

"Donny!" he bellowed.

I wound a towel around my middle and came out. Dr. Ben's heavy paw took my shoulder in a grip that hurt.

"What happened?" he grunted.

I sank down on the bench, avoiding his eyes. "I don't know," I said. "He just—died."

There was complete silence while his glittering little eyes searched my face. And then Dr. Ben began to curse. It was almost poetry. He didn't raise his voice, but the words were brutal and vicious. It wasn't directed at me. It was against things in general. It was cursing to make your blood run cold. Oddly enough, I began to feel a lot better.

Dr. Ben simmered down. He stumped up and down the room like a caged animal.

"You couldn't have picked a worse one to lose," he grumbled. "D'you realize who that was?"

"I know who it was. It was Colonel Robert Beel, my friend."

"The chairman of the Board! Great God!"

He did some more walking.

"Donny."

"Yes."

"Do you want to see his folks?"

I shook my head. "Would you do it, Dr. Ben?"

He dug an old-fashioned turnip watch out of his tunic and scowled at the dial. "I better hurry," he said.

"Thanks."

"Donny," he said, "I been thinking. Mebbe you better have a vacation." He gave me a queerly expectant look.

"Sure," I said bitterly. "The longer the better. Death takes a holiday."

"Now, Donny," he began.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I've still got all my buttons."

"Good. I figured mebbe you was going temperamental on me." He shoved his meatly-red face up to mine. "Listen, Donny. A surgeon don't think about human life like ordinary people do. He can't let himself. It's got to be just something he uses in his business. And don't you forget it."

I started to come alive. "Dr. Ben, there's something wrong with this whole affair. Something off-key. It just doesn't happen like that."

He gave me a sharp look. "There'll be an autopsy. It's all provided for in Ben's will."

I was thinking now. "Dr. Ben, he shouldn't have died. I knew him inside out. He didn't sneeze, but what I knew about it. Dammit, I'm no intern. There was no reason for him to die."

Murdock stared. "If there was anything out of the way," he said, "Gavin will find it. That little rummy is the best pathologist in the world."

He lumbered toward the door. "Go write up your report," he told me. "We'll talk later."

I had this idea in my head now and I clutched at it like a drowning man. While I was dressing, I made myself review Beel's case history from the very beginning. There's a pattern to medical cases that a

doctor can sense, and this one didn't jell. There was some factor that hadn't been figured.

In the hall I passed the door of the workroom. Ginny Jerome was folding four-by-fours.

I went in and sat on the edge of the worktable. I didn't want to be alone. I wanted another human being around. Anybody would do.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

"Out to lunch."

"Aren't you eating? Or were you waiting for me?"

"I'll go later," she smiled, "but I'll bet you haven't eaten."

"Don't want anything."

She began to bustle about with that superior air women have. There's a small refrigerator in the workroom for biological supplies, but the gals often smuggle snacks into it. First think I knew I had a 250-cc beaker of milk in my hand and a box of ginger snaps.

They tasted good. It had been a long time since dinner the night before.

Ginny said, "Don, I just wanted to say how sorry I am about—"

"Forget it."

She went back to her four-by-fours. In a minute she said, "Don, there's something wrong around here."

"Woman's intuition?" I kidded.

"I don't know," she worried. "But this place gives me the creeps."

I looked at her. "Having man trouble?"

She shivered. "That's part of it."

"You're a very attractive girl. You ought to be used to it."

"Thanks, pal," she said, with irony. "I can handle wolves. But these—they're so darned surgical about it. And Dr. Gavin is older than my father, Dr. Murdock, too."

I stared at her, frowning. "That doesn't sound like Dr. Ben."

"You and your Dr. Ben."

I was playing with my big idea again. We were talking about different things, but she was right about something being wrong. I said slowly. "You're new around here. You imagine a lot of things."

She bit her lip. "Don."

"Yes."

"Does Dr. Murdock use drugs?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, I stopped by the ward yesterday afternoon. The nurse wasn't in the office. But the five o'clock medications were set up on the desk. And Dr. Ben was there."

"Why shouldn't he be?"

"I startled him. I'm almost positive he had a tube of morphine in his hand. But when he saw me he fumbled around, picked up a vial of insulin and hurried out."

"You're crazy," I said.

"Don, you should have seen his eyes. He looked right at me. They were all pupil."

I knew what she meant. In an addict that's

a sign he needs it and needs it bad. After he gets his dose the pupils contract to pin-points.

A faint chill fluttered down my back. I felt like hell. I was being disloyal to Dr. Ben. But I found myself saying it, "I think you're wrong, Ginny. But could you . . . could you manage to get into the ward office and check the narcotics inventory. Without anybody knowing what you were doing?"

She nodded.

"I think so, Don."

I didn't think she'd find anything, even so. There's too many ways to cover a shortage.

"I'll let you know tonight," she said.

I looked at her. "Tonight? Aren't you going out with Earl?"

"Would you rather I didn't?"

"Why should I care?"

Color mounted in her face. Her eyes were suspiciously bright. All of a sudden I was really seeing her again, like I had in the scrub room this morning.

"I'm sorry, Ginny."

She didn't answer. She was at work on the four-by-fours again, her hands trembling a little.

I stood there helpless, feeling like a fool. I wanted to tell her something, but there didn't seem to be anything to say. Oh, this was my day all right.

I put in most of the afternoon writing up my operation report on Beel. It was a tough one to write. I had to get it all down, without trying to whitewash myself.

Murdock wasn't in his office when I took the report over. Maybe he was gone for the day. Hours are apt to be irregular at Cushman Memorial.

I tossed the report into his "IN" basket and slumped down in Dr. Ben's chair, letting the wind go out of my sails.

I didn't like what I was going to do. But I searched Murdock's desk, and I did a good job. The total yield was one hypodermic syringe, and that didn't need to mean anything.

A folded slip of paper was tucked almost out of sight in a corner of the desk blotter. It turned out to be an oculist's prescription blank.

I moved to another chair when I heard Murdock's heavy shambling step in the corridor.

"You still here?" he growled. He lowered his weight into his chair, grunted relief and scratched himself.

I smiled. "I didn't know you were so vain, Dr. Ben."

"Huh?"

"Contact lenses," I said, waving the prescription blank. "Invisible eyeglasses."

"Gimme that!"

I surrendered the blank. "That prescription is for presbyopia," I mused. "I didn't know you needed glasses."

He slammed his desk in irritation. "I don't! The feller's a fool. It's just eyestrain." Suddenly, it dawned on me. I asked, "When did you get examined?"

He looked blank. "Why, yesterday noon. Say, what the hell's eatin' you?"

"But how come you went to an outside man instead of somebody here at Cushman?"

Dr. Ben was losing patience. "Get out of here, Donny," he grumbled. "I got work to do."

I started for the Residence. On my way out through the dark basement corridor, I spotted a thin line of light under the door of the morgue.

My knock opened the door. Gavin stood there in his white gown, one rubber-gloved hand holding the knob.

"Well, well!" he said. "To what do I owe this honor?"

I went in. "If this keeps up," he was saying, "I'll be drawing a bigger gallery than you do, Dr. Judd."

Henry Earl was standing by the slab. He was dressed in street clothes. Behind the thick glasses, his brown rabbit's eyes blinked at me.

He nodded. Then he looked at his watch, mumbled something and headed for the door.

I sat on the edge of Gavin's cluttered desk. "Why the overtime?" I asked.

Gavin said, "The family is in a hurry for the remains of the late colonel. But it will take me a little longer than it did you, doctor?"

I let that one pass.

The morgue is a small, windowless room. Right now the only light was a green-shaded drop-lamp hanging in the center of the room. Directly under it was the tiled, heavy white-porcelain slab with little streams of water running down its side-gutters. I looked away from what was on the slab.

The pathologist reached for a large muscle-retractor and went back to work.

"What did Earl want?" I said.

Gavin grinned nastily. "The same thing you do. He wanted to know how Beel died."

"Well, what's the answer?"

"Give me time. I'm hardly inside yet." He looked up from the cadaver. "General respiratory and circulatory collapse," he quoted my own tentative diagnosis back at me. "That's very good, doctor. All it says is the man is dead."

"But—"

"Don't worry. I'll tell you why your patient died. I always do, don't I?"

I made myself ignore that one, too. I studied Gavin's workbench on the opposite wall. It looked like a mad scientist's laboratory, complete even to a good triple-objective microscope and a small centrifuge. Gavin didn't trust the technicians in our regular lab. He liked to do most of the fancy stuff himself.

Gavin wasn't drunk tonight. The change in him was remarkable. He was working with the speed and finesse of a lecture-room demonstrator. He had pulled his dictaphone up on its rolling stand and every few minutes he would straighten, pick up its speaking tube, rattle off his findings.

The little guy was good. You had to admit that.

He got back to playing the perfect host "I suppose I ought to extend my sympathy, doctor."

"For what?"

"My dear fellow. By knocking off the chairman of the board, you have neatly cut your own throat as a candidate for chief of surgery. When Murdock retires the job will go to Henry Earl."

"Balony! Dr. Ben's good for a long time yet.

"Balony nothing. Murdock's a has-been. He doesn't even do his own work."

"What?"

"That variation on the pre-frontal lobotomy you and Earl worked out. I notice when it got written up in the *Medical Register* it was credited to Murdock."

"Nuts!" I said. "Could he help it if the writer didn't get his facts straight?"

Gavin gave me a pitying smile.

He worked silently in the cone of light. I watched from the shadows.

"Where's Ginny?" he said.

"Didn't Earl tell you?"

"Out with him, eh?"

"You'd better worry about your own girl friend," I told him.

"Eh?"

"Helen Rejack."

Gavin's face darkened. "That frustrated old maid! I wish she'd let me alone. Just because I bought her a few drinks—" He spat.

I tried, unsuccessfully, to imagine Rejack having a few drinks.

The minutes dragged, punctuated only by Gavin's occasional clipped words into the dictaphone.

"Anything yet?"

He frowned.

"Check for pulmonary embolism," I suggested.

Gavin reddened. He laid down his retractor. "My dear doctor," he purred in silky insult. "I know my trade. Might I suggest that you learn your own. Or go take a job in a butcher shop. You should be well qualified."

That did it. I'd been taking it too long, without a chance to dish any out. For a minute I didn't even know what I was doing. I had to get my hands on something, and all I could see before me was Gavin's sneering face.

Then Gavin's hand hit me in the face and I went reeling back against the desk. I stayed there, shaking my head, gazing

stupidly at my finger marks reddening on his throat.

Gavin crouched by the slab. He was white with rage. His gloved hand trembled at his throat.

We were like waxworks figures. In the clammy, lifeless air of the morgue the only sound was a steady clicking from the phone as it dangled by my hand, and occasional tinny squawk from the operator. I must have knocked it off when I hit the desk.

"You killed one man this morning," Gavin whispered through tight lips. "Isn't that enough?"

I stumbled for the door, wondering if I were going to be sick. The little guy was half my size. Was there anything I hadn't pulled today?

I did my best when I got downtown, but I couldn't get drunk. It happens, sometimes. But later in the evening things got coldly blurred.

I remember wondering miserably if Ginny was having a good time with Earl.

I don't remember what time I came home. I do recall there was a police car in front of the hospital. That bothered me. The cops always deliver around back.

You can guess how I felt in the morning. I felt worse when I got over to the hospital and they told me Gavin was dead.

III.

"THEY'VE got Henry Earl in there with them now," Ginny said. She shivered. We were sitting in the same deserted workroom off the surgical suite.

"Who is *they*?"

"Dr. Murdock and the man from the police. They're in Dr. Murdock's office. They've talked to just about everybody already."

I was holding my head in my hands. This did not represent discouragement. I was simply trying to hold it together.

Her eyes widened. "You look sick."

"Must be the neutral spirits I had last night," I told her. "They weren't neutral. They were agin me."

Ginny made sympathetic noises. She drew hot water from the sterilizer, produced a smuggled jar of instant coffee.

The coffee started to clear the hot cotton wool out of my head. I lit a cigarette, trying to get my brain into gear. I had a feeling I was going to need it.

Ginny went on, "Miss Rejack doesn't believe Dr. Gavin killed himself."

I asked some questions, but she didn't know anything. Gavin had died by gunshot, she'd heard. And Rejack was going around looking like a zombie.

"Ginny, I'd better clear something up for you, Dr. Ben does not use drugs."

"Oh, I meant to tell you. I checked on the ward. The narcotics inventory balances."

I nodded. "A few hours before you saw him he'd had his eyes examined. Get it?"

"Oh! Then it was the atropine, wasn't it? The drops they put in your eyes. They dilate the pupil."

"Sure."

Ginny looked disappointed. "But why did he act so funny?"

"You know how he is about admitting there's anything wrong with him. He drives himself. He has to have a fever of 102 before he'll admit he's got a cold."

"Well, I'm sorry, Don."

"No harm done. Dr. Ben need never know we suspected him of being a hop-head."

Then she got sympathetic about my hangover again and I asked her what kind of an evening she'd had herself. All right after it got started, I gathered, but Earl had been late.

I wanted to follow that up, but things started to happen. The annunciator panel in the hall chimed softly and lit up with my number. The phone rang before I could get to it to call in. It was that fussy old babe down in Central Supply, and she was all upset because we were one saline infusion bottle short on our exchange this morning. Ginny argued with her while I chewed my nails.

When I got through to Viola on the switchboard it turned out I was wanted in the chief's office.

Earl was leaving Murdock's office as I came up. When he saw me, he frowned and made motions of tightening his lips and shaking his head from side to side.

There wasn't much time to figure that one out.

Dr. Ben performed the introductions with his usual lack of polish.

Detective Lieutenant Sam Tabor looked more like somebody's uncle than like any cop who ever gave me a parking ticket. Dr. Ben sat at his desk, grumbling to himself and stabbing at his desk blotter with the paper knife.

Tabor sat beside the desk. With his thinning hair, his neat business suit and his bifocals he might have been a surgical supplies salesman calling on a tough prospect.

I asked how Gavin had died but he politely brushed that aside and wanted to know where I had been last night.

"Half the bars in town," I told him. That brought me a scowl from Murdock.

"Could you establish any definite times?" Tabor asked politely.

"I'm afraid not. I wasn't keeping track." I made some gag about maybe the union bartenders' local could get together and check me in and out of the various taverns.

Nobody laughed.

"When did you get back to the hospital, doctor?"

I thought for a minute and told him about seeing the police car out front.

Tabor nodded and said, "Would you mind telling about your . . . er . . . argument with Dr. Gavin yesterday morning?"

"What's the idea of all this?"

The detective gave me his sad, apologetic smile, but he meant business.

So somebody had been talking about the riding I had taken from Gavin in the diet kitchen. Rejack, no doubt. Had she also told him Gavin was trying to wolf the girl I'd been dating? I knew I had to be careful.

"Gavin had been drinking," I began slowly. "He started riding me about my work." I sketched in the scene as well as I could remember it.

Tabor asked, "Why did he feel so hostile toward you?"

"I'd like to know that myself." I chewed my lip. "But he was that kind of guy. He called it a sense of humor, but it had a hollow-ground edge."

"But his feeling toward you was something special?" Tabor went on.

"It seemed to be," I admitted. "And lately it was getting worse. I can't think of any reason."

Tabor's face told me nothing.

"Dr. Judd, as a medical man, what do you think of the possibility of Dr. Gavin's suicide?"

I thought it over. "I suppose anybody could. Maybe Gavin had his troubles. But I think he'd have worked them out hurting other people rather than himself. But then I didn't know him very well." I shot a questioning look at Dr. Ben.

Murdock raised one stubby paw to scratch his white poll. Dr. Ben didn't care much for a problem unless it could be attacked with scalpel and tissue forceps. "I dunno," he growled. "He was a funny feller."

Then Tabor produced an automatic from his pocket. His voice was very soft and polite. "Ever see this before?"

Right then I began to get scared. I'm no crystal-gazer, but I started to realize something was hanging over me.

Whatever it was, it tied up with my big idea of yesterday. Ginny, too, had spotted "something wrong." No more cracks about woman's intuition.

I had the crazy feeling they were closing in on me from all sides.

"It's an army .45," I said carefully. "I've seen hundreds of them." I could feel a trickle of sweat down my ribs.

Tabor didn't press the subject. "When did you last see Dr. Gavin?" he asked.

I closed my eyes, like I was trying to think. I remembered the signal Earl had flashed me as I came in. I had to take a chance I was reading him right.

"Yesterday morning," I lied. "In the diet kitchen."

Tabor nodded again. His face was expressionless.

And that was that. All very nice and friendly. That's what you think. I had merely gained a little time.

Tabor did loosen up a bit. About ten, the night maintenance man had spotted lights in the morgue. Gavin, in surgical gown and gloves, was lying on the floor with the death gun beside him. He had been shot through the temple, a contact wound. No shot had been heard, but examination showed he had been dead maybe an hour. No suicide note. Colonel Beel's body was on the slab.

As I went out Dr. Ben was grumbling profanely about the hell all this was knocking out of the hospital routine.

Detective Lieutenant Tabor wasn't listening. He stared blandly after me.

Ginny was gone from the workroom when I got back there, but Henry Earl was waiting.

"Well?" I said.

Earl's eyes avoided me. "How . . . how did you make out?"

"Better than I expected," I told him. "What's the big idea?"

Earl colored under my stare. He said, "Gavin committed suicide, of course. It wouldn't help to put you into that morgue last night, after he cussed you out yesterday morning."

Before I could say anything Ginny was tugging at my arm "I've only got a minute," she gasped. "Miss Rejack will be after me. Don, what happened?"

I calmed her down. "Earl, what makes you think Gavin killed himself?"

"You didn't know him," Earl said flatly.

"I know he hated my guts."

"Don't you know why? Don't you know he used to be a big-time surgeon?"

"Gavin?"

"Sure. Can't you guess why he had to quit?"

I had it now. "It wouldn't be that he lost too many patients in surgery?"

Earl nodded slowly.

I digested that. It fitted. Nobody knows better than I how bitter that kind of failure could make a surgeon. And I was the hot-shot kid of the surgery, the boy wonder, right under Gavin's nose every day.

I began to feel an odd sympathy for Gavin, that strange and bitter little man.

I was walking up and down now. Ginny followed me with anxious eyes. I was racing my motor and not getting anywhere.

"Earl," I asked, "does it strike you there's something wrong with Beel's death?"

He hesitated. "You mean—"

"I mean maybe somebody helped him die! It sounds crazy as hell, but—"

Earl looked away. After a minute he said

quietly, "Did Gavin hate you that much?"

"You're crazy!"

Earl shrugged. "Am I? If he killed Beel, there's the motive for suicide. He was still a doctor. And he had to live with himself."

And then Ginny gave a little "oh!" and I looked around to find Rejack standing in the doorway. How long had she been there?

She gave me a blank stare from red-rimmed eyes. Her face was dead-white, without expression. She moved with a curious stiffness. I saw what Ginny meant about a zombie.

"Miss Jerome," she said in her harsh, toneless voice, "don't you belong downstairs?"

Ginny scuttled out and I followed, leaving Earl to deal with Helen.

I was gum-shoeing under a handicap. I never heard of Sherlock Holmes working with a hangover.

The locker room off the lounge was empty. I gave Earl's locker a quick sift. I wasn't looking for cigarettes this time.

His army .45 was gone. That confirmed where Gavin's death gun had come from.

I lit a cigarette that tasted like burning jute and reminded myself that the gun could have an innocent explanation. Gavin, or anybody, could have found it like I did. Since Earl hadn't identified it, I had a hunch it couldn't be traced to him.

I said silent thanks to whoever had pulled that trigger. He evidently wasn't trying to get anybody else in trouble. He had wiped off the prints I must have left on the gun yesterday. If there'd been anything on the gun Tabor would be printing everybody.

Even though my brain was still sweating out pure alcohol I sat down and forced myself to think.

First, it was possible Gavin really was a suicide. Whether he had gimmicked my operation on Beel or not.

In connection with Gavin a picture floated into my mind. Rejack's face, its frozen mask for once cracked wide open. "Keep your girl away from him. Please, Don."

I shivered.

After a minute I went back to wondering about Henry Earl. Just how late had he been for his date?

And then it occurred to me. In covering me on being in the morgue last night he had also covered his own visit there.

I didn't kid myself. Sooner or later Tabor was going to find out I'd fought with Gavin in the morgue, last night.

And when he did I'd better have something ready for him.

I stood up. I'd suddenly remembered that Marie had got married yesterday.

Viola Peterson swiveled around from the switchboard and crossed blonde legs. "I heard it was a wonderful wedding," she said wistfully. "I just love church weddings. Don't you, Dr. Judd?"

"Crazy about them. But you worked Marie's shift last night?"

"Uh-huh. Oh, Dr. Judd, isn't it awful?"

"Yeah, but—"

"That nice Dr. Gavin," she said meltingly. "I bet he was crossed in love."

"Maybe you've got something there, Viola. But save it. I'm in a bad mood."

My hangover was still showing. Viola stared and said, "You do look awful bad. You ought to see a doctor."

I gave her a sharp look. I decided she wasn't kidding. I passed it up because sharp looks hurt my head. I asked about phone traffic in and out of the morgue last night.

"There wasn't any," she said sadly. "The policeman asked me."

But I had an idea. "Viola, do you remember the morgue phone being off the hook?"

"Why . . . why, yes! I had to buzz for the longest time before he'd pick up the receiver!"

I nodded. That had been my fight with Gavin.

Viola's face screwed up in painful thought. "After that I kind of watched the morgue signal. And . . . and Dr. Gavin did place a call! Why didn't I remember that before?"

"When?"

"Well. I was eating my sandwiches. It was about nine. But I can't remember who it was to."

"Try, Viola."

"I can't." She was mournful. "He must have placed it by number."

So Tabor had been ahead of me in trying to fix the time of Gavin's death. But I had something he didn't have.

I didn't spent much time in the morgue. It was cleaned out and the concrete floor had been freshly scrubbed. I got gooseflesh in the chill, dead air, and I wondered whether the little pathologist had ended up in one of his own cooler drawers or if Tabor had the body.

I didn't know what I was looking for. But I found it. Gavin's dictaphone on its little stand had been pushed back against the desk. There wasn't any cylinder under the needle. Just a few blanks in the rack underneath.

When I rolled into the chief's office, I walked into a welcoming blast of his best fancy-grade, pure sulfur profanity.

"What's the matter? Dr. Ben? Get up on the wrong side of the bed?"

"Bed, hell! I ain't been to bed! I ain't had a minute's peace since they found Gavin. I just got rid of that detective feller. And now you!"

"This won't take long. What was the verdict on Colonel Beel's autopsy?"

"Denny couldn't find a blame thing. It'll go down as shock and general collapse."

"Hey!" I objected. "Why Denny?"

"Denny did the autopsy this morning. The family was in a hurry for the body."

"But I thought Gavin was doing it!"

Dr. Ben grunted. He yawned and leaned his heavy body back in the chair, scratching. "Gavin's dead. Remember?"

"But I understand the colonel's body showed Gavin worked on it."

"Well, if he did, then he done the Dutch before he wrote up his findings."

What was I supposed to say to that? That I'd been in the morgue and I'd seen him dictating his report?

I stood there chewing my lip and trying to figure this new development.

Dr. Ben made a kind of strangling noise. His heavy jaw dropped and his eyes goggled at something over my shoulder.

It was Helen Rejack. She stood just inside the door. Her mouth was working and she trembled all over, but the hand that held the gun didn't tremble.

I was looking right down the barrel. It looked like you could toss a quarter down it.

I cried, "Helen! For God's sake!"

A horrible faint smile came into her eyes. She whispered, "This is for Carl."

I left my feet in a dive for the gun. I didn't even hear the crash of the shot.

And I didn't know it when I hit the floor.

IV.

I DON'T know how long I was out of the ball game. I have a vague recollection of being violently sick. When I got my eyes open, they didn't want to point the same direction.

Dr. Ben was leaning over me, sticking a piece of tape on my forehead.

Ginny was there, too, helping him. And crying.

Even crying, she looked nice. Even with tear streaks on her face. It was like I was seeing her for the first time.

"Hey!" I said. "What's the matter?"

She sniffled. "You big lug! She might have killed you!"

And then it dawned on me. About two weeks later. I realized I was in love with her. I'm real bright, I am. It took a rap on the skull to do it.

Murdock snorted. "Damn these sniveling, caterwauling women! This place used to be a hospital."

"Let me up."

"Lay still! I took four stitches. If she'd hit you anywhere but the head you'd be a goner."

I pushed them back, sat up on the divan and waited for the room to stop whirling.

Dr. Ben started to curse, but his heart wasn't in it. He said querulously, "Where did she get that gun?" He bent to pick it up. It was another army .45.

The crease on top of my hangover had done things to my head. It felt like a room full of Swiss bellringers. I said, "How

would I know? The damn things must grow on trees around here."

I fingered my squash experimentally. "What happened?"

Dr. Ben laid the gun on his desk. "She dropped it after she shot you," he said. "Then she went all to pieces. I gave her a hypo and had a couple of the girls take her next door. I better call that Tabor feller."

"No."

"But—"

"I'm the one to prefer charges. I want to talk to her first."

Dr. Ben stared at me. "You should have seen her face," he said hoarsely. "She was like a mad-woman. These repressed neurotics, murderous!"

I tested my legs. Rubbery, but workable.

Dr. Ben mumbled, "She must've been behind Gavin's death."

I looked at him. The heavy face was almost gray. It was hard to believe, but he was frightened.

"Cheer up," I told him. "You've got her gun."

They had drawn the Venetian blinds and in the anesthesia room it was a dusky half-twilight. I chased two nurses out and then I was alone with Rejack.

She lay quietly on one of the operating tables, her eyes staring blindly upward. She had a drawn, skull-like look. I wondered how much dope Dr. Ben had used to stop the hysterics.

"Helen," I said.

After a while she turned her head to look at me. Her face was paper-white, drained of all emotion.

"I'm sorry," she said, with effort, "sorry I didn't kill you—"

"Helen, listen. I didn't kill Carl Gavin."

She turned her face to the wall.

"I didn't like him, Helen. But I didn't kill him. What makes you think I did?"

"You were there," came her tired, bitter voice. "In the morgue last night. I know. Your friend Henry Earl made a slip."

"My friend. My pal. A slip. Oh, sure."

Then I told her about the phone call Gavin made before he died. I told her about the missing dictaphone cylinder with Gavin's autopsy report. When I got through talking I wasn't sure I'd convinced her. Her body was shaking with harsh, dry sobs.

On my way down the hall I stopped at Dr. Ben's office.

Murdock was at the desk. His bloodshot eyes looked up at me. He said in a thick, furry voice, "Did you turn her in?"

For a moment I couldn't believe my eyes. Dr. Ben had found my bottle. And he had given it a terrific belt. Sitting on the desk blotter, the pint was half empty.

The jug was a souvenir of my last night's pub crawl. I'd brought it over and put it in my locker this morning. Even before I

heard about Gavin I figured this was going to be another one of those days.

I found my voice. "Now I've seen everything," I said. "I thought you wrote the Volstead Act?" But since he was having himself a party I went in and prescribed myself a healthy dose.

Dr. Ben said, "We'd better turn her in."

I said, "No. She just made a mistake. Hell, it's *my* head, isn't it?"

"The woman's a maniac. She oughta be locked up."

I studied him. It was the first time I'd ever seen him scared. Sweat stood out on his heavy face like lard.

"Dr. Ben, you don't know much about women. She was in love with him. That's all."

My head had settled down to a dull, steady throbbing. Deep in thought, I wandered the hills of Cushman Memorial. It was late afternoon. Most of the day personnel were gone.

One thing, a dictaphone cylinder is pretty hard to get rid of. Unlike a phonograph record, it's sturdy. You have to batter it.

Anyway, the pieces of one lying around might cause talk.

The best thing would be to simply put the cylinder in a dictaphone and shave off what was recorded on it. Then it would be just another blank. But that would take time. The killer wouldn't have stopped to do it in the morgue. For all he knew the shot had been heard.

Gavin had been found at ten o'clock. He made a phone call about nine. If you gave him time for a little argument with his killer it was possible that his death had been discovered almost at once.

And ever since then the police had been swarming all over the hospital. Every time you looked up you'd seen another cop.

Which would mean that the killer still might not have had time to shave that cylinder. There was an outside chance that the missing autopsy report was still around.

I tried to imagine where I would hide if I were a dictaphone cylinder.

The answer was—among the blanks in the rack underneath any dictaphone.

An hour of so later I was ready to give up. I had two cauliflower ears from dictaphone ear plugs. I had listened to medical reports and correspondence till I was dizzy. I had combed the secretarial pool and all the offices, even my own. You wouldn't think a small outfit like Cushman could support so many dictaphones.

By now my cylinder probably had a routine memo about somebody's liver recorded on it.

And then I had another idea. Dr. Ben's office was generally open all night. He liked to cruise about the wards till all hours.

What a beautiful place to hide the cylinder.

And Tabor had commandeered the chief's office for his own use. The killer wouldn't have had a chance to get at it.

When I got there Dr. Ben was gone. From the amount of unused whisky in the bottle I calculated he'd been called out right after I left, probably to attend Rejack again.

I sat in his chair and pulled the dictaphone stand over.

And I hit bingo on the first try.

It was a ghostly sensation, sitting there listening to the tinny echo of a dead man's voice crackle at me.

When it was over, I leaned back and went over the whole thing. It hung together. Oh, brother, but it hung together!

It was getting dark in the office. I snapped on the desk light and stood the cylinder on end in the puddle of light on the green blotter. Beside it sat the half-empty pint of liquor. And the gun Rejack had used.

I reached out absently and picked up the automatic. I removed the shells from the magazine, dropping them in my pocket. I laid the gun back beside the bottle.

After that I just sat there.

The big bear appeared in the doorway. "That damn woman!" he exploded. "Talkin' up now as cool as you please. Apologizin' like she might have broke a cup at a tea party." His deep growl shook with outrage. "And she wants her gun back!"

He shuffled into the room.

When he saw the cylinder, he stopped like he had run into a wall.

I got up and walked over to close the door.

Dr. Ben sat down in his chair as if he were very, very tired. I stood before the desk, looking down at him.

I picked up the cylinder. Dr. Ben's thick body was bowed forward. His stumpy, powerful fingers were white with their grip on the edge of the desk. He stared at the spot where the cylinder had been.

I kept my voice cold and neutral. It was the only way I could do it at all. I had a peculiar feeling like I was performing an operation. A cutting away of diseased tissue.

"You were careless with this cylinder." I balanced it in my hand. "But then you didn't think anybody knew it existed, did you? You thought there was plenty of time."

No answer.

"Ever since I learned Gavin's autopsy report was missing I knew Gavin had been murdered. And I knew why. Because of something he'd found in working on Colonel Beel's body."

Murdock sat completely motionless.

I went on, "I should have guessed it long ago. It was there for everybody to see. You

were washed up. Your eyes were going bad. You didn't dare operate much any more. But you wouldn't admit there was anything wrong with you. You drove yourself. You bragged about your vitality. You took credit for the work of subordinates. You even started chasing young women. All the signs of an old man who's trying to convince himself he hasn't slipped.

"When the king gets old, he fears the crown prince. I was next in line for your job. You must have figured if you could add one more to my losing streak—and the chairman of the board, at that—I'd no longer be a threat. Besides, the colonel was the chief figure in the drive to replace you. Two birds with one stone."

Then Murdock looked up. His heavy face was the color of putty. He said huskily, "I didn't mean to hurt you, Donny."

"I don't suppose you did. I think you even like me. But it was time for you to retire gracefully, giving me your blessing. You couldn't do it. Surgery was your whole life. You didn't have anything else. And Ben Murdock always was a fighter. And, like you say, human life is just something a surgeon uses in his business."

Murdock licked dry lips. His eyes held pain. And a curious, childlike bewilderment. "You were crowding me, Donny."

I said, "Ginny even saw you getting the vial of insulin. But she made a bad guess. She thought you were after morphine. It was very simple. All you had to do was load a hypodermic syringe with insulin and shoot a few hundred units through the rubber seal into the quart of saline I was going to use for a transfusion during Beel's operation."

I hefted the cylinder in my hand. "It should have been foolproof. Beel's death looked like typical surgical shock. Even with an autopsy you should have been safe. The blood sugar level is very unreliable after death, and, anyway, it's the last thing you look at unless the patient was a diabetic. You knew Carl Gavin was good. But you didn't know just how good he really was."

I went on. "Gavin made a phone call before he died. Who would the poor little guy have called, after making such a discovery? Who but the chief of surgery? You'd found Earl's gun like you found that bottle of whisky in my locker. When the call came you knew what you had to do. You got the gun and went down to the morgue."

While I was talking, I hadn't been watching Murdock's hands. But moving slowly, dreamlike, the stumpy fingers had reached the automatic Rejack had used. Now the gun was rock-steady in his two furry hands. It was centered on me. His bloodshot eyes were blank.

The gun clicked empty as he pulled the trigger.

I said quietly, "Even me, Dr. Ben?"

The big man stared stupidly at the gun, as if he had never seen it before. It dropped from his hands.

His little eyes filmed with animal cunning. "You can't prove any of this."

I said, "I don't know, I'm no lawyer. But how about Helen Rejack. Can you convince her?"

There was silence. Murdock shivered.

"You could try to kill her, before she got you. Or have you had enough killing, Dr. Ben?"

Have you ever watched a man die? Murdock's powerful sloping shoulders began to sag. In the inside part of him, the part that holds a man up and holds him together and keeps him going, he was dying right before my eyes.

And then he surprised me. He lifted his big head and I heard a ghostly echo of his old sardonic, ribald chuckle.

He said, "I could say everything went black. That's what they all do nowadays."

"Yeah."

"Donny."

"Write a letter, Dr. Ben. To Tabor."

I could almost swear he smiled. He asked, "Should I write it or dictate?"

I took the half-dozen cartridges from my pocket and dropped them on the desk.

Murdock slumped back in the chair. His face was in shadow. He was staring at the cartridges, glinting oily copper on the green blotter.

He said, "So long, kid. Don't take any wooden nickels."

I didn't answer him. I closed the door behind me as I went out. I didn't look back.

Down the hall I stopped in front of the big plate-glass window that looks into No. 2 operating room. I stopped because I couldn't see well enough to know where I was going. I wondered if I were going to be sick.

And then Ginny was beside me. It was like I'd been expecting her. Neither of us said a word.

I kept looking through the window. Henry Earl was operating. An emergency. Earl looked up. He gave me a thumb-and-finger highball.

He was doing a Murdock radical resection.

Ginny nodded toward the people in white under the blazing surgery lamp. "It means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

I found my voice. "It's a job. It's a job you can do things with. But you can't live for a job. Carl Gavin tried it. And Dr. Ben. There's got to be something more."

Then: "Ginny. You're coming out with me. I don't want to be alone tonight."

Shamelessly, I hung onto Ginny's hand. I held it very tight.

We stood and waited for the sound of the shot.

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