

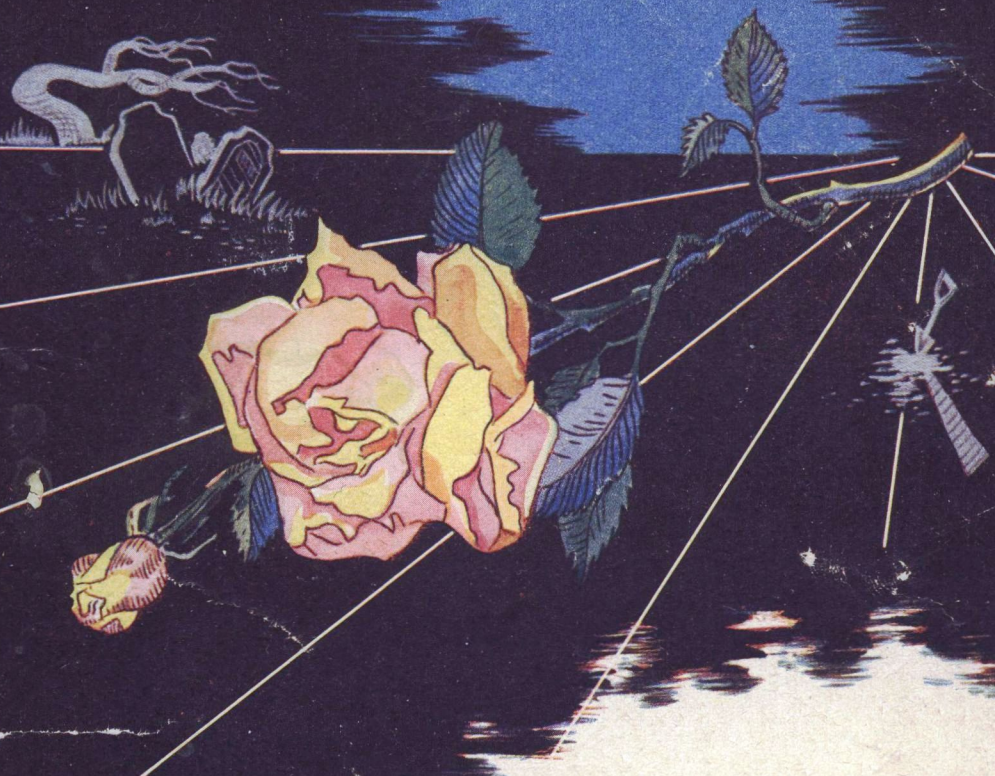
STREET & SMITH'S

DETECTIVE

STORY MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER

BRITISH
9D
EDITION



IN CASE OF DEATH

BY INEZ SABASTIAN

also

SLEEP NO MORE • ALREADY BURIED

and **SPECIALIST IN DEATH**

**"I'll PROVE in
only 7-Days
that I can make
YOU a NEW MAN!"**

*Charles
Atlas*

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Man."

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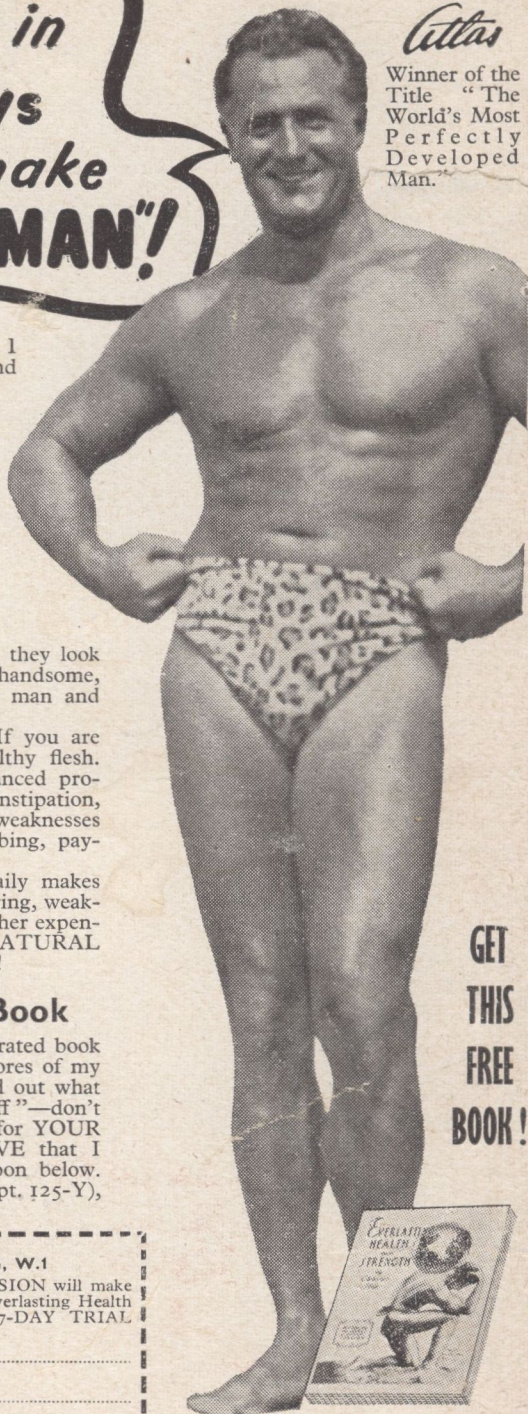
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STREET & SMITH'S

DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

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

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—or the other fellow?



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BY C. T.
SULLIVAN

Specialist in death

Gangsters were taking over the town . . . a businessman who didn't pay protection signed his own death warrant; that is, until fighting Clark Storm and the law moved in. Then the real fun began.

I.

My binoculars practically took my eyes into the room across the street. I ignored my conscience and let 'em—my eyes—roll around.

Her name was Kate Hale and she was just stepping into the bedroom from giving herself a shower. Her black hair cascaded down over her shoulders as she pulled her rubber cap off. I let the binoculars drop slowly to where the window cut her off at the knees and judged her to be about one hundred and twenty-five pounds, with each pound contributing to her beauty.

The shades of the room next to Kate Hale's hotel room were pulled down. The lights showing under the shades there flicked out as I watched. There was a rat in this room, a thirty-five-year-old rat named Dude Pazzini.

Three weeks before my chief in Business Defense, Inc., in Seattle, had called me off a job in Reno into headquarters.

"I'm sending you to Butte, Storm," he had said. "You know what to do. Get 'em so they won't bother anyone else."

The chief is a gray man with ice-chilled, gimlet eyes and a decisive voice. He hates criminals with a consuming hatred.

I'd flown the snow-smothered Cascades and Rockies in a Northwest airliner and landed at Butte. Police Lieutenant Biff Leary had met the plane and checked my credentials. He'd told me Pazzini was my man.

I was parked in a third-floor room of a crummy hotel watching the rooms in the top-class hotel across the street. I had a .38 revolver cuddled in a clip holster under my left arm. I wanted to stir things up so I could use the gun.

Kate was pulling a white dressing gown on when I turned the glasses back on her. She seated herself before a dressing table. I saw the door of her room open and Dude Pazzini walk in.

I'd wondered if she were Dude Pazzini's girl and this was it. If she could curl up to him, she wouldn't mind a small rattler, a black widow spider or a tarantula coiled in her purse.

A good pair of binoculars clear up suspicions, sometimes. Kate might be working for Pazzini, but now she was registering

plenty of anger. She placed a chair between herself and Pazzini and was pointing at the door like she meant it.

Pazzini's lips sneaked up over his white teeth like a dog's. He tossed his overcoat on the bed and his hat on a chair as he moved toward her. Through my binoculars I saw her hands go up and rake his face and a darkline showed she brought blood.

Pazzini whipped a left at her jaw. Kate's head bounced back. He grabbed her and threw her on the bed.

I could have called the cops. Butte cops don't like characters who slug women. Or I could have called the hotel desk and said a battle was going on in a third-floor room. But neither would have been fast enough to have saved Katie a beating.

I slid my window wide open and my .38 took over, bucking four times in my hand. One slug through the top half of a window just leaves a neat hole, but four shots banging in rapid succession through a window punches a section out of it and sends the glass crashing to the floor.

I saw Pazzini flop to the floor, knew he thought someone was shooting at him, so I jerked the shades in my room and scrambled out of there fast. In less than two minutes I was in a leather chair of the hotel lobby across the street, dropping cigarette ashes into a nice big brass cuspidor.

Kipling, a long time ago, objected to Butte's brass cuspidors, but they still come in handy in a town where men spit when they feel like it.

My chair fronted the elevator. Pazzini squeezed out of the elevator before the doors were fully opened. His right hand was stuffed in his coat pocket and he was walking fast, like fear was trudging on his heels.

My right foot swung hard against his ankles as he was going by me. He went down like he'd been the victim of a shoe-string tackle. I stepped forward as if to help him and the toe of my right No. 12 shoe crunched into his face. I heard his nose break.

A woman shrieked. Another fellow and I pulled Pazzino to his feet. He was wobbly on his pins, like a drunk. I apologized with gestures, the gestures being brushing him off. He held a handkerchief to his nose.

Pazzini rushed out of the lobby fast after his eyes cleared so he could see and a Big M cab took him away.

The lobby quieted down. I slid deeper in my chair, slipped the .32 automatic I'd frisked from Pazzini's pocket under my

paper and ejected the shells. There was a tiny diamond and two tiny rubies set in the black rubber of the grip.

Pazzini had the reputation of being both a killer and a lady killer. The .32 automatic was a woman's gun, but the three jewels meant three lives to me. I figured the diamond signified a man's life and the rubies two women's lives.

The gray, cold man, our chief in Business Defense, Inc., would have approved my tactics.

"Get 'em killing mad, so they'll lash out blindly, then they'll act like the rats they are," he had said.

Business Defense, Inc., was born after Western governors had proclaimed their alarm over the influx of criminals into the West from the mid-West and East.

The rat bands of crime were moving into all Western states. They gorged on money from enterprises just outside the law, grew bolder and moved in on legitimate businesses open to their methods, concentrating on night clubs, laundries and trucking firms.

Owners of these were approached and offered protection. If protection money was refused trouble started fast. Gang goon squads were transported where needed by plane and car. Stench bombs exploded in night clubs. Fights at crap tables and roulette wheels drove customers away.

Laundry trucks were overturned. Chemicals were spilled on packed clothing in laundries at night. Fires started. Trucks carrying valuable merchandise were crowded off highways. Bodies of the drivers were found in or near the flaming trucks.

Police fought but they had to wait until a crime was committed. The goon squads were moved to other states and blind trails blocked short-handed police. Business was awakening to the truth of the F.B.I. statement that many police departments are under-manned.

The San Francisco-born idea was to have a force to strike these criminals when and where they could be found, to attack them rather than await their attack. "Identify them and exterminate them" was the order. The F.B.I. gave suggestions and the gray man took over.

Each agent of Business Defense, Inc., was given a three months' course. We learned to use guns, kill with our hands and act fast.

The criminals' power was that they could damage or destroy a man's business if he

opposed them because they could act at will and keep the victim in fear for his family, his life and his business.

Even we who had had ranger or commando training were required to take the course and a third of the men who started it were weeded out. The agents left were hard, fearless, tested and hated the preying criminals.

The gray man had called me in after I had completed the course. He'd checked my card: Clark Storm, age 30, weight 170, gray eyes, black hair, 5 feet 11 inches.

"You'll do, Storm," he'd said.

"We can't let these gangs grow in power. Their next step would be to grab control of city governments and it's not impossible their power would grow to be an octopus-like hold on the nation," the gray man said.

I'd never forget his words. I used them in talks I gave before Montana business clubs.

"Fight 'em," had been my message. "If you're paying protection, stop it. If you're afraid, tell us. It'll be in confidence. We'll act. In many cases the secret service, F.B.I. and treasury department will back us up."

Other agents were making the same talk in Vegas, Reno, San Francisco, Seattle and other cities. An undercurrent of opposition to spreading criminal power in the West was gaining force.

Criminals were striking back. The body of Jud Raines, one of our agents, was found lying by the Columbia highway in Oregon. His arms and legs were wired together and around his neck a copper wire had been tightened until it cut deep into his flesh and strangled him. It hadn't been an easy death for Jud.

The gray man had wired each of his men, "Carry on!"

Agents received call from businessmen: "I'm paying a thousand a week . . . it's breaking my business. I can't stop paying until I get help." Trucking firms reported drivers, fearing they would be killed, were quitting.

In Butte I had learned from Lieutenant Leary that Dude Pazzini was Montana lieutenant for the mobsters. Two men always were at his side when he called on businessmen. They were Big Six Carlson, about forty, dumb, big and brutal, and Frenchy Rieben, about thirty, his black hair plastered down with perfumed oil, his black eyes shifty, and nervous tension making him like a coiled spring.

I waited an hour in the hotel lobby,

slowly puffing a cigar. Big Six Carlson and Frenchy Rieben walked up to me. Big Six's eyes looked like the ends of hard-boiled eggs. The blue color in them was so pale it seemed like a shadow. Frenchy shifted on his feet.

"You talk with your face too much," Big Six said.

"I've been talking to businessmen," I admitted. "Are you interested in having me talk to Pazzini and his associates?"

There was the flicker of a smile in Frenchy Rieben's eyes.

"You'll squeal when we want you to," Carlson guffawed.

The elevator door slid open and Kate Hale stepped into the lobby. When she saw Carlson and Frenchy Rieben, she started to step back in the elevator, but they crowded in with her. I bucked a hole between the pair.

"Just in time for an afternoon cup of coffee, Katie," I said, pulling her back into the lobby. She didn't know me, but she was glad to get away from Carlson and Rieben. She grabbed my arm as if I'd been an old friend and we headed for the coffee shop. Carlson's big ears got red. He started after us and I saw Frenchy grab him and stop him. The two men walked out of the lobby.

"I'd like to talk to you," I said. Kate went to a booth with me and we both ordered coffee. I told her I'd been checking up on Pazzini and knew she was working for him.

"But no longer," she interrupted. "He said he was going to start an office and I accepted a job. I became suspicious he was a crook and today he forced himself into my room."

"An agent for Business Defense saw him attack you and shot out your top window to stop him," I told her.

She agreed to take over as secretary in an office I was starting in Butte. I warned her Pazzini wouldn't like it.

When she left she asked me how many agents we had in Butte.

"One," I replied. I suppose she remembered I must have been watching her just before Dude Pazzini made his attack.

"He must have seen plenty," Kate said, blushing.

"And every ounce beautiful," I confessed. I figured Katie and I would get along.

I'd left my trench coat in the room of the dump across the street, which I had just rented as an observation post for the day. I walked up the steep, dark stairway and into the room, as it was dusk and I had pulled down the shades.

The roof fell in when I closed the door. A ham of a hand bored into my belly. My breath was exploded out by force of the punch. I figured it was Big Six from his size. Another man stepped in from the side and slashed my face with his fist. I felt myself hitting the floor but couldn't do anything about it. Fast hands went through my pockets.

"I got his gat, Six," Frenchy Rieben said. Big Six punched the light switch. Frenchy was holding the .32 automatic I'd taken from Dude Pazzini and the business end was pointing right at my head. My .38 in the clip holster was punching a hole in my left side. I was lying on it. I sucked in air and felt strength flowing back into me.

"We'll give him a once-over and scram," Big Six said. "I'll make his face look like a couple of pounds of hamburger. Stand up, pretty boy."

I rolled over and got to my knees and when I faced Frenchy and Big Six I had my .38 in my hand.

"You two are too dumb to live," I said. Frenchy triggered the .32 automatic. His face went blank with surprise when nothing happened.

"Look at the handle, Frenchy, before you throw it on the bed," I said. Frenchy and Big Six looked and their eyes bugged out when they saw the inset jewels.

"Dude's gat!" Big Six exclaimed in surprise.

"Yeah, he gave it to me to hold. On the bed with it, Frenchy." Frenchy tossed the gun on the bed. Big Six moved toward me.

"Stand still or I'll gut-shoot you," I promised. Big Six stopped. Fear crept into Frenchy's eyes. I wear a heavy signet ring on my left hand. I didn't close my fist. I gave Frenchy a few backhanders before closing my fist and smashing it into his nose. Frenchy went down. I knew he wasn't hurt too bad.

Big Six was rushing me, but he had been winner of too many easy brawls. I ducked down and got inside his grasping arms. I gave him the butt of my .38 right on the end of his mushroomlike nose. He went down with a thud that shook the room.

I slipped Dude Pazzini's gun into my pocket and sat on the edge of the bed smoking and dangling my .38. I called the two every rat name I could think of. "Wait'll the gang hears about the three boys with the broken noses," I said. Their hate steamed up fast. Big Six and Frenchy had murder right there in their eyes.

"Get 'em killing mad so they'll lash out blindly," had been the gray man's orders.

I stood them face to the wall and found two guns on them. I was beginning to carry an arsenal around with me. I took out my knife and slashed their belts and for good measure their coats and pants. "Pazzini'll have something to say when he sees you characters," I predicted. I slipped out the door.

I had a quick steak, went to my apartment and called George Dickens. He's president of one of Butte's banks. I also called Lieutenant Leary and it was not long before Leary, in a police car driven by Officer Mick Muldoon, picked me up. We drove to Dickens' home.

Dickens' home was a three-story brick on West Park Street. It had been built in the ways when smelter-smoke killed all vegetation, had no front yard and its side walls touched the walls of other houses.

The interior was in sharp contrast to its drab exterior. A maid took Leary and me through a brightly papered foyer up one flight of stairs to a den that occupied the entire second-floor front of the house. The walls were paneled in a dark polished wood. Bookcases occupied one side wall and the other wall backed up a small bar. There was a large couch and several comfortable chairs in the room.

Leary and I waited only a few minutes and Dickens walked in. The banker had a firm, hard handclasp and he got down to business quick.

"I know what's going on," he said, settling his two-hundred-pound bulk in a chair and fixing Leary and me with his blue fighter's eyes.

"I can check deposits and tell what firms in town are paying to these blood-suckers. My dad helped string the like of 'em from tree limbs. I wish I could." Dickens grunted in disgust and took short, fast puffs on his cigar.

I also wished Pazzini, Carlson and Rieben were dangling from tree limbs. I knew each one of the three wanted me dead and were probably hunting me.

"I turned a friend of twenty years' standing down for a loan today," Dickens continued. "When he wanted to know why I told him, 'You're paying protection to gangsters and when you're doing that you don't control your own business.'"

I asked him to estimate the amount of money being milked off Silver Bow county alone.

"It is about seventy thousand a month, with the figure going up each month," Dickens declared.

"There have been four deaths in the past six weeks caused by goon squads, but I can't tie them to Pazzini," Leary said.

"What do you need to act?" Dickens asked. "If it's money, I'll give it to you in cash. If I can't fight them with bullets, I can with money."

"I get a hundred a day and expenses," I said, "when I'm on this kind of job. In order to get these racketeers who've invaded Butte I need a man with guts, one who'll tell them to go to hell when they proposition him. I want someone who'll fight back."

Dickens grabbed a French phone and dialed a number.

"I've the man you want," he said. "He'd rather be in a good fight than make money."

"Who is he?" Leary asked.

"Tex Drake," the banker replied.

Leary's grin grew wide. "Sure, Tex'll play ball," he said. They told me Drake owned the Mile High, a night club and gambling spot atop the Continental Divide.

"I'll see him tonight," I said. "If he goes along with us we'll work it so the goon squads will center their attention on him."

Lieutenant Leary and Dickens nodded. They seemed to brighten with the prospect of action against a criminal force they knew had started to gnaw at the courage of their home town.

"But," I said, "if Tex Drake takes losses, they'll have to be split among business outfits now paying Pazzini for this fake protection."

"I'll give you my word on that," Dickens said.

I drove to Kate Hale's hotel, checked the desk and found Pazzini had left. I gave Kate a buzz and she agreed to see me. We had a couple of drinks before walking to where my car was parked near the Rialto theater. I drove out East Park, through Meaderville with its gaudy neon fronts advertising the best ravioli dinners in the world and its Meaderville-made wines.

My convertible has a powerful motor and we zoomed up the Divide. Kate's perfume was sharp and clear over the tobacco and leather smell of the car.

Cars passed us going down into Butte but at our speed none passed us going up the hill. We wound higher and higher and the glitter of Butte spread out below us.

The snow out of town was clean and it seemed like the car would zoom right into the black, star-studded sky.

I slowed down so Kate could see the lights of Butte and instinctively glanced in the rear view mirror before swinging into a turn-out to park.

I caught the dark bulk of a car behind. It was being driven without lights. I acted fast. Katie didn't get to see the glitter of Butte, with its myriad of lights sparkling in the cold, clear mountain air.

I swung my right arm behind her beautiful neck and pulled forward fast. She went down toward the floor just an instant before a star hole appeared in the windshield before us.

I had my right foot punched on the throttle so hard it was cutting into the rubber mat on the floor board. My convertible picked up speed and leaped up the hill. I cut loose with my .38 through the rear window of my car. I let six shots stream back at the trailing car.

It fell farther back. We rounded a horse-shoe turn. I kept watching, but the car didn't show and I figured he'd made a skidding turn and was heading back to Butte.

I explained to Katie. "You have fun," she said. Katie has what it takes. I felt kind of warm toward her.

II.

THE Mile High actually was above six thousand feet above sea-level. It was built on a spine of ridge extending out from the Continental Divide. The million lights of Butte seemed right under the balcony that ran along one side of the night spot. Snow was heaped along both sides of a walk around the building.

Music and the smell of whisky, good food and excitement came out the windows. Tex Drake's place looked like the pure quill to me. I called Lieutenant Leary from the bar and told him about the car that had tailed us. He cursed and said he'd check for the car.

Drake took me into his office. I didn't have to tell him what was going on. He knew. Drake was a thin individual with a touch of rawhide about him. His hair was fading back toward his ears. His black eyes roved around before centering on me with a hard brilliance.

"I got a call from them. They want an

interview tonight," Tex said, and he had a sarcastic inflection on the word "interview." He shifted in his chair and I caught the flash of a shoulder holster under his tux.

"I'd see them in hell first, but the other pantywaists are paying off, not only here in Butte but in Reno, Frisco, L.A., and the rest of the hot towns. I've been tempted to ride along. Why in hell should I battle for the rest of them?"

"Dickens says he'll guarantee you any damages done here if you fight back," I told him.

"He can't guarantee my life!" Tex Drake exclaimed.

"Do you have to have someone to do that, Tex?" I asked. He scowled at me.

"I broke three of their noses this afternoon and didn't get roughed up much yet," I added.

There was a rap on the office door and a voice said, "Pazzini is here, Tex, with two pals. You want I should stick around?"

There was a couch at the wall of Tex's desk and a washroom door off the other wall. I went into the washroom and partly closed the door. Tex opened the door and I heard men trail into the office and the door close. Tex told his man he didn't need him.

"What do you want, Pazzini?" Tex asked.

"Just protection money," Pazzini replied. I could see through the crack between the rear of the door and the jam. Pazzini was standing before Drake, who had seated himself behind his desk. Big Six Carlson and Frenchy Rieben seated themselves on the couch. All three were wearing heavy coats.

"We offer to protect your business, and it is a good one, in return for say ten percent of the take," Pazzini said. His voice oiled out under his black, hair-line moustache.

"Go on," Tex invited. "I'm very dumb." I couldn't see Tex Drake, but I knew he was riding along with me by the contempt he put in his voice when answering Pazzini.

"Some guys not protected find their business and themselves kind of damaged," Big Six cut in.

"Yes, sir," Frenchy Rieben said, deliberately making his voice high. I saw him press a spring in the handle of a knife he had in his hand and the blade glitter out.

"Some places have been mussed up and the owners also," Frenchy continued. "See—" Pazzini and Carlson laughed.

Frenchy drove the knife blade into the arm of the couch and ripped the cloth with it.

"That Frenchy's a card," Pazzini said. He had an automatic in his hand and I knew it was on Tex.

"Better muss him up, Big Six, so he'll understand," Pazzini said.

"Let me cut him a little," Rieben said. Big Six pushed Frenchy back and heaved his bulk to his feet. He had big yellow teeth. They were easy to see now. His smile practically showed the roots of his tonsils.

Frenchy shoved forward on the couch. He had a ringside seat and I think he liked to see Big Six operate.

Maybe I should have permitted Big Six to slug Tex Drake once to really roil him up. Instead I kicked the washroom door open and yelled, "Hold it!" I stepped out and jammed the .38 against Pazzini's neck and took his .32 automatic.

"You'll go broke buying these toys," I scoffed. I lined Big Six, Frenchy and Pazzini against the wall.

"Their noses are all taped, Tex," I said. "They were going to give you a working over and you never had a better chance to practice your Sunday punch."

Tex chuckled and started for them.

"If they dodge I'll shoot their right legs off," I promised. Tex's Sunday punch was expertly administered. We finally let them go with blood dripping from their noses and tears from their eyes.

We started to wait after that. I corraled Kate, bought a few stacks of chips and we tangled with the roulette wheel. I had parked my convertible for a quick getaway.

About one o'clock in the morning a car roared alongside the building and there was the *tat-tat-tat* of a chopper and then the crash of an explosion. They'd chucked some kind of bomb, or a couple of sticks of dynamite with a short fuse, through Tex Drake's office window. It made a hell of a noise and drove the office door off its hinges and sent it spinning under the crap table. It upset everyone on that side of the table, including a portly dowager with a bunch of diamonds on her chest.

I didn't take time to assess the damage. I was sprinting for the door ahead of the crowd. I got out of there fast, was in the convertible in seconds and spun through the gears and shot down Butte hill at a speed that scared me, making the corners by skidding.

I picked up the car ahead and it was rambling. Right ahead was the hairpin turn.

I have good brakes on my car. I used them, skidding on the icy surface of the oiled road. My car wheels cut through and dug trenches in it. I got the car to a stop just as the other car circled the hairpin turn and started back to pass almost directly under me.

There were flashes winking toward me from the rear seat of the car and I could hear metal slugs slicing into my car.

I reached under the dash and grabbed a small grenade the gray man supplies us with, a grenade made out of corrugated metal with a firing pin and chucked it downward at the car that was breezing by almost under me.

The car was lifted upward by the flaming blast. It hit hard, went over on its nose, bounced, and went crashing over and over down the snowy side of the hill to the sound of crumpling metal and splintering glass.

I drove back up to the Mile High and called Lieutenant Leary.

"You might check a car that spun over Butte Hill," I advised. I asked him to call me back at the Mile High.

Kate, Tex and I were having a few at the bar about an hour later when Lieutenant Leary's call came.

"Three stiff's were in the car," Leary said, but he didn't sound dejected. "They are strangers to Butte but bear a remarkable resemblance to some of the goons we have been looking for."

"They weren't Pazzini, Carlson and Frenchy Rieben?" I asked.

"No," Leary replied.

"They've already brought their strong arm squads in, Leary," I said. "When Pazzini finds these three are dead, he'll yell for more help."

Katie and I did routine work at an office I rented on the sixth floor of the Copper building. It was an office without any gilt lettering on the door.

Butte businessmen, gambling men and ladies smelling too strongly of perfume came to the office and told us Pazzini either was collecting or had ordered them to pay.

Pazzini and his men took only cash. Katie got the tight look of strain about her face. I could feel tension tightening inside me like a spring.

"Something's going to happen," Katie told me.

"It will," I agreed, thinking it would

probably happen to me. Tex Drake dropped in occasionally.

"The Mile High's a fortress," he said. "If anyone hits at it again they'll not get down Butte hill alive."

"The last three didn't live very long," I reminded him.

"Hell, no, you blew them off the hill." Tex grinned as he spoke.

"Pazzini has got to act, or the gang will get him out of here. He knows he's got to take Butte or be killed by his own pals," I said.

Sam Eubanks, owner of the Treasure laundry, came to the office.

"Pazzini came and demanded a thousand a month. I told him to go to hell," Eubanks said. "I've worked a lifetime developing my business."

"See Dickens at the bank. He'll see you are protected financially if you fight Pazzini," I advised.

I swung my convertible around the Treasure laundry often at night, knowing Pazzini had to strike. I had tipped off Lieutenant Leary and he had police cars making the block twice each hour.

Pazzini's men struck, but in the daytime. One of the Treasure company's laundry trucks was grinding up the steep hill into Centerville when it was rammed by a big sedan. The truck went over on its side. Someone in the sedan hurled a gas-filled bottle with light waste wrapped around it into the truck. The sedan speeded away.

The truck burned and the driver, his clothing saturated with gasoline, rolled screaming in flames in the road. He screamed weakly for awhile, even after someone rushed from a nearby house and smothered the flames under blankets.

Leary called me and I was driven to the scene by Officer Mickey Muldoon. There was nothing I could do. I drove back to the office. Katie wasn't there.

The office had been ripped to pieces. The records we had collected were gone. I felt sick and helpless. I knew Pazzini, Big Six Carlson and Rieben had Katie Hale. I thought a lot of her.

Pazzini had proved he knew more than sending goon squads to wreck a place or kill a man. He knew I would be called to the flaming laundry truck and crossed us up by nabbing Katie, either to be a hostage or for revenge or both.

I reached for the phone and called a

Seattle number. The gray man answered. I told him the jam I was in.

"Ron Barnes will fly the five-passenger ship over," the gray man said. "He'll leave in half an hour and will land at Butte by four this afternoon."

They found Mickey Muldoon at two in the afternoon lying by the side of the Anaconda road just beyond the radio station. The police car he had been driving was found wrecked just out of Butte. Mickey had been dragged from the car and given the works by Pazzini.

The police radio dispatcher called me. Lieutenant Leary was already on his way. I burned up the road in my car and skidded to a stop as Leary climbed out of the black police car and rushed to where Mickey was lying. A silent crowd of motorists stepped back as Leary and I shouldered our way through.

The gray man's tactics were working. The gang was starting to lash out blindly, driven by both fear and anger.

Mickey had been pistol-whipped and shot twice in the chest. Apparently, he'd been tossed from a speeding car for his flesh was torn from his arms, legs, face and head, showing he'd rolled some distance on the gravel shoulder of the road. There was a bloody froth on his lips.

"Leary," he was murmuring, so low we could scarcely hear him.

"Boy, boy"—it was as though Leary were talking to his son—"I'm right here by you. You'll be all right."

"Dyin'," Mickey said, so low his word was just a faint whisper of sound. Leary brushed the back of a hard hand over his eyes and I saw his lips frame words. I didn't know if he were praying for Mickey or making a pledge to get the ones who had left him dying by the road.

"Was it Pazzini?" Leary asked.

Mickey nodded his head. The "yeah" that came from his bloody lips was just an ejaculation of breath. He seemed to be making a supreme effort to try to talk. He got four words out we understood—"Kate," "Wise river," and "cabin."

Leary and I figured he had seen them pull away from the Copper building with Kate, given chase and wrecked the police car, perhaps after he was shot. They'd taken him into their car then, completed their brutality on him and tossed him out.

Lieutenant Leary's face grew whiter. He gently let Mickey's body down and pulled

a blanket over it. Mickey was dead there by the road. There were some cop killers still alive in the world.

I drove back to the office and called several real estate men. I gave Pazzini, Big Six and Frenchy Rieben's descriptions and names. I wanted a quick check made of any cabin rented in the Wise river section during the past two months.

The Bukner Real Estate Co. gave me my answer fast. Rieben had rented a cabin just off the main highway. He had used an assumed name, but Bukner said my description fitted him.

Lieutenant Leary would have to play his hand slow, according to the law, the police way.

I went to the airport and waited. I didn't let Ron Barnes keep the five-place ship on the snow-covered Butte airport long. I took the controls and let him eat sandwiches and drink a thermos of coffee while I gave him the score.

"Leary will be tied up here for awhile, but there'll be loads of police heading for the cabin tonight. We're ahead of them now," I said.

"Leary hasn't got any evidence against Pazzini that'll stand up in court, just a dyin' man's whispered words. If police surround the cabin Pazzini might kill Kate."

I gave the ship the gun and got her going down the runway.

"We'll check the cabin from the air," I explained.

It was bumpy and I bee-lined the ship for Wise river. Ron Barnes had field glasses ready and I went over the cabin slow at about five hundred feet.

"I caught a glimpse of someone at the door," Ron said. "And there's a fellow as big as a moose walking through the snow toward the woods by the side of the road. He's carrying a rifle."

"That'll be Big Six," I said. I gained altitude and gunned the plane ahead until I was sure it was out of sight of the men at the cabin. I circled back then and piloted the plane behind a ridge parallel to the valley the cabin was in.

"You going to try to land?" Ron asked. He was tightening his safety belt as he spoke.

"If there's a flat piece as big as a baseball diamond I'll try it," I told him.

"There's a spot," Ron said. "I'm praying for you can't see what's under snow."

I let her down and she hit easy but started to roll and right ahead was a stack of snow

and ice-covered logs. We went over, the plane's right wing crumpled. We had protected our heads with our arms when we hit, but there was blood on Ron's forehead.

"O.K.?" I asked.

"O.K.," he replied, and grinned. "Boy, I thought we were goners."

It grew dark when we topped the ridge and waded through snow drifted in the trees. We could see the cabin lights at our right.

"I'll get Big Six," I said. Ron waited opposite the lighted cabin window. We knew if we tried to rush the cabin across the open field we'd be blasted before we reached it.

There was the flare of a match up ahead. I was on my belly worming forward, around trees and under fallen timber and deadfalls. Snow worked down my neck. My hands were ice. I heard Big Six walking, saw the dark silhouette of his shoulders against the sky. I worked up to a standing position.

I took a deep breath, got my .38 by the barrel and, rolling around the tree, plunged at the man. He had a rifle in his hands and swung it at me. It crashed against my upper right arm and hurled me to the snow. Big Six started to pull it around for a shot. I body-blocked him and the two of us were scrabbling around in the snow. He was cursing and yelling.

I lashed out with the .38 and he crashed backward, but I knew we had lost our chance to surprise the cabin. There was a sharp pain in my left arm. I felt the warm flow of blood.

Big Six had dropped his rifle and I knew he was using a knife. I felt its point probing deep in my left arm the second time. I smashed out with the revolver and felt it crush through Big Six's thick skull. I pushed my gun back into the clip holster and weakly rose to my feet.

The cabin lamp was blown out.

"You all right, Six?" Frenchy Rieben was calling. There was an undercurrent of fear in his voice.

"Six," Pazzini added his voice to Frenchy's.

I was sick and tired and it seemed like a weight was on me as I crawled through the snow toward the cabin.

"Someone's there," Frenchy said. I knew it was just a question of seconds until they'd spot and blast me. I hoped Ron Barnes might be in position to cut loose with his automatic.

"Answer now or the girl gets it," Pazzini called. His voice carried clearly over the

snow. I knew he'd keep his word. He'd knife or shoot her and get out of there in the car and we'd never get him.

I wobbled from weakness as I stood up.

"Keep your hands high and walk this way," Pazzini ordered. "Light the lamp, Frenchy." Pazzini let me by him into the cabin. I walked to the far wall and turned to face them. Pazzini and Frenchy each had their guns on me.

"Keep your hands up," Pazzini said. I could feel the blood running down into my armpit and down my side.

"You're going to get it," Pazzini said. There was a bunk under the window. Kate Hale was lying on it, her feet and arms tied.

"You'll get it and she's got to disappear. Our troubles'll end in Butte."

I could see his eyes start to narrow and Frenchy's fingers tightened about the grip of his revolver.

The crash of glass startled me almost as much as it did Pazzini and Frenchy. Ron Barnes had worked his way alongside the cabin and batted a pane of glass out with his revolver. Pazzini shot over Kate through the window. My right hand wasn't hurt. I had my .38 out and it was alive in my hand. Pazzini was going down and his .32 was turned on me. I felt slugs pound my upper legs. I fell and saw a man's running legs. They seemed to be running out the door. I pulled the trigger of my .38. Frenchy went down. I hit the floor with my face. I was so tired and weak the floor felt soft.

Someone was dumping whisky into my mouth. It took me minutes to realize I was in the cabin. My arms, side and legs were bandaged. Kate Hale's hand was cool on my forehead. I was stretched out on the bunk.

Leary was there looking happy, talking to Ron Barnes. They were showing a quart of whisky back and forth.

"Where's Pazzini, Big Six?" I asked.

"The stiff's are outside getting stiffer," Leary said. "Faith, I'd have liked to have had my gun a-blazin' at 'em."

"And Frenchy Rieben's singin' like a canary," Ron Barnes added, taking another drink.

I was so tired I let my head fall into Katie's lap. My Butte job was over. I was blissfully tired. I didn't hurt. I just went to sleep again right there with my head in Katie's lap, police talking loud, and two guys who had been tough now just stiff's chilling outside the cabin door.



“In case of death—”

By INEZ SEBASTIAN

Every passenger on the privately chartered plane was insured for one hundred thousand dollars; all worth more dead than alive. But, of course, no one would wish any of the specially invited guests dead. . .

I.

GAY, as she walked into the big, high-ceilinged living room of her apartment and kicked the door shut behind her, was aware of a faint, whispering echo of the sound, as if another door had closed, very softly. She glanced toward the bedroom, puzzled, sure that she had left that door open when she went out. It was heavy; the faint breeze of the June day could not have blown it shut. Unconsciously, she braced herself for unpleasantness, then relaxed, and smiled with relief. Stan wasn't here, couldn't possibly be here; before he left last night he'd thrown his key down on the coffee table so hard that the glass had cracked. So he couldn't have come back, determined to convince her that their marriage was not a failure.

Awkwardly, Gay took off her hat with her left hand, and struggled out of the jacket of her black linen suit. The bandage on her right hand caught in the sleeve, and she winced as she freed it, biting her lips as pain throbbed through the burned flesh. If only she'd gone to the doctor four days ago the hand would be so much better by now; he couldn't understand why she hadn't.

“My husband said he knew all about

burns,” she had explained. “He put some stuff on it, but it seemed to get worse, so I thought I'd better come to you today.”

“I should think so!” Dr. Lee had grumbled. “How on earth did you manage to do this, anyway?”

“Well, I . . . I was making tea.” That much was true. “And I spilled a lot of boiling water over it.”

He looked at her sharply. “I've known you for five years,” he said, “and I've never known you to be awkward. In fact, you're remarkably skillful with your hands.”

Gay managed a fairly successful laugh. “I'd had two martinis,” she lied.

For, of course, she couldn't tell him the truth. She couldn't say, “My husband did it, on purpose. You see, it means a lot to radio press agents to get a paragraph about their clients into my column in the *Morning Gazette*. Sometimes just a line or two holds a publicity account for them. Stan knew I'd ask him to write the column for me if I couldn't do it; that's what happened last winter when I had the flu. So, two slimy press agents whom nobody trusts paid him one hundred dollars apiece to slip some very phony stuff into the column, and he burned my right hand—oh, he pretended it

was accidental, of course—so that I couldn't type. Then he wrote the column.”

No, she couldn't tell Dr. Lee that; she couldn't tell anyone. She couldn't even prove that Stan had spilled the water on purpose. Even last night, when she'd stood there with a copy of the *Gazette* in her hand and accused him of taking pay for the outrageous tripe he'd written, and brought up the way her hand was burned—even then he'd insisted that he was innocent. When he finally gave in and admitted that he had taken pay for what he'd done, he had laughed at her for her scruples; she just didn't know her way around, didn't realize that nowadays you had to make money any way you could.

“O.K.,” she'd said finally. “This is the end, Stan. I can't put up with any more. I can't trust you. I've got to admit that you'll do anything for money, anything you think you can get away with, no matter how dishonest it is. You're so ruthless. Why, I . . . I believe you'd commit murder, if there were enough money in it for you.”

“Oh, now, listen, darlin'—”

“I won't listen! I've tried hard for two years to make a success of our marriage, because I loved you so much, because I wouldn't believe you were the kind of man you are. I really believed that you were writing a play, instead of just talking about writing one; I was glad to pay the bills, so that you could have all your time to work.”

“But, honey-heart, I—”

“I know, you wrote half the first act. Ever since then you've been telling people about having appointments with Jed Harris and Rogers and Hammerstein and all the other producers, but you haven't really seen them at all, and you haven't done a lick of work. You—” She paused, checking the impulse to remind him of the way he'd run around with other women. He would have smiled and told her that she was hopelessly unsophisticated, a silly, jealous female. “Stan, I'm through. I just can't live with you any more. You'll have to go.”

So he had gone away at last, looking so hurt, so incredulous, that she wondered if she could possibly be wrong about him. They had been so happy the first year of their marriage, and she had been so proud of Stan, so glad to support him so that he could write his play. She had fought against her growing disillusionment, as she began to realize what sort of man he really was. Even when she learned that he was trading

on her position, borrowing money from press agents with no thought of returning it, indulging in more and more flagrant love affairs, she had tried to convince herself that things would change if only she held their marriage together a little longer. But her love had died, slowly, taking with it all respect for him; the sight of his face when he burned her hand had brought real fear. Gay had meant it when she said that she believed he would commit murder if it were to his advantage.

Still holding her jacket in her hand, she took a step across the deep-blue carpet toward the bedroom, hesitatingly took another. It was absurd to have that shivery feeling of fear; even if Stan were in the bedroom he wouldn't hurt her. But if he had come back, expecting her to be at the *Gazette* office as she usually was at this time—suddenly, she turned her back and went over to the desk. After all, she didn't have to go into the bedroom just now.

The wonderful letter that had come that morning was there, under a pile of mail that had been sent over from the office just before she left for the doctor's. Gay pushed the mail aside impatiently, looking for it, and found it at last, between two big brown envelopes from National Broadcasting. Postmarked in the small town in Michigan where she had grown up, with the name of a law firm in one corner—Gay smiled as she looked down at it.

“Eight thousand dollars!” she said softly. “How on earth auntie managed to save that much, even skimming the way she did! Never giving me enough to eat all those years, making me work my way through high school and college because she said dad didn't leave enough to pay my way; even so, I don't see how she managed it.”

But there was the letter from the lawyer, proving that she had. And the eight thousand was Gay's, because there was no one else who had any claim to it.

Gay's blue eyes filled with tears. “I'm glad I used to write to her, and send presents for Christmas and birthdays,” she thought. “Even though auntie didn't like me, she did like presents.”

She dropped down on the big blue couch and swung her feet up on it, thinking of how wonderful it was to have the money, listing the people to whom just a little of it was going to mean so much. A few hundreds here and there would make all the difference in the world.

It was then that she heard the sound

that made her sit up straight, her body tense. It had been soft, muffled, but unmistakable, that ragged little cough; Gay could almost see the cigarette smoke that it carried out into the bedroom. When he was keyed up about anything, Stan could never control that nervous cough.

"Stan!" she called sharply, leaning forward, turning toward the closed door. "Stan, are you in there?"

At first there was no response, but when she called again the door opened, and Stan stood there, yawning, twisting his bulky shoulders, smiling at her as he smoothed his light tousled hair.

"Hi, darlin'," he drawled. "I fell asleep, waiting for you to come home, and got a crick in my neck."

"Stan, what are you doing here?" Gay's voice shook a little, because she was so angry.

He sauntered into the room and sat down in the big chair near the couch. "Gosh, you're pretty when you're mad!" he said admiringly. "Amber hair, sea-blue eyes, color in your cheeks, lovely!" When he wanted something, he'd always described her brown hair and blues eyes that way. "You're a beautiful gal, only you don't know it."

Gay ignored the flattery. "How did you get in?" she demanded.

"Used my key," he answered. "I picked it up from the floor last night, when you were pacing up and down, ranting like a ham actress." His good-natured face was bland with complacency. "Don't look so grim, honey, even if I am still in the dog house."

"If you don't get out of here right now I'll call the police," she said icily. "I meant it last night when I said I was through with you."

"But, sweetheart—"

"I meant it, Stan."

"But—Oh, all right!" The complacency vanished, and his plump face looked suddenly old, defeated, that of a man whose thirty-five years might have numbered fifty, "I'll get out," he said, leaning back and lighting a cigarette that was the last of a battered pack. Gay felt a little pang of pity. Would he have nothing to smoke now, and not too much to eat? "I was fool enough to think maybe we could straighten things out," Stan went on. "I couldn't believe that you'd change so completely. I was all set to turn over a new leaf, you see. Planned to sell my books." His glance

swept the laden shelves that flanked the fireplace. "That would give me money enough to pay the rent here for a couple of months and convince you that I've really reformed."

"But, Stan, you can't do that! Those first editions are worth a lot of money, and you won't get much on anything if you just dump them all at once." Even as she spoke Gay wondered how habit could be so strong. Why should she care, now, what he did?

"Don't I know it!" he said mournfully. "But—well, last night when I couldn't sleep—I stayed with the Hiltons, slept all hunched up on that five-foot couch in their living room—well, I thought of all you've done for me, all you've meant to me, and I couldn't wait to do something about trying to get you back."

"You did a lot for me, too, Stan," Gay said honestly, recalling the first months of their marriage, just after she began writing her column on the *Gazette*. Stan had given her a lot of good advice on how to handle it. And she had been so blissfully, amazingly happy, for the first time in her life.

Then she glanced down and saw her bandaged hand, and remembered all the tricky little things Stan had done. She thought of the evenings she had sat at the typewriter, pounding out articles for the *Gazette's* Sunday section, for radio magazines, for any publication that would pay for her work, so that she could support the household.

Stan hadn't stayed home; the sound of the typewriter made him nervous. And if he was going to write a good play he must go to the theater a lot; he could always wangle passes, using Gay's name. But it was dreary to go alone, so one pretty girl after another had gone with him. There had been a lot of gossip; once it had verged on scandal, and Stan had promised to turn over a new leaf that time, but the new leaf had soon been like all the others.

"Stan, it's no use," Gay said abruptly. "We're through. And—Good heavens, can that clock be right?" She stared at the desk clock in amazement. "It can't be four-thirty! I have an appointment to interview Edgar Bergen at five. I'll have to change."

She was running toward the bedroom, unfastening her blouse with her left hand. Stan sauntered after her. When she came out of the dressing room, drawing a robe around her, and sat down at the dressing table, he stood in the doorway and watched her comb her hair.

"I'll never get a cab at this hour, and I simply can't be late!" Gay muttered. Stan's presence annoyed her; he was watching her with narrowed, speculative eyes.

"Where's Bergen staying?" he asked.

"At the Waldorf Towers. I'm seeing him there."

"Well, then, look. I've got Jim Hilton's old convertible downstairs; he lent it to me to tote my books in. So why don't I run you over to the Waldorf? I can get you there in nothing flat."

"Oh, Stan, would you?" Gay asked gratefully. "If you will—"

"Sure, I will. Wait a second." She was fitting a wide-brimmed black hat on her head, trying to do it with one hand, and he stepped behind her and adjusted it skillfully. "There. Very becoming. Now get your dress on and let's go."

He gave a low whistle of admiration when she joined him in the living room. "You're more beautiful than you've ever been before," he told her, and would have taken her arm, but Gay eluded him.

"Come on, we'll have to hurry," she said. "It's ten of five. Oh, and, Stan, give me your doorkey, please."

He handed it to her with a rueful smile, and she dropped it into her bag and ran down the stairs to the street. The car was at the curb. Gay got into it quickly, and Stan went around to the other side and stepped over the low door without bothering to open it.

"I don't believe we'll ever make the Waldorf on time," Gay said uneasily. "All this traffic—"

"Now, don't worry, darlin'," he answered easily as he started the car. "Remember, I know how to drive."

She nodded, thinking of the time just after their marriage when he had rented a car and driven her up to Lowell Thomas' house near Pawling. She had been amazed by his expert handling of the roadster, and had wondered if they couldn't possibly manage to get a car of their own. She had had so many plans in those days; his play would be a success; they'd have a house in the country, and he would write more plays, and they'd have the children she wanted so much.

"Made it!" Stan said exultantly, skimming across First Avenue just as the traffic light turned red.

But between First and Second several trucks had herded together, like gigantic animals; the north and south traffic on

Second Avenue started just as he reached it, and he jammed on the brake so suddenly that Gay was jolted forward till she almost slid off the seat.

"Stan I'd rather be late than do that again!" she protested, cradling her bandaged hand in her left one, biting her lip as pain shot up her arm. "I almost crashed into the windshield."

"Darlin', I'm so sorry; I wouldn't have hurt you for anything in the world. Why, when I think of the way I spilled that water on your hand—Gay, you've got to believe that I didn't do that on purpose, you've got to! I can't bear to have you think I did."

"All right, I'll believe you," she answered, her eyes on the taxi that was planning to pass a limousine before Stan could do it. Stan won, missing the big car by inches. "Stan, I . . . please be careful!"

"Suresure." It was an old habit, running those two words into one, carelessly, contemptuously. "I'll be careful, but I'm going to get you to the Waldorf on time if it's the last thing I do." And he made a quick turn into Third Avenue.

"Oh, Stan, don't go down Third!" Gay protested. "It's such an awful street. All those Elevated pillars—"

"Fifty-third's jammed solid between Third and Lexington," he said curtly. "If I'd gone straight across we'd be stuck there at least ten minutes." He was driving along the car tracks, and the thick metal pillars of the El marched on either side. On the tracks above their heads a train rattled along. "Time they tore the El down; they don't need it any more, with all the subways and bus lines they've got now."

There was not much traffic between the pillars; only one of the busses that had replaced the street cars was ahead of them. In the space between the pillars and the cars parked along the curb a truck sped along beside them, and Gay slid down a little in the seat, moving uneasily.

"We'll get out of here, if you don't like it," Stan told her quickly. "I'll turn right on Fifty-first if you say so, and go down Lexington and drop you at the entrance on that side of the hotel. Only it'll take longer."

"Anything to get off this street!" Gay exclaimed, and added apologetically, "I'm sorry to be so fussy, but my hand hurts, and I hate driving between these pillars. There's so little room, especially when so many cars are going in the other direction."

"You can be as fussy as you like," he

said warmly. "Gay, I . . . I'm not going to give up trying to win you back, you know. I'm just beginning to realize how much I love you. Why, without you I'm so lost I don't know what to do. I'm going back to grab off a job, and pay back all you've spent on me, and then—well, if love means anything at all—"

The wind lifted Gay's big hat, and she pressed the brim down and rested her right hand against it, and turned a little, to look up at him. His tone had gone straight to her heart, but she reminded herself grimly that he couldn't possibly mean what he was saying. He had said these same things before. Of course, this was the first time she had definitely broken with him; perhaps he had been shocked into realization of what it meant to lose her. Maybe he did mean what he said. But even if he did, she didn't want him back; their marriage couldn't be—

Gay never knew what made her turn sharply, pushing her hat back, so that she saw what was inevitably going to happen. Stan was swinging the car to the right, toward the lane between the El pillars and the sidewalk. But not swinging it quite far enough, or sharply enough. With horrible certainty, Gay knew that the car would crash into the towering metal pillar that stood squarely in its path.

After that first paralysing instant of fear, her body seemed to move of its own accord, propelled by some force that had been summoned instinctively. She scrambled onto the top of the seat and over the back of the open car, as automatically as she would have jerked her hand back from a roaring flame. The jolt as car met pillar hurled her to the ground, and she fell clear, landing on her side, falling limply, hardly realizing what had happened.

She huddled there on the pavement, too stunned to move, until people began crowding around the wrecked car like vultures swooping down on an animal's carcass. There was a babble of voices—"D'you see it? The damn fool, turning short that way!" "Jumped just before it hit, jumped right over the side of the car, he did."

A man almost stepped on Gay. Apologizing, he picked her up, and carried her past the people who crowded close, saying, "Is she dead?" excitedly, as if they hoped she were. Dazed, Gay felt as if it were happening to someone else. Then she was in a store, sitting on a hard chair, and a policeman was urging her to drink some water

she didn't want. Evidently, she had fainted; water was splashed on her face, and her dress was dripping wet.

The policeman was saying something about an ambulance when she broke in, at first making sounds that didn't even resemble words; that shocked her into speaking clearly.

"I must go," she insisted, trying to rise. "I'll be late—I have to see Edgar Bergen."

Somewhere in the background a man laughed. "Wants to see Bergen! Must think she's Charlie McCarthy." And a woman added, "She's nuts, poor thing."

Gay gripped the policeman's hand. "I'm not nuts! I'm a newspaper woman, and I'm late for an interview with Edgar Bergen. Can't you get me out of here?" she begged.

"Darlin'!" It was Stan, suddenly appearing at her side. "Are you all right? Lord, I—Were you hurt? You . . . you might have been killed!"

"Lucky she wasn't," the policeman cut in, raising his voice as the cars in front of the store hooted their protests at the jam the accident had caused.

"Don't I know it! The steering gear jammed—the brakes didn't hold—" Stan paused, caught a quick, gulping breath. "Gay, are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm all right," she said irritably. "Get me out of here, please!"

He helped her to rise, but the policeman intervened. "Just a minute, lady. I got to get the facts," he said.

"But I can't—" Gay closed her eyes as tears filled them, and tried to speak over the sobs that rose in her throat. "I . . . I—"

She did not hear what the policeman said, but a moment later Stan was putting her into a cab and giving the driver her doctor's address. He was talking to the policeman as the cab started, saying something about never having had an accident before.

"Sure, no guy who has an accident ever had one before," the taxi driver told Gay. "Say, you were lucky to come out of that smash-up alive. I seen it; I was parked by the curb, just let a fare out. Say, the way you hit out over the back of that car—I never seen a lady move so fast. And that guy that was driving, he moved fast, too. He wouldn't 'a been killed, though; wouldn't even 'a got the steering wheel in his stummick!" he added disdainfully. "Only your side of the car was smashed; his side sort of slewed around. But you . . . you're lucky you wasn't killed."

"I guess I am," she said. The next words

seemed to say themselves. "A girl who's just inherited eight thousand dollars certainly ought not to be killed!"

II.

SAYRE AND LINCOLN, INC., was one of the country's largest advertising agencies; its offices filled three floors of a building that ran from Park Avenue through to Lexington, those on the Park Avenue side typifying a decorator's idea of what important executives' surroundings should resemble. Tex Hunter grinned as he crossed highly polished floors and jewel-colored rugs on his way from the door of one of the larger offices to the desk at the far end.

"I hardly dare remember that I knew you when," he said, as the man behind the desk rose and gripped his hand.

The thickset, perfectly tailored man said unprintable words of affection, paused to look ruefully at Tex's red hair. "Not a tinge of gray, and look at me!" he grumbled.

"Sure, you're living at high tension," said Tex. "Having to keep up with all this stuffed-shirt background."

"And all you do is chase murderers," Bill Jameson retorted. "No tension there! What brings you to New York? I suppose you're on somebody's trail," he added enviously. "Nothing else would drag you out of California."

"Partly it's that, partly it's a vacation," Tex told him. "I need your help."

Jameson sat up straighter; his face had the eagerness of a small boy's at the circus. "D'you mean I can—"

Tex shook his head. "Nope, you're not going to help me shoot somebody," he said, laughing. "I just want you to wield a little influence. Here's the setup." Unconsciously, Jameson leaned forward in his chair. "About four years ago, in Hollywood, a Mrs. Bailey died. She'd come out there six months before; she was a widow, about fifty, had plenty of money. Didn't know anybody. Met a chap named Holcomb a few weeks later, and married him about a month later. He was big, husky, blonde, not bad looking, like a lot of other fellows who go out there wanting to break into the movies. He'd never tried that, though; didn't even register with Central Casting. His game was different. That country's the happy hunting ground for fellows like him."

"Wealthy widows?" asked Jameson, looking proud of his own astuteness as Tex nodded.

"That's right. It's even better than the cowboys' racket in Reno. Sometimes, amazingly, the marriages turn out fine. Well, Holcomb and his wife evidently made out successfully for a few months; she bought a house, got a couple of cars, they went everywhere, looking very happy. Didn't have any real friends, just knew a lot of people they'd picked up at bars and Santa Anita and around like that.

"Then they were driving down to Mexico and had an accident; her side of the car was smashed up when it hit a telegraph pole. He was driving, wasn't hurt. She was laid up for quite a while; the doctors said she'd be lame for life. The young husband—not so young; about thirty, people guessed—was still attentive. Then she died. Poison."

Jameson's eyes sparkled. "The husband gave it to her?"

"They couldn't prove it. He'd gone off on a hunting trip that morning; she'd mixed herself a drink of gin-and- tonic, her favorite, just before lunch; the tonic was flavored with arsenic, but, of course, the drink tasted bitter, anyway, so she didn't notice. Holcomb rushed back to town, shocked, horrified, couldn't wait to help the police. But they couldn't pin the woman's death on anybody. When her affairs were settled up they stopped trying."

"Why? Didn't her husband inherit—"

Tex shook his head. "Nothing to inherit," he explained. "She'd been spending her capital, and there was barely enough money left to bury her. All her husband got was the stuff she'd given him; clothes, a car, a watch, stuff like that. She didn't even own the house; it was mortgaged to the hilt. She'd managed all her affairs herself, the bank people said, so the husband couldn't have known she was nearly broke. Well, that looked like a motive for suicide; she'd be afraid she couldn't hold Holcomb when her money was gone."

Jameson leaned back, looking disappointed. "But I thought you were—" he began.

"I am. Grindle, my chief, got a tip the other day that Holcomb did kill his wife, and that's he's in New York now. If we can locate him, there's enough proof to send him to the gas chamber. That's why I came to see you. Grindle was informed that Holcomb lives here, and has been mixing with the radio crowd. He's changed his name, I suppose. The guy who had enough of a grudge against him to write to Grindle didn't say. I knew your agency had a lot of

accounts that sponsor broadcasts, so I thought maybe you could finagle something for me, fix it up so that I could mix with the people he'd be in with. I don't know what Holcomb looks like now, of course; if he's guilty he may have done something about changing his general appearance. But I'd like to run him down."

Jameson nodded curtly. "I don't have much to do with the radio end of things here," he told Tex. "But I'll fix this for you." He spoke into the inter-office phone on his desk, and presently Don Newlin appeared, and was introduced as head of the agency's radio press department. Then Jameson really spread himself.

"Mr. Hunter has just come on from the coast," he told Don, and added impressively, "I want you to see that he meets the crowd you work with, newspaper people, magazine writers, the whole lot. It's important that he meets everybody."

"Not that I'm after your job," Tex said quickly.

"Not that I'd care if you were," Don retorted. "I'm sick of it. Right now the job's one headache after another."

"Why?" Tex sounded really interested.

"We've got a cocktail party for the press coming up next Monday. Clinton's in town, and mad because Bob Hope gets so much more publicity than he does."

"He's not half as funny as Hope," Jameson pointed out.

"Sure, but he won't admit it, especially since his Hooper rating went up, and he won't admit that it went up because he had a series of big guest stars on his program. So we're giving this cocktail party for the press, at the Ambassador, to make him happy. Not that the newspaper gang gives a hoot about meeting Clinton, but they'll come because they're friends of mine."

"Who'll be there? Just the men and women who work on papers and magazines?" asked Jameson, with a significant glance at Tex.

"Oh, we may get a few gatecrashers," Don told him. "We'll have a guest list at the door with girls checking it, but a few always drift in. You can't set up free liquor in this town and hope to keep 'em out."

"I'd like to come to the party," Tex said.

"Sure, glad to have you. I'll see that you meet everybody. And, say, we've got another stunt coming up that ought to suit you. It's my worst headache, but it's going to turn out all right. We're flying a hand-picked crowd down to South Carolina next Friday

for the week end; going to broadcast our 'Haunted House' show from a real haunted house down there." Don's voice warmed with enthusiasm, and he ran one hand through his already rumpled brown hair. "It's the biggest publicity stunt that's been pulled in years; there's never been another shindig like it. We're shooting the works."

Jameson laughed. "Consolidated Machinery must want to get rid of some excess profits," he commented, and, to Tex, "They sponsor 'Haunted House.'"

"Well, they did tell us to go as far as we liked," said Don. "We're using chartered planes, putting the gang up at an inn we've taken over, giving 'em a week-end they'll never forget. We've asked thirty of the top magazine and newspaper crowd, and got acceptances from nearly all of 'em. You'd better come along, Mr.—"

"Tex," said Tex. "Sure, I'll come."

"Swell! You'll meet everybody you ought to know; that's one place where we won't have any crashers. We've got a surprise for 'em, too. You know, usually on any kind of trip the press folks are asked to sign a paper releasing the people who invited them from any claim for damages in case of accident. Well, we're not doing it. Instead, we're insuring each person for one hundred thousand bucks." He laughed with satisfaction. "Yes, sir, one hundred thousand bucks. That's only in case of death, of course. If anyone just gets hurt they won't collect that much."

Jameson sat up a little straighter. "Sort of tempting somebody to—well, push somebody else off the plane or something, aren't you?" he asked.

Don laughed again. "Oh, there'll be no danger of that. There's never yet been an accident on a trip of this kind."

Jameson's eyes met Tex's for a fraction of a second. "Tell me, will there be any husbands and wives along?" he asked. His casual tone made Tex grin.

Don shook his head. "No, not one; all spouses will be left at home. This party is just for the working press." He rose and turned toward the door. "Well, I'll get back to work. By the way, Tex, how about having dinner with me tonight? I'm taking a gal named Mary Lawrence. She's editor of the *Gazette's* Sunday supplement, does a lot of radio stories. You ought to meet her. She can give you a line on some of the other people you ought to know; she's been around a long time."

Tex nodded. "Sure, I'll be glad to go along."

Don turned and looked up at Tex, measuring his six feet of height, studying the blunt-featured, good-looking face beneath the red hair. "Mary'll be glad to meet you, too," he remarked. "She's just shed her third husband, and is looking for another."

When Gay arrived at Sayre and Lincoln's cocktail party for the press she saw Stan almost at once. She was walking slowly down the stairs leading to the Garden Room, looking at the crowd below, wondering if he would have nerve enough to crash this party now that she had broken with him. Then she saw him, standing at the bar between the two shallow, curving flights of stairs. He was talking to a pretty girl whose gray suit Gay had sighed for when she saw it in a fashion show; her hat was a masterpiece of the goofiest and most expensive designer in town. She was looking up at Stan and smiling. Gay saw Stan touch his fingers to his lips and then to hers.

"Stan ought to change his technique," drawled a woman's voice, and Gay turned and saw Mary Lawrence, just behind her. "He used that same silly little trick when he was wooing you, and I was trying to convince you that he was a heel. Better get down there and break that up, baby, if you still want Stan."

"But I don't," Gay replied, smiling into Mary's red-brown eyes. "I've turned him loose."

"Praises be!" Mary studied her shrewdly. "You've really recovered from that obsession, then? No regrets?"

Gay shook her head. "Not one."

"And Stan's losing no time about choosing the next Mrs. Avery. But he's going to need plenty of money to land this one."

Gay shrugged her shoulders. "Who is she?" she asked, glad that it mattered so little to have Stan devoting himself to someone else.

"Thelma Bates, of the drugstore Bates. Decided to be a writer, so daddy bought a magazine for her. It's one of those things they give away at the swank hotels, that cost a fortune to print."

"Maybe Stan's angling for a job," Gay suggested.

"Darling, Stan's angling for a rich wife. Oh, he'll probably help her write her interview with Clinton, after this party, and she'll think he's brilliant, just as you did when you first met him." Mary's throaty chuckle

warned Gay of what was coming. "You certainly were lovesick if anybody ever was."

An odd little smile played around Gay's pretty mouth. "I know," she said sweetly. "I behaved just the way you always do before you get married again."

Mary's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Well, really," she said, and then, chuckling again, "Darling, you are growing up at last! If you've reached the stage where you can take a shot like that at me I have hopes of you. Little meek-as-Moses is a dormat no longer."

"Oh, Mary," Gay said quickly. "I didn't mean to. I wouldn't be nasty to you, of all people—"

"Don't spoil it!" Mary exclaimed. "Look, I'm going to meet the guest of honor and get it over with, and then settle down in a corner with a nice, over-size drink. Sit with me, will you? I want to hear all about your bouncing Stan out on his ear."

Gay nodded, and watched as Mary went on down the steps and began edging her way through the crowd. She owed so much to Mary. When she arrived in New York with a letter of introduction from the head of the English department at college, Mary had rescued her from a jobless, friendless, penniless state that was almost desperate. Mary had had Gay do a couple of articles for the Sunday supplement which she edited; then, armed with them, she had persuaded the managing editor of the *Gazette* to hire Gay to list the daily radio programs.

"He knows he's got to put in a real radio section before long, much as he hates to," she'd told Gay. "I've convinced him that you practically invented radio, so you'll be in line for the job."

All that first year Gay had lived in Mary's apartment, paying an absurdly small price for her room, getting her own meals in the kitchen. Mary had seen to it that Gay was included in many of her own invitations, had taught Gay how to dress, where to shop, had introduced Gay to people she ought to know. And when Mary married her third husband and Gay moved out, it was Mary who found an apartment for Gay and lent her the furniture for it, till Gay could buy her own.

Gay had just landed the job as radio editor of the *Gazette* then, and Mary had stood over her for the first few months, helping her to make the column so distinctive that before long people were asking, "Have you read Gay today?" By the end of

that year the *Gazette* was using the question as an ad on the sides of its delivery trucks, and Gay had met Stan and fallen in love with him.

And Mary was saying, "Well, being married to a heel is a liberal education. I ought to know, I've tried it twice. But a girl like you can get her heart broken in the process of being educated that way. You're not tough enough to bounce back, Gay. Please don't marry him!"

But a week later Gay had married him, in the Little Church Around the Corner. It had been the conventional wedding of that type. Gay had worn two of the least expensive orchids, the wedding party—the bride and groom, Mary and her third husband, who had a bad hangover, and Stan's best man, whom Gay had never seen since or before—had had lunch at the Algonquin, because of its literary traditions. The bridal couple had spent the honeymoon week-end fixing up their apartment. The following Monday Stan borrowed some money from Gay, because a check he expected had not arrived. It never did.

"I should have taken Mary's advice," Gay thought now, watching Mary as she wove through the crowd. "She's always right. No matter what she urges me to do from now on, I'll do it."

Beth Lewis spotted Gay just then. Tall, handsome, Beth was in the radio publicity department of Columbia Broadcasting, the network carrying the guest of honor's program.

"Gay, angel!" she exclaimed, as Gay ran down the last few steps. "So you finally got here. Want a drink? Want to meet Clinton right away or later?"

"Right away," Gay answered. "And then I've got to run." Stan would be sure to stay till the party was over, and she didn't want to encounter him.

"I'll fight that out with you later," Beth warned, and led her over to the rather dull little man who could be so funny on the air, if he had a good script.

Clinton beamed on Gay, and presently was explaining that his new program would depend on character and situation rather than on gags; she listened as he glibly repeated the things his writers had jotted down for him to say, and wondered if she could possibly get an angle that would make the interview interesting. His remarks were stock stuff, of course. It would be a temptation to cut loose and take him apart in print; being

venomous and amusing at the same time was easy, and made a column that people would laugh over and quote to their friends. But Gay disliked that method, so she asked questions, and more questions, and finally got enough material for a fairly decent piece.

"Exhausted?" Beth asked, as Gay finally turned away.

"Yep, and I'll change my mind and have that drink now," Gay told her. "A whisky-and-soda that's mostly ice, please. I'll be over at that little table in the corner, with Mary Lawrence."

"See you there," said Beth, and turned away toward the bar.

As she walked toward the corner, Gay braced herself. She didn't want to talk about Stan, and Mary would insist on hearing every detail. But Mary surprised her.

"See that chap standing at the bar with Don Newlin?" she asked, as Gay sat down. "The tall one with red hair?"

Gay looked over her shoulder. "Yes. Why?" And then, staring at Mary's radiant face, "Oh, Mary, not again? You've just come back from Reno the third time!"

"I know it," Mary said blithely, tucking her back hair up under the gay hat that was so much too young for her. "But this time it's the real thing. He's wonderful, Tex is. I met him last week, at dinner with Don, and I'm going to marry him, only he doesn't know it yet."

"You always say they're wonderful," Gay reminded her.

"But this time it's true; I don't have to pretend. Of course, he's a little younger than I am; he's thirty, and I'm thirty-three." Her steady gaze defied Gay to remember that she would never see forty again. "But that doesn't matter when two people are really in love."

"No, of course not," Gay agreed, and turned to look again at Mary's candidate for matrimony.

She liked his face. Beneath the thatch of red hair his gray eyes were deep-set, alert; as he talked with Don he looked about the crowded room, not idly, but as if he were really seeing the people about him. There were deep creases at either side of his mouth, that deepened as he smiled at something Don said. Suddenly, Gay wanted to talk to him, to have him look straight into her eyes, so that she might try to read what lay behind them.

Finishing her drink, Mary began talking again. "Isn't he as wonderful as I said?"

she demanded. “Don won’t tell me much of anything about him, except that he came on from the coast, but just because Don’s suddenly so cagey I have a pretty good idea of what goes on.” She nodded importantly, drawing in the corners of her mouth. “Unless I’m awfully mistaken, Tex Hunter is going to be the new vice president in charge of radio at Sayre and Lincoln.”

“Really?” Gay told herself that she didn’t care what he did. He’d be just as interesting if he dug ditches.

Mary nodded again. “Don did admit that he was called into Bill Jameson’s office, at S and L, to meet Tex. Well, you know what that means. Jameson’s president of that agency. And Tex wouldn’t want to meet the radio press if he didn’t expect to have something to do with ’em.” She sighed, and studied her hands, short-fingered, grasping little hands. “Vice president in charge of radio—he’ll make oodles and oodles of money!”

Gay said, “Hm-m-m,” in careless agreement, and glanced around the room in search of Stan. The blonde Thelma Bates was still there, but Stan had gone. Gay settled back in her chair, glad that she need not leave.

“Now tell me about you and Stan,” Mary urged, signaling to a waiter for another highball.

Gay sighed. “Oh, I finally realized that we just couldn’t make a go of it, so I told him he’d have to leave. Last Wednesday.”

Mary looked at her sharply. “But you were in an automobile accident with him Thursday,” she said. “I was interviewing Edgar Bergen when Stan phoned that you’d been hurt and couldn’t make your appointment, and then some doctor called up a little later, to say the same thing. If you threw him out Wednesday—”

“Oh, he came back to pick up some books he wanted to sell; he had Jim Hilton’s old convertible, and offered to run me over to the Waldorf, because I was late. We ran into one of those El pillars”

“How?” Mary demanded. “I mean, how could you hit it so that you weren’t all smashed up?” She leaned forward, her eyes fixed on Gay’s face, as she waited for an answer.

“Well, somehow just one side of the car, the side I was sitting on, hit the pillar. And, honestly, Mary, I don’t know how I did it; it was just instinctive, but I scrambled over the top of the seat, over the back, and fell down to the street just as the car hit. Why

are you so awfully interested? I mean, the look—”

Mary laughed a little as she turned away. “Oh, nothing. I’m always surprised when anybody comes out of an auto accident without a scratch,” she said. “The only time I was in one I had my jaw broken.” She paused, to sip her highball. “Tell me, Gay, Stan came here from Hollywood, didn’t he? Didn’t he say something one night when he was sort of tight about having lived there, and then he never would say more about it?”

Gay frowned, trying to remember. “I don’t believe he ever really lived there,” she said slowly. “He did mention it, at our wedding breakfast, as a matter-of-fact, and then you said you’d been in Hollywood a lot and wanted to know when he was there, and he sort of backed out of it; said he’d been there for a few hours once, just driving through to San Francisco. You know how Stan is, Mary. He’ll say anything to impress people, and then hedge if he finds he can’t get away with it.”

Mary’s hearty laugh rang out. “You’ve certainly lost all your love for him, haven’t you?” she asked. “Finally admitting his faults, instead of covering up for him. Oh, well, who cares whether he ever lived in Hollywood or not! I don’t know why I even brought it up. Where’s Stan living now that you’ve booted him out?”

“With the Hiltons.”

“After treating ’em like dirt, as he has?”

“They’re too nice to hold that against him. And he hasn’t much money, and they have a couch in the living room.”

“I thought he was broke, when I read a couple of your columns week before last. Stan wrote ’em, didn’t he?” Gay nodded. “I knew you’d never run all that stuff about those two putrid singers. Why, every word in those two columns was a puff for some third-rater who— Tell me, how much did Stan collect? For, of course— Never mind, here comes Don.”

Don’s brown hair was more ruffled than ever, and his mouth had its usual one-sided smile; Don hated his job, and his only defense was to deprecate it. “Beth Lewis asked me to bring this over to you,” he told Gay, setting a glass down in front of her. “Drink it up and then tell me why you’re not going on our ‘Haunted House’ trip to Charleston.”

Gay pushed the drink aside. “I can tell you without that,” she said. “You know how it is, Don; I loathe those shindigs.

Everybody drinks too much, and people gather in groups and sing old songs. On that Pittsburg jaunt, I thought I'd go crazy if I heard 'Down by the Old Mill Stream' just once more."

Don chuckled. "I promise not to let anybody even hum it," he told her. "And other objections?"

Gay shrugged her shoulders. "It's just that— Oh, I don't know, Don; I don't see why I should go."

Mary broke in, "It's only going to be the most wonderful trip of its kind that anybody ever promoted," she said. "I'm going, Gay, and so's Tex. And I wish you'd come. I'll need somebody I can trust, to talk to."

"Look, Gay, it's really going to be swell," Don went on. "We're leaving Friday in a chartered plane. We're staying out in the country, at a beautiful old place that's been turned into an inn; we've taken it over for the week-end. There'll be a dinner party in town the first night, and luncheon next day at the country club, where you can play tennis or swim or whatever. And that night there'll be a barbecue, and the 'Haunted House' broadcast, at a place you never saw the likes of, a wonderful old plantation house."

"That the haunted house?" Mary asked.

"That's it. Some charming people live there now, and they sort of laugh off the idea of ghosts, but the tale is that a big bootlegger rented the house during prohibition, and killed off a whole crew of annoying competitors, down in the old slave quarters under the house."

"But, Don, if you're leaving Friday, everything's set by now," Gay protested. "You can't change your plans to include me."

"Sure, I can. I'll throw somebody out if I have to."

"Good old *Morning Gazette*, biggest circulation in the country," muttered Mary. "Sure, he'll make room for you."

Gay rose and picked up her bag. "I'll think it over, Don," she promised. "I'll phone you first thing in the morning."

But, as she left the hotel, she told herself that, of course, she couldn't go on this jaunt, pleasant though it would be. She'd have to stay home and make plans for going out to Reno and divorcing Stan.

It was nearly dark when she reached the remodeled house where she lived. Crossing the dimly lighted sidewalk after she got out of the cab, she stiffened suddenly, realizing that Stan was coming toward her,

though she could not see him clearly. But she knew the sound of his footsteps so well. Like many big men who have never done much walking because their feet are too small for their bodies, Stan took short steps; when he was hurrying, as he was hurrying along the walk now, his movements were jerky, badly balanced.

The taxi had left, but Gay stood near the curb. She was not actually afraid of Stan, but she did not want to be completely alone with him. When he stopped directly in front of her, she drew back a little, waiting for him to speak.

"Darlin', don't be so frightened!" he exclaimed. "You look as if you thought I was going to hit you."

"I . . . I'm so surprised to see you," she said. "Of course, I'm not afraid; I'm just annoyed. You know perfectly well that I don't want to talk to you. If you don't stop hanging around—"

"I'm not hanging around!" he retorted indignantly. "I had to see you about something that's important to both of us. Let's go upstairs and—"

"We will not go upstairs," Gay said crisply. "We'll sit in the lobby, for exactly five minutes."

She walked down the three shallow steps ahead of him, and crossed the tiled floor to the big bay window, to sit down on a prim little chair, her hands folded in her lap. A man passing on his way to the self-operating elevator looked at her appreciatively; beneath her tiny hat her light-brown hair curved smoothly over her head, and her blue eyes were bright with annoyance. Stan pulled a second chair close to hers, and coughed a little as he sat down.

"You see, it's this way," he began. "I ran into Terry Carver at lunch at Toots Shor's today, and he gave me this chance to make some money. Real money. He's taking on a new radio show, another of those blood-and-thunder things he does; maybe you know about it?"

"I heard that he was auditioning it," Gay replied.

"Well, he's giving me a chance to write it. He's too busy, turning out two others. So, he'd approve the story line and take a look at my scripts occasionally, and pay me two hundred and fifty bucks a week to start with. Of course, all he gets is a thousand! But my price will go up to three hundred after the first six months."

"It's a wonderful chance for you, of

course," Gay said. "But why tell me about it?"

"Because it's a wonderful chance for both of us. If you're still set on going to Reno—" He waited, and Gay nodded, "All right; I can pay for the divorce. Then I'll start paying back all the money you've spent on me these last two years."

"I'll take the Reno expenses, but that's all," Gay told him. "The rest is water over the dam."

"I'll argue that out with you later. But, here's where I have to ask a favor of you." He ran one hand over his dark hair, nervously. "Terry's done the story line for the first three months, and the scripts for the first week, and he's ready to go up to his summer place in New Hampshire next Monday. But he wants to see my scripts for the second and third weeks before he leaves, to make sure I can do 'em."

"But, of course, you can! You write well, when you want to."

He smiled at her quickly. "Thanks. But this is the hitch. I've got no place to work. I'm still staying with the Hiltons, sleeping on that small couch in their living room, or rather, staying awake on it. I can't write there; Jim's working on the songs for a new musical, and bangs the piano all day, and Sally's practicing taps in the bedroom; wants to get back into the Rockettes, now that the baby's weaned. And that baby—it wails like a banshee all day long and half the night."

Gay laughed in spite of herself. "They're sweet to let you stay there," she reminded him. "But, of course, it's no place to work."

"It's bedlam! And if I'm going to grind out ten radio scripts by Monday—" He threw out his hands, helplessly. "So this is what I thought. If you'd go on this trip to Charleston—oh, I know you said last week you wouldn't, but if you would—and if you'd let me work in ou . . . in your apartment this week-end, while you're away, I could bat out those scripts like falling off a log." He paused a moment, studying her face. "It would be quiet; I'd shut off the phone, nobody would know I was there. I could get myself something to eat when I was hungry—" He paused again, but still Gay was silent. "It's my big chance, Gay. Won't you do it, please?"

Gay could not have given a reason for her hesitation; it seemed unreasonable, selfish, to refuse merely because she disliked the idea of turning the apartment over to him. She looked at Stan thoughtfully, not

quite trusting him, although he was so earnest, so plausible. It was absurd, she told herself, to feel that any plan of his which involved her had some hidden motive behind it.

"You've always been so generous. Too generous," Stan added, his voice very humble. "I suppose that's why I have the nerve to ask you to do this one more thing for me. I wouldn't do it if this didn't mean so much to me, my big chance to get on my feet."

"I . . . you see, I don't want to go to Charleston," Gay said.

Stan laughed bitterly. "It's going to be a trip people will talk about for years, and you just don't want to go! When everybody who hasn't been asked would give their eye teeth for your invitation! And you'll be the star guest, what's more; Don Newlin told me today that the agency would consider the whole thing a success if he could just persuade you to go." He got up, walked to the outer door with his short, jerky step, after a moment came back to her. "Oh, well, I can phone Carver and tell him the whole thing's off, I suppose—"

"That's ridiculous! You can work in the library—"

"Ever try to do any writing there?"

"Or borrow somebody else's apartment; Mary's, Don's—"

"Mary's place is going to be full of painters and paper hangers. Don's lending his to a cousin who's coming from out of town."

Gay bit her lips, hating her own reluctance, puzzled by it. She took off her hat and sat twisting the delicate white flowers, unconsciously, as she tried to argue herself into doing as he asked. The door opened suddenly, and Mary strolled in, lifting quizzical eyebrows when she saw Stan, barely nodding to him as she sat down on the curved window seat near Gay.

"Does this mean that you two—" she began.

"It doesn't mean a thing, except that I had to ask a favor of Gay," Stan told her. "She's always been such a good sport that I hoped she'd grant it, but she can't see her way clear."

Mary's smile was malicious. "Gay's been a good sport far too long, so far as you were concerned," she said, and turned to Gay. "Look, darling, I came to ask a favor, too. Won't you please, please go along to Charleston? Because I'm going to need you, to talk to, to tell me the seams of my stock-

ings are straight, to remind me not to drink too much, to—Oh, just to keep a loving eye on me. I— Stan, go off somewhere, will you?" Obediently, he turned and walked to the far end of the lobby. "Gay, I'm so terribly in love with Tex," Mary went on, urgently. "And this trip can mean everything to me, being down there with him, seeing so much of him. But there's a lot of liquor around and no work to do. I— Honestly, Gay, if you won't go on the trip I won't go either."

"But, Mary, you—"

Mary shook her head, and pushed a stray lock back beneath her hat. "I won't do it; I made up my mind on the way over here," she said positively. "So won't you please change your mind, honey, and go along? For me?"

Gay smiled, and said, as she had so often said before when Mary used those words, "Of course, I will. You know that I'd do anything in the world for you."

Mary leaned forward and kissed her. "Wonderful! Stan!" she called. "Stan, congratulate me. Gay didn't want to go on this Charleston trip, but now she says she will."

He came back to them, quickly, smiling. "I'm the one to be congratulated," he told Mary. "Gay, you angel—"

Gay stood up, making a little gesture of impatience when he would have caught hold of her hand. "It's all right, Stan," she said. "The cleaning woman will be in the apartment Friday morning; she'll let you in, and you can use her key, only be sure to leave it for her when you go, Sunday."

"Sunday afternoon. You'll get home about eleven or twelve," Stan said. "I'll be out long before that," he promised. "Thanks for this, darlin'; I'll never forget it."

Watching him as he walked away, Mary shook her head wonderingly. "D'you know," she said to Gay, "sometimes I like that no good so-and-so in spite of myself. What he said goes for me, too, honey; thanks, and I'll never forget it."

III.

WHEN Don Newlin shepherded the guests of Sayre and Lincoln, Advertising, Inc., onto the plane at La Guardia Field on Friday, Gay walked up to the front and took one of the single seats. Mary, settling down across the aisle with Tex Hunter, leaned across him to speak to her.

"You're being awfully exclusive," she

said. "Why don't you move over here behind us?"

"I'm going to sleep as soon as we get started," Gay answered. And as the plane taxied down the field she closed her eyes, thinking that now, at last, she would be free of the fear that Stan would suddenly appear. It had haunted her all this last week; she never returned to her apartment without wondering if he would be there, and at night she would wake suddenly, sure that he was in the room.

She had never been able to understand why he had hidden in the bedroom that day when she came home from the doctor's, when he betrayed his presence by coughing. He might have expected to get away with it, of course; she often rushed home for something she'd forgotten, and hurried out again without going into the bedroom.

The plane lifted, wheeled over New York, headed south. Somebody said, "What about that rumor that there are five cases of Scotch aboard?" Somebody else said, "Who wants to play poker?" Don Newlin walked to the front of the plane and faced them.

"Hi, I've got to make a speech," he announced. "Maybe you're wondering how soon you'll be asked to sign the customary releases, saying you won't hold the agency responsible if you're hurt on this trip. Well, you won't have to. You're each insured for one hundred thousand bucks."

"Whee!" It was a low whistle from the man on the *Chronicle*. "Too bad we have to be killed to collect."

"I've never been so valuable in my life!" Mary exclaimed. "Don, what if we're not killed? What if we're just damaged? Do we get anything then?"

"You do if the accident's not your fault, and a result of the trip," Don said. "So don't think you're going to make money by having appendicitis."

Thelma Bates, sitting behind Tex and Mary, gave a silvery laugh. "What price a broken leg?" she asked. "Or getting almost drowned, or something? I need money for my magazine," she explained to the Gray Syndicate man beside her, and went on to tell him all about it, and ask if he wouldn't like to write a few articles for her. She could pay only three hundred apiece for them, she explained, before he broke in eagerly.

Well, that was a new method, Gay thought; dangle a chance to do special stuff before any newspaper or magazine man and he'd dance attendance on you. No wonder Stan was anxious to make good on

that radio assignment; he'd certainly need cash if he were courting Thelma.

A stewardess came along just then, taking orders for drinks; they arrived just as Mary organized a blackjack game on the floor beside Gay's seat, and Gay joined it, glad to be too busy to think. It had been impossible not to wonder if Stan knew about the insurance Sayre and Lincoln had taken out on them. Not that it would do any good if he had, of course; he was back in New York, working his head off. And it was ridiculous to think he could be capable of murder, just because her love for him had changed to such dislike.

And it was silly to link little things together. The way he had burnt her hand, the automobile accident, when only her side of the car had been smashed, right after she had received that letter about her aunt's money, a letter Stan could easily have read, and probably had, before she got home that day—

"Oh, anything can look suspicious if you want it to!" she told herself angrily, feeling guilty, ashamed of her readiness to think the worst of him. Perhaps the whole trouble, always, had lain in the fact that she made plenty of money and he could make so little; now that he was going to make plenty of his own he'd probably change, lose the very faults she had objected to most. Mary had warned her when she married him that the setup was bad, giving numerous illustrations from her life with her first and second husbands to prove it.

Sorting her cards, she looked at Mary, sitting cross-legged on the floor opposite her. "I'm losing my shirt!" Mary wailed. "Or what's left of it. Lend me five dollars, will you, Gay?"

Gay fished a bill out of her bag, and got up to walk to the back of the plane a few moments later, to work a kink out of one ankle. She was sitting by a window, looking down at the clouds that were golden with sunset, when Don Newlin joined her.

"Mary's lost that five dollars you gave her and has borrowed ten from the Bates girl," he said as he sat down beside Gay. "Crazy girl!"

"Maybe I ought to try to make her stop," Gay said, recalling Mary's appeal to her to keep her in line. "She loses her head when she starts gambling."

"So she was telling me the other night. I ran into her at the Fred Allen show and we had a few drinks together afterward. and Mary got confidential before I could

stop her." He laughed as he lighted Gay's cigarette. "She was funny about it, but I think she meant what she said, that she hasn't a dime."

"But she gets a good salary from the *Gazette* supplement, and she does extra pieces for two or three magazines, and she ghost-wrote a book for that orchestra leader—"

"Yeah, she told me all that. She did the book for five hundred flat. But she borrowed money for that last trip to Reno, and while she was out there she got to playing the market, and she put money into that musical, 'Two by Two,' that flopped after a week."

"Oh, I begged her not to do that!" Gay said, sighing. "Practically nobody ever gets anything back on a musical show." She stood up to look down the aisle, to where Mary was announcing that she was going to quit after one more hand. "I must talk to her; I've got something important to tell her, that I've been forgetting about."

For, of course, it would be so simple to straighten out Mary's troubles, as soon as that eight thousand dollars came through. Mary could have as much of it as she needed.

"How much does she owe? Did she tell you?" she asked Don.

"Oh, she said around twenty thousand."

"But she couldn't possibly—"

"Oh, yes, she could. She had a wonderful run at roulette right after she got to Reno; that's how she happened to play the market while she was out there. She wanted to make enough to pay back what she'd borrowed to go. And that apartment building where she lives went co-operative last year, you know, and she borrowed the money to buy her place. Oh, yes, Mary could owe twenty grand without half trying."

Gay leaned back, frowning, thinking that her inheritance wouldn't pay even half of Mary's debts. And it was dreadful to think that Mary was worried about money, because she was so generous with it. Well, she'd offer the eight thousand, when she got it, and as much more as she could scrape together.

"By the way, about your room," Don was saying. "I know you'd like to be alone, so I'm giving you one of the singles. Mary gets one, too; the rest of the gals will have to double up. You're going to like this hotel, Gay; it's sort of rambling, has a lot of balconies all over the place, and wonderful gardens. And with nobody but our crowd there it's going to be like a big house party."

"Of course I'll like it," Gay assured him. She knew how hard he would work to make the trip a success, how tough it would be on him if anything went wrong. He'd be held responsible by the agency, whether it was his fault or not. If anything happened that caused a flood of bad publicity it would probably cost Don his job; Sayre and Lincoln was an old agency, pompous, stuffy, still not quite convinced that its clients ought to go in for radio advertising. This "Haunted House" jaunt ought to create publicity that would make the sponsor happy for years, and endear both the program and Sayre and Lincoln to the guests. If it didn't, Don would be tossed to the lions, instead of getting a substantial raise.

The hotel was out in the country. Gay liked it the moment she walked into the huge, high-ceilinged hall. A bar had been set up at one end of the hall, but Gay shook her head when Don motioned her toward it.

"I'd rather go right upstairs and take a shower," she said. "Maybe that'll wake me up. Where do I go, Don?"

"Wait a second. I'll have a boy take your bags up, just show me which ones they are. You're on the second floor, near the end."

Gay followed a grinning bellboy up the broad, shining stairs, and along a heavily carpeted hall to her room; the first glimpse of it made her long to remain there. The wide bed stood between French windows opening onto a balcony that ran across that side of the building; when Gay stepped out onto it she saw that formal gardens lay below, and the scent of some night-blooming flower lay on the warm air.

"I do hope it's jasmine," she thought as she went back into the room and began to unpack. "Not that I know what jasmine smells like, but it sounds so lovely."

She hung up her dresses, tossed a nightgown across the bed, and stepped out of her clothes. Her long red-and-white robe swirled around her as she crossed the room, and she tripped as she went up the low step into the bathroom. Apparently, it had once been a huge clothes closet; the one window was high up in the flowered wall, and the old-fashioned tub and bowl were badly placed.

The bowl was opposite the door, and as Gay tripped and stumbled forward she bumped into it, her body hitting the bowl's edge, so hard that she was left breathless. The bowl was high, standing on what looked like a pedestal, which in turn stood on a small square of marble.

"Of all the antiquated—" In her annoy-

ance, she did not even finish the sentence, but tossed her robe aside and stepped into the tub, feeling gingerly of her body at the waist, where it had hit the edge of the bowl.

The phone was ringing when she returned to the bedroom; Don was at the other end, urging her to hurry; the dinner party at the club had been scheduled to start fifteen minutes ago.

It was late when they arrived again at the inn, but Gay was not sleepy, as she followed Mary up the stairs. Mary was in a foul humor; the local girls had paid no attention to her claim to Tex, but had taken advantage of leap year and seen to it that he danced most of the evening. Mary had retired to a corner, knowing that she could not compete on the dance floor. And Tex had made matters worse by seeking Gay out whenever he was free.

"Good night, Mary," Gay said, as Mary opened her door. Mary mumbled a response, and Gay went on down the hall to her own room, happier than she had been in a year.

"Just an idiot, that's what I am," she told herself. "Thrilled because a nice looking guy was interested in me tonight. And why shouldn't he be interested? It's his business." She walked across the room, to look sternly at her reflection in a long mirror. "It's his business, just as it's Don's business to take me to lunch occasionally in New York. Let me tell you this, young woman! If you didn't have that job on the *Gazette*, Tex Hunter wouldn't give a hoot about you!"

Even so, it was hard to believe that he'd been merely getting his hand in as a radio publicity man. He had wanted to know all about her, had even delicately led up to the subject of her husband. Mary had told him Stan was a writer, and came from out West somewhere.

"That means Hollywood, I suppose," Tex had said.

"Oh, no, he never lived there," Gay replied. "He lived in Seattle before he came to New York."

"And you're a Seattle girl, too?" He smiled, apologetically. "I don't mean to be curious, it's just that I'm interested."

"Oh, my life's an open book," Gay had told him. "I've never been west of Michigan, grew up there, went to college there, and then headed for New York."

"And met your husband when you arrived in the big city, so that you never had to tackle it alone?"

Gay had laughed at that. "I did not. I didn't meet Stan till I'd been in New York

nearly two years, with Mary helping me over the rough spots till I could stand alone.” She’d glance toward the corner where Mary and the *Chronicle* man were finishing a bottle of Bourbon. “Mary’s one of the most wonderful people in the world,” she told Tex.

“One of the most merciless, from what I hear,” he replied. “I’m told that she doesn’t care who gets hurt when she’s after something.”

Gay was still angry when she remembered that. “It isn’t true!” she exclaimed. “Of course, she can’t always be kind; she has to fight to hold her job, so many people are after it! In any business nowadays a woman has to fight if she’s just going to hold her own. But Mary—oh, Mary would never hurt anyone if she didn’t absolutely have to; why, she let’s people write articles for that Sunday supplement sometimes, when they need money badly, when she knows the articles will be so bad that she’ll have to rewrite ’em herself.”

Walking up and down the big bedroom now, she thought of what she had said, and wished she had said other things that would have been more convincing. The idea of calling Mary merciless! Someone who didn’t like her must have noticed that she was interested in Tex and tried to ruin her chances with him.

The desk clock chimed twice, and Gay shrugged her shoulders, realizing that she ought to get some sleep, though she had never felt more wide awake. She could get into bed and read, of course; she glanced around the room and saw that there wasn’t a book anywhere.

But there were books in the library on the first floor; she had noticed them when everybody gathered there for a nightcap before going to bed. She closed the door softly behind her and ran along the hall and down the stairs.

Two or three men were at the bar in the hall as she crossed it and went into the library. The room was partly in shadow; only the lamps on the tables at either end were lighted. Gay was standing in front of one of the tall bookcases, a book in either hand, when she heard a sound behind her. As she turned it was repeated, a stifled, choking sob that made Gay wince.

She started down the room, and saw the girl who was huddled on a high-backed sofa that faced the fireplace; her bedraggled blue suit merged with the blue covering, so that

she would have gone unnoticed if she had not sobbed so uncontrollably.

Gay went over to her and sat down on the end of the couch. “What’s the matter?” she asked. “Can I help you?”

The girl sat up and stared at her. Gay tried to place her among the crowd that had come from New York on the plane, and failed. She had never seen this girl before.

“Tell me what’s the matter, so that I can help you,” she urged. “Please!”

The girl mopped her eyes with a sodden handkerchief. “Nobody . . . nobody can help me!” she gulped.

“Sure, they can. What’s wrong?”

The story came out in fragments. The girl was Mona Blair, and she lived in Savannah; she worked on a magazine there. But she had been in New York the year before, for two months, living on her savings, hunting a job. Finally, she had had to give up and go back to a home that she hated.

“And I live with my brother and his wife and she just hates me, and a woman who almost gave me a job in New York wrote to me and said she had one now.” Tears streamed down Mona’s face as she talked, and she mopped them away and pushed her brown hair back with both hands before she went on. “So I heard about all you people coming down here in this plane, and I thought if I could just get here, why, I could explain to the man in charge, and maybe he’d let me ride back in the plane with you.”

Gay nodded; there had been room on the plane for three or four more people. And she knew how Mona felt; she herself would never have made the grade in New York if Mary hadn’t helped her.

“Only that man, that Mr. Newlin, he says I can’t.” Mona’s voice thickened with sobs. “He says I can’t even stay here tonight. He said to wait here till the man goes into Charleston early in the morning for milk and stuff and I’d have to go with him.”

Gay rose and laid one hand on the girl’s shoulder. Long ago she had promised herself that if she could ever do for someone else what Mary had done for her she would let nothing stand in her way.

“Of course, you can stay here tonight,” she said. “You can sleep in my room. And tomorrow I’ll talk Don into taking you back to New York with us.” For once she was going to use the power her *Gazette* job gave her. “Now stop crying and come upstairs with me. Be careful cross the hall; I don’t want Don to see us.”

They ran up the stairs together, and down the softly lighted hall. Mona laughed softly as the bedroom door closed behind them.

"Oh, we made it! We made it!" she cried delightedly. "And look at this lovely room. It's just the prettiest room I ever was in. Oh, it's so nice, and you're so sweet to bring me here. I'll be grateful to you all my life long." She was rushing about the room, hovering over the dressing table, pausing to open Gay's perfume and dab it on her throat and wrists, spilling some on Gay's hairbrush in the process.

Gay rummaged through the drawer where she had put her lingerie. "Here, take this nightgown, Mona," she said. "And there's my robe, on the bed. Why don't you take a shower now"—with a glance at the girl's travel-stained arms and bare legs. "And I'll go down to the bar and get you some sandwiches; you must be hungry."

Mona nodded approvingly. "That's a real good idea," she said, as she picked up Gay's robe. "This is just gorgeous! I do love red and white stripes." Swiftly, she shed her dress and put on the robe, drawing it tight around her waist. "Just fits, see? Know what I think I'll do? I think I'll just wash my hair and pin it up, so's it'll curl tomorrow."

Gay sighed. At that rate, Mona would be babbling on till morning, and, perversely, she herself was sleepy now. She walked slowly down the stairs, wondering what she had let herself in for. Well, she could stay downstairs quite a while; maybe in half an hour or so Mona would want to go to bed.

Tex was wandering around the lower hall with a glass of milk in his hand. He beamed on her delightedly and urged her to have some.

"I'm pretending to help Don," he said. "He's looking for a girl who's got mislaid, somebody who bobbed up out of nowhere and wanted to join the party."

"Oh, I know where she is," Gay said, and told him about Mona. "I'm hoping she'll have her hair washed and be in bed when I go back upstairs," she concluded. "But I'm awfully afraid she'll still be prancing up and down in my red-and-white robe, wallowing in luxury. Poor child!"

"Then why don't we sit down over here in the corner and talk about you?" he suggested.

Gay did sit down on the big couch, and accepted the glass of milk he brought her.

"But we're not going to talk about me," she told him. "Why should we?"

"Because I'm interested."

Gay shook her head. "Not in me personally; in me as radio editor of the *Morning Gazette*. Oh, I don't mind"—as he opened his lips to protest. "I'm used to it. And some of the agency people would be my friends even if I lost my job. But you won't need to be pals with all the press, you know, if you're going to be a vice president in charge of radio."

He glanced at her quizzically. "Is that what I'm going to be?"

"So I heard."

"And I couldn't be interested in you just as a person?"

There was warmth in his voice, and genuine interest, Gay told herself. He was looking at her as if he liked to, smiling a little, and, in spite of loyalty to Mary, she smiled back.

Before she could answer Don came into the room. "If that girl's still hanging around here I'll strangle her with my bare hands!" he announced, petulantly. "Horning in on the party, telling a hard luck story—"

Gay leaned toward Tex. "Don't tell him Mona's in my room," she whispered. "He'll be in better humor tomorrow; I'll tell him then."

She went upstairs a few minutes later, and Tex went with her; his room was at the far end of the hall from hers. He waited at the top of the stairs, watching as she went on, to her own door, and then turned toward his own. He had gone halfway when he heard her door slam against the wall as she threw it open; when he turned, she was running blindly toward him, running as if terror ran at her heels.

"Tex! Oh—Tex!" He caught her in his outstretched arms, and she clung to him for an instant, gasping for breath. "She's dead, Tex—that girl. Lying there in my robe, all blood."

Mona's body lay on the bathroom floor, with blood gushing from her left temple and from an ugly wound at the base of the skull. Her light-brown hair was dry except where the blood matted it. Evidently she had tripped on the low step leading into the bathroom, as Gay had tripped earlier in the evening, and stumbled on the long robe; falling, she had hit her head on the square marble base of the wash bowl's pedestal.

That was Don's reconstruction of what had happened. He stood by the window seat

in the hall where Gay sat with Tex and told it to them, carefully. "Isn't that what you think, Tex?" he demanded. "You saw her; isn't that what you think? Because when that doctor from town gets here—"

"I told you to call the police," Tex reminded him.

"I know, but don't you see, there's no sense in getting the police in on this. The papers would get hold of it, and we'd get publicity on it that would drive old Sayre crazy." He waited an instant, but Tex said nothing, merely continued to rub Gay's icy, trembling hands. "You don't have to call the police in case of accidental death, Tex, you know you don't. And this was certainly an accident; why, the same thing might have happened to Gay."

"Yes, the same thing might have happened to Gay," Tex said slowly.

"Well, then! I'm certainly not going to call the police. And look, folks, don't say anything about this, will you? Nobody knew the girl, we three were the only ones who knew she was here. The doctor will take charge of everything. I'll find out who her folks are and all that." Don ran his hands through his ruffled hair, and when he spoke again, after a pause in which Tex said nothing, his voice was high-pitched, nervous. "Look, you know what the New York tabloids will do with this. They'll say 'Mysterious Beauty Slain in Haunted House Party'—stuff like that. They'll make people think it was murder."

"Sure, they'll eat it up," Tex said indifferently.

"And what's my boss going to think? The agency spends about twenty-five bucks on this jaunt, and gets a lot of lousy publicity that hurts the program. Why, the sponsor could threaten to switch the account to somebody else!" Don's tone implied that that was real tragedy. "See here, Tex, it won't do that girl any good to drag the police in. She died accidentally, you know that. If you and Gay will just keep your traps shut, why, nobody but the doctor will know anything about her dying here. And he— Listen, there he is!"

He ran down the stairs to the front door as a car swung into the drive. Looking out of the window, Tex could see Don talking to the man who got out of the car. He rose quickly and grasped Gay's arm.

"That doctor may want to talk to you, but you're in no state to do it tonight," he told her. "Maybe I can put him off alto-

gether. You're going to go to bed before he gets up here."

"Not in that room!" Gay protested. "I can't go into that room where—"

"Of course you can't. You'll sleep in my room, and I'll bunk in with Don. Come along." He grasped her arm and hurried her to the other end of the hall. "I'll get your night things out of your room and bring 'em to you, and get your other clothes to you in the morning."

As the door closed behind him, Gay walked over to the windows. The balcony that ran along that side of the house ended before it reached this room; no one could possibly get in except by the door. Not that there was any need to be afraid, of course. Poor, silly Mona Blair had been killed accidentally, just as Don had said.

Gay slept late the next morning, and woke to find the spring day so lovely that Mona Blair's death seemed preposterous, completely unreal. As she walked into the dining room Don met her.

"About last night," he said softly, though there was no one near. "Everything's all right; the doctor took charge of everything. Look, honey, hurry your breakfast along, will you? Because it's almost time to start for the club for lunch."

"I'll just have coffee," Gay answered. Before she had finished it, Don was at the front door with his list, assigning people to cars, sending someone to find Mary and Tex, who had gone walking in the gardens. Gay went out to the porch, wishing that she might see Tex alone for a moment. Her clothes had been in her room when she woke that morning; Don must have got a pass key somewhere, she thought. She wanted to thank Tex for helping her through the horrors of the night before, and to have him assure her that Mona's death had been accidental. But when she reached the porch Mary and Tex were driving away in a small car by themselves. Gay sighed, telling herself that there was no hope of talking to him alone; Mary would see to that.

Late in the afternoon she was sitting on the country club lawn at the edge of the river that flowed through the grounds; it was a wide, swiftly flowing river, whose waters danced in the sunlight. Thelma Bates and two men were just setting out in a rowboat. Thelma making a coquettish fuss about stepping in till one of the men took her in his arms and lifted her down.

"Old-fashioned technique, but it still

works," said Tex, and Gay looked up in surprise.

"You're always appearing suddenly when I don't know you're anywhere near me," she said. "Are you part Indian?"

He laughed as he sat down. "Nope, it's commando training, plus rubber-soled shoes. You all right today?"—glancing at her keenly. Gay nodded. "You're one girl in a million," he told her. "You didn't scream your head off last night when you . . . when you went into your room."

"I couldn't; I was too shocked. All I could think of was . . . was running to get you." She faltered a little over the words, because she had felt so safe when he took her in his arms. "Where's Mary?" she asked quickly. She must remember Mary every moment when she was alone with him.

"Oh, she's gone off to explore some old house in the neighborhood for a series of articles she's writing for some magazine," Tex said carelessly. "Historical plantation houses, one of those things. Wanted to go alone! said that was the only way she could get the feel of the place. She— Hey, you idiots, stop it!" he shouted.

His voice cut across the gay shrieks of Thelma and her companions. Well out in mid-stream, she and one of the men were rocking the rowboat. Tex ran to the river bank.

"Stop that unless you want to drown!" he called to them. "The river's deep and the current's terrific. Stop it!"

Startled, they obeyed, and Tex returned to Gay, who shook her head as she smiled at him. "Don't you realize that Thelma wants to fall in and be rescued?" she asked. "It isn't far to shore."

"They'd never make it," he told her. "That river's much swifter than you'd think, and it goes underground right around the bend. Anybody who got carried that far wouldn't have the ghost of a chance to come out alive. The caretaker here at the club told me about it."

"Sounds spooky." Gay commented, stretching her bare legs out in front of her, luxuriating in the heat of the sun.

"Wait till you hear the rest of it. It goes underneath part of the house where we're going tonight, under the cellar, where the house slaves used to live in pre-Civil War days. There's a trapdoor in the floor. They used to draw water up through it—"

"Or throw the slaves in?"

"Nope; the family that lived there was

always good to the slaves. But a bootlegger took over the house during Prohibition, and got rid of some of his competitors that way. The river goes underground quite a distance, goes fast and deep, before it comes out again. Nobody could get out, once they went in."

In spite of the sunshine, Gay shivered. "A good swimmer—"

"Wouldn't have a chance," Tex said. "He'd have to hold his breath longer than anyone has ever held it before, for one thing. And he'd probably have his brains dashed out long before the river comes into the open. The caretaker said that the bodies that were found farther down were in pretty bad shape. So, stay away from that trapdoor if anyone opens it tonight."

Gay's blue eyes were dark with sudden fear as she looked up at him. "Tex, you don't think—I mean, last night, if anyone had come into my room when my back was turned, and had seen Mona, in my robe— Her hair was about the color of mine, and she was my height—" She stopped, unable to tell what was in her mind.

"Are you asking if I thought somebody might have wanted to kill you?" he asked. "But who'd want to?"

"Why . . . why, nobody, I guess."

"Does that mean that you think someone might?"

She shook her head. He'd think she was silly, bidding for attention, if she told him that she was afraid of Stan. Because Stan was in New York, making the most of an opportunity to work. If she did as she longed to do, if she told him about the way Stan had burned her hand, to get a little money, and about the automobile accident, right after Stan must have seen that letter about her inheritance, if she begged him to stay near her, to protect her, he'd think she was shrewdly attempting to make him stay close to her instead of going off with Mary.

"There's no one in the world who'd want to kill me, of course," she assured him. "My husband and I are going to get a divorce; he's back in New York now, working his head off to get the money to send me to Reno, so that he can be free to marry Thelma Bates if she'll have him. And he's the only person in the world who has any interest in me except Mary, who's my good friend."

"Well, that thing last night was enough to make you nervous," Tex said, and helped her to her feet as Don summoned them.

Mary was standing in the wide hall, drinking a julep, when they got back to the hotel. "I certainly have fallen in love with these things," she told them. "Never had 'em properly made before."

"Did you get your story?" Tex inquired, taking the glass from her and finishing the drink.

"Got a lot of perfectly beautiful stuff; the house, what's left of it, is fascinating. We sat on a pile of stones and— Don't be jealous, darling," she said quickly. "A man from the local historical society was there; he knew all about what the place used to look like. He was just wandering around, and I was lucky enough to run into him. We climbed around till I'm worn to a tatter, and I fell down and skinned my knee. I'm a wreck!"

"And Don's just about to urge us to hurry and dress for the barbecue," said Gay, as Don appeared at the end of the hall.

"For two cents I'd stay home!" Mary muttered. "I'm so dog tired! I'd like to stay right here and drink juleps all evening."

Gay started up the stairs. "You can't miss the broadcast, after being brought down here for it," she said over her shoulder. "Come on, Mary. We've only got half an hour."

"I could go just as I am," Mary retorted, looking down at her dusty dress. "Nobody's going to look at me, with all you belles around."

But when she came down to the living room later Gay looked at her in amazement. Mary had recaptured some of the beauty that had been hers when Gay first knew her; her gray eyes were bright, her cheeks faintly flushed. She was vivid, exciting. Don gave a wolf whistle when he saw her, and Mary acknowledged it with a bow and then went over to Gay, to draw her off into a corner.

"I want you to do me a favor," she said softly. "I—well, I'd like to concentrate on Tex tonight. We'll be going back to New York tomorrow, and he'll be busy at the agency and there'll always be people around; you know what New York is! But here I am with a romantic background all set up, and a chance to get him to myself. So help me out tonight, will you?"

"Why, of course, anything I can do," Gay said quickly.

"It's just this. The house where we're going is one of the important ones in that series I'm doing; it's really famous. I ought to scout around and look it over thoroughly, but I'm so tired, and if I could just give all my time to Tex— Gay, you know the kind

of stuff I'll need, descriptions of rooms, all that. Would you get it for me?"

"Sure. Glad to," said Gay, wishing that she could be the one to share the romantic background with Tex. "D'you want descriptions of the furniture and hangings and that sort of thing?"

"Oh, they'll be like these; antiques are all alike." Mary cast a disparaging glance at the hand-painted wallpaper and beautifully polished mahogany. "From what I hear, the only thing that's different is the slave quarters, underneath the house. I'll play that up. I'll take a look at the place with you, and then you can get the details for me."

Gay nodded. Often, when she first came to New York and was staying with Mary, she had done leg work like this on feature articles that Mary wrote afterward; the experience had been valuable when she got a job of her own.

"You're a darling," Mary said warmly. "Come on; drive over to this place in the car with Tex and me, and we'll all have dinner together."

IV.

THE house stood far back from the road; the tall white pillars of its entrance were framed by golden, glowing light when they arrived. A wide lawn stretched off to the right; colored lanterns swung from the trees showing the white-spread tables beneath them, and in the background a brighter glow marked the barbecue pit. The air was sweet with the fragrance of honeysuckle, vibrant with the music of guitars and banjos.

Don presented them to the charming woman who owned the house. Gay thought that she had never met anyone lovelier, or more gracious. Looking up at the house from the lawn, at the many lighted windows, at the long, covered passage leading from the house to the kitchens, she laughed softly.

"It's so beautiful!" she exclaimed to Mary, rejoicing in the feeling of freedom that had come to her. The nagging fear that had haunted her since Tex told her about the river that afternoon was gone; this was an evening for fun.

She went with the *Chronicle* man to inspect the barbecue pit; then he headed for the bar, and Gay walked on alone, stopping only when she found herself at the river bank. There was something frightening about the river, even here, where the light from the lanterns cast a glowing path across

it. It flowed so silently, so swiftly, seeming to have a personality of its own. Gay was fascinated by it. She could see where the river turned sharply a few feet away, suddenly disappearing, and wondered if there was where it slipped underground and flowed beneath the house.

"Thinking of going for a swim?" That was Tex, coming across the lawn toward her as she turned away.

"Well, not till after dinner," Gay answered, laughing.

"Mary sent me to find you," he told her. "They're serving dinner; she has places for us at that table nearest the house. She said she was too tired to walk any farther. She flatly refused to come down here and look at the river; says she hates it."

But Mary was not at the table when they reached it; she hurried to join them a few moments after they sat down. "Had to go into the house for a moment," she said. "I'd stepped through the hem of my skirt, the nicest maid fixed it for me."

She was wearing a white dress that fluttered about her ankles; beside her, in a black one, Gay felt drab and dull. Mary fairly sparkled, and Gay told herself that love was the best beautifier in the world, and tried not to envy Mary. Tex seemed to be fascinated by her; Gay tried to be interested in the *Chronicle* man, but he, in turn, was fascinated by the form of corn bread known as huskpuppies.

"This heavenly chicken!" Mary exclaimed, her voice shrill with enthusiasm. "And those yummy sweet potatoes—I'm eating my head off." But she was eating almost nothing. "Isn't that music divine? I've never liked that quartette on the radio, but out here, singing spirituals, they're marvelous."

"They never get much chance to sing on 'Haunted House,'" volunteered a little blond girl who sat farther down the table. She was one of the actresses on the program, the one whose blood-curdling scream was part of the signature. "Mostly they just play small parts on the show."

"Well, they're wonderful. Oh, shoofly pie!" Mary picked up a piece and rose. "Come on," she urged Gay. "Come with me."

"But coffee," Tex was protesting, when Mary interrupted.

"Oh, you needn't come; matter-of-fact, you'd be in the way," she said. "Gay and I have a little practice engagement of our own."

"Wherever you're going, don't stay long," Don called as they started off across the lawn. "The broadcast starts right after dinner, you know. Up in the living room."

"Oh, we'll be there," Mary answered lightly. And to Tex, who was following them, "Honey, you go back and finish your coffee, and then join us in the living room."

"Why can't I come with you now?" he asked.

Mary's voice held a trace of irritation. "Because this blamed skirt of mine is falling to pieces, right off my body! I want Gay to do some fancy repairs with safety pins. If I ask that maid she'll go in for fine sewing that will take hours."

But when he turned and went back to the table Mary laughed, softly, exultantly. "Poor darling, he's so easy to deceive!" she said. "This is what I want to do, Gay. After the broadcast everybody will go trooping down to the slave quarters; it'll be like a subway jam. So I thought if you and I could just slip down there now we'd be able really to see what the place is like, to get the real atmosphere of it. That's what I've got to have. It won't take long."

"I suppose not," Gay agreed, but she shivered a little, and did not know why.

"It's the slave quarters that are supposed to be haunted, you know," Mary went on. "Though nobody's ever seen anything, of course. Someone once heard a scream from down there at night and that's how the story started, but it'll have to be dressed up if it's going to be any good for my article. Let's see; the door's over here—" She was walking along a narrow hall on the first floor of the house, straight toward the door. "That nice maid showed me where it was, after she mended my skirt," she explained to Gay.

She opened the door, switched on a light, and closed the door after Gay passed through. Steep, narrow stairs descended in front of them to a passage way, lighted by another single bulb. From it rooms opened on either side, low-ceilinged, stone-floored rooms, that led into one another, varying only in size.

"I'd hate to try to find my way out of this place," commented Gay, following Mary, who walked ahead, turning on lights wherever she could find them. "Mary, look at those windows."

Their sills were level with the ground outside, wide sills, as wide as the walls were thick. Iron bars stretched across them, and heavy shutters left only a crack for air.

"Um-hum. But just see that fireplace; I wish I had that in my apartment at home." Mary laughed as she paused to look at it. "That whole apartment would fit into this place and be lost," she said. "Dozens of people must have lived down here." Her high heels clattered back, patter *patter*, patter *patter*, as she began to limp.

"It's that blamed knee of mine!" she exclaimed disgustedly. "I really hurt it when I fell this afternoon. It hurts like mad."

"Then don't go tramping around this place," Gay urged. "All these rooms look just alike; you can hardly tell one from another. Let's go back upstairs."

Leaning against the wall, Mary shook her head, and threw out her hands in a gesture that embraced the big room. "I can't," she said. "I've got to get the feel of the place, the . . . spookiness of it. Because I'm going to give that bootlegger story a different twist; I'm going to say it's slaves who haunt this place. It would be just as true!"

She grimaced with pain, and leaned down to rub her knee gently; finally, she limped over to one of the wide window sills and perched on the edge of it. "I just can't walk another step," she said. "Not right now; not till this pain stops."

"Well, then, why don't you stay here and soak up atmosphere and I'll go through the other rooms?" suggested Gay.

"Oh, will you? And look, Gay, will you do this? Will you go as far as you can and just stay in one of the rooms, just pretend that—well, that you have to stay here? That's what I'm going to do, pretend I'm down here alone. That's the only way to get the real feeling of the place."

Gay hesitated, feeling that her reluctance was absurd, yet it took real effort on her part to walk away into the dimness of the next room. "What if I can't find my way back?" she asked, with a little laugh that betrayed her nervousness.

"Oh, just call to me," Mary replied. "I know the way out from here. The door to our right and the next one to our left, then to the right and we'll be in the hall where the stairs are."

"That doesn't sound right to me," Gay said. "However—" She paused and went back a few steps. "How long do you want me to stay away?"

"Well, I thought—oh, fifteen, twenty minutes."

"Mary!"

"But, darling, all you'll have to do is just

stand and let the . . . the feeling of the place seep into you!"

"It's so darned spooky down here!" Gay protested. "I just don't like it. I can't tell you why, but I feel as if I just couldn't stay here. As if I mustn't. As if something horrible would happen to me if I did."

Mary's laughter was indulgent. "Oh, baby, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed. "That's why you can do so much better a job on this than I can. To me this is just one more cellar. You can stick it out for ten minutes, can't you? I'll settle for that. And then come back here to me and we'll go upstairs and find Tex and have a drink. Do it for me, honey, please!"

"Oh, all right," Gay said, and walked away, through one dimly lighted room after another. One was an outside room where the shutters were slightly open: Gay could hear the quartette singing, and shouts of laughter came from a group who evidently were doing a square dance. She heard one of the men shout "Swing your partners!" as the music swelled. It was like something taking place in another world, far away. She wondered if the slaves who had lived in these rooms had looked out sometimes to see their masters dancing on the lawn.

She walked steadily on; Mary had wanted her to be as far away as possible. There were few lights here, a single bulb swinging from the ceiling, then darkness in the next room, and the next. A hall zigzagged past; she crossed it, and came to a large room with a fireplace, that looked like the one where she had left Mary. Beyond it was a smaller one, almost dark, and there Gay stopped.

She must stop thinking, she told herself; she must just try to feel as people would who lived down here. "But they'd have more light, and they wouldn't be alone," she told herself. The light in the larger room swung a little on its cord, and shadows reached across the floor toward her like living things. One looked almost like a man; Gay bit her lower lip, curbing the impulse to scream.

That was when she decided to go back to Mary. She darted across the large room, across the crooked little hall, into the next one. "Mary!" she called, shakily. "Mary, where are you?" She was sure of her direction, but wanted to hear Mary's voice.

There was no answer; only the echo of her own words. "Mary—Mary—Mary"

fainter, merging into maddening repetition of, "Are you—are you—"

She called again then, and ran faster, with the echoes of her footsteps running after her along the stone floor. Mary would be waiting in that big room at her left, the one with the fireplace.

But when she reached it the room was empty. "I'm sure this is the room. I'm sure!" Gay said, speaking aloud, maliciously the words repeated themselves. "Suresure—" "Suresure—" Like the way that Stan ran them together; exactly like that.

She stopped running then, trying to control her rising panic, Telling herself not to be silly. What if Mary wasn't here? What if she'd gone back upstairs, determined to make Gay realize what it was like to be down here alone, frightened, unable to find the way out? Mary was a stickler for realism; she'd gone down in a submarine years ago, before the war, to find out what it felt like to be trapped in one.

She walked rapidly, across the room, across another; into a hall. This must be the hall where the stairs were. But there had been a light in that hall, at the top of the stairs; in this hall there was none. Gay bumped into the opposite wall before she realized that it was there. She turned then, and walked along it, and took the first door to her left, to cross a dark room toward one where there was a light. The light went out as she hurried toward it.

It was then that she realized that it was not merely the echoes of her own rapid footsteps that followed her. There was a bare whisper of sound, soft-soled feet padding along, as if a large, heavy man were trying to run softly. A big man who took short steps, because his feet were too small for his body. A man like Stan.

Ice ran through her veins then, when another sound came, a slight cough, soft, a queer, hacking little sound. It told Gay the truth, that the footsteps were Stan's, that he had been waiting for her, was following her. That he meant to kill her.

The certainty whipped her fear into terror, and she began to run, not knowing where she was going, knowing only that, somehow, she must find the stairs. She ran blindly through one shadowy room after another, collided with masses of darkness that were walls instead of doorways, and jerked away and ran on, breathing in harsh, sobbing gasps that left her no power to scream.

And from somewhere up in the house came an eerie sound, wailing through the night. People all across the country would settle back in their chairs, waiting comfortably for the weekly "Haunted House" program. Gay gave a moaning cry as she realized how useless it would be for her to scream; if anyone upstairs heard it they would just think it was some special sound effect!

Her knees were trembling so that she could hardly stand; she darted through a doorway, paused an instant, leaning against a wall, to take off her pumps, and ran on, through another door. Waiting there, she heard the thudding footsteps pass, heard the labored breathing of her pursuer.

She tiptoed across the room, and found herself in the hall she had longed to reach; there were the stairs, at the far end, revealed by the faint light at the top. It reached only halfway down; the floor at the bottom was in darkness. Gay ran forward, thankfully, holding her breath as she passed a wide doorway; an instant later she heard Stan behind her again, running faster now, coming closer as terror and exhaustion slowed her feet.

The darkness on the floor was like a pool stretching between her and the distant stairs. There was no difference in its quality where the trapdoor had been removed, leaving a square opening, with the swift river flowing less than a foot beneath it.

Running headlong, straight toward it, Gay felt the current of cold air that ran along the floor. Stan's footsteps pelted across behind her now. He reached out and caught her skirt between his clutching fingers, and the fabric tore as she jerked from his grasp. Panic-stricken, she screamed again and again, wild sounds that tore at her throat.

Suddenly, the door at the top of the stairs was flung wide; light streamed down the steps, along the stone floor, revealing the jagged opening almost at Gay's feet. At that instant Stan grabbed at her again. With the strength of frenzy, Gay threw herself forward, in a leap that carried her far enough so that her knees landed at the far side of the opening. One foot struck the water, and felt the current's power, dragging her back and down, and fought against it, clutching at the roughness of the stone floor, scrabbling along till she was safe.

Behind her she heard a cry that was inhuman in its terror. Moving so fast that he could not stop, Stan struck the river so

hard that water was tossed high, splashing over Gay. She heard him gasping as he fought for his life, struggling against the fearful pull of the river. She turned, and saw his hand, clinging to the opening's edge. It disappeared as she reached out her arm, and there was only the deep murmur of the river as it bore his body away.

“Gay! Darling—darling—” Tex was running down the stairs, kneeling beside her, taking her in his arms. She buried her head in his shoulder, shuddering as the long, painful breaths tore their way through her body. “I should have known—I was so stupid. I should have known!” he muttered, holding her close.

He said it again, later that night, sitting beside the couch where she lay. “I should have known what they were up to, but I was fool enough to believe Mary when she told me you'd come upstairs with her and gone out on the lawn.”

“Mary?” Gay repeated blankly. “She told you that? But she left me downstairs; she wanted me to stay there. She said she'd wait for me, and then she didn't.”

“Of course, she didn't. Don't you see, dear, she and Stan planned this thing together? She had to have a lot of money, right away. She'd got into a bad jam in New York just before she came down here, she'd taken quite a bit of money that didn't belong to her and might have to go to jail if she couldn't replace it.”

“Mary stole money?” Gay asked. “Oh, no!”

Tex smiled. “Oh, yes. Remember that series of articles she wrote last month on unsolved crimes? Well, she got some pictures for it last week, and one of them looked just enough like Stan to give her something to go on; when she heard about that automobile accident of yours she was suspicious. Stan had tried to kill his first wife that way.”

“His first wife! I didn't know he had one!”

“Well, he did. I'd seen that picture of Stan, too, out West, but I never saw him in New York, and didn't know about the smash-up you were in or I'd have gone after him. But none of the descriptions I got of him sounded as if he were the same man. I was stupid about it anyway, after I met you. I concentrated on you instead of my job.”

“You're a detective!” Gay exclaimed. “I didn't know—I never thought—”

“We'll go into that later,” he told her.

“Want to hear the rest of my story? Well, at that cocktail party Mary learned about how much you were all to be insured for on this trip. She went straight to Stan and proposed a deal; she had just enough on him so that he couldn't have backed out even if he'd wanted to. Not that he wanted to! She met him this afternoon when she pretended to be looking at that old house, and they slipped down here and went over the layout of the cellar. Tonight, when she said she was having a maid fix a rip in her skirt, she was really seeing that he got into the place to hide.”

“I . . . I can't believe it of Mary,” Gay said slowly. “I simply can't.”

“I told you she was merciless,” he reminded her. “When she told me all this after I brought you upstairs, while the doctor was getting you calmed down, she wasn't at all sorry for what she'd done. If she hadn't been pretty drunk she would not have told it, of course, but she hardly knew what she was saying. Well, you know the rest of what happened. She sent you off by yourself, and it was up to Stan to frighten you into running so blindly that you'd fall through the opening into the river; he knew how to drive you toward it, and if he couldn't do that he could grab you and throw you in.”

Gay shivered, and he moved to the couch and put one arm around her. “That's all of the story, I guess. Oh yes, the girl who was killed in your room, Mona Blair. Stan did that; he was on the balcony outside the room, and crept up behind her, thinking it was you. That was their original plan, to have him kill you in your room, in some way that would make it look like an accident. When he found that he'd made a mistake, last night, Stan went along the balcony and into Mary's room, and they made their plans for tonight.”

Gay drew a long, shaky breath. “But my falling into the water—I don't see how they thought that could seem accidental.”

“They thought it could. Mary was to say you'd come upstairs with her in time for the broadcast, though you didn't want to, and that you had said you were going out to the lawn. Feeling sure that you had gone back downstairs, she would go down, when the broadcast was over. While we were having dinner, Stan had got hold of a white coat like those the house servants here are wearing tonight, and had managed to open the cellar door and go through it when that maid who fixed Mary's dress would see him; you know, she was sitting at the door of that

little retiring room off the hall. She couldn't see anything but his back, and she'd naturally suppose he was going down there for some more liquor for the bar. It's kept down there."

"They must have thought fast, to figure all that out this afternoon, and be sure it would work."

"Remember, Mary's accustomed to using her imagination, though she's so practical. And Stan knows what it means to plan a murder."

"But then how would they explain my being killed?"

"Oh, that was easy. Mary would say that when she went down the stairs the second time you appeared at the far end of the hall, and started running toward her. You didn't see that the trapdoor was open, neither did she. How would she know that that 'servant' had opened it for some reason or other? She'd be as surprised as anyone else when the maid told of seeing him go down there earlier. All she'd know was that you came running toward her, and suddenly disappeared in the darkness."

Gay shook her head, and gripped Tex's hand more tightly. "It's all too horrible!

For Mary to plan to do that to me. Mary, of all people!"

Tex shrugged his shoulders. "You'd be surprised if you knew what people will do for fifty thousand dollars, which would be Mary's share of the insurance money. Especially, when part of it will keep them out of jail."

"But I loved her so much," Gay said wonderingly. "She was so good to me, when I first came to New York, and I cared more for her than I did for anyone else in the world."

Tex took her in his arms. "Can't you love me instead?" he asked. "I should have looked after you, and I didn't, but will you let me spend the rest of my life making up for it? When I was walking around out there on the lawn, and heard you scream, and realized how terrified you must be, I—well, I knew that if something had happened to you I didn't want to go on living without you, Gay, darling—"

Gay's laughter was a contented little croon. "And all the time I thought it was Mary you were falling in love with," she said, and added, happily, "And all the time it was me!"



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Sparrow cop

By RONALD OLIPHANT

Officer Flanagan may have been "old-fashioned and slow-witted," but he could still teach some of the young 'uns in the department a trick or two.

OFFICER ALOYSIUS G. FLANAGAN, as he ambled along the Central Park walk with his slow, flat-footed gait, didn't look a particularly formidable arm of the law. He was thickset and pot-bellied, with ruddy, loose-hanging jowls and a scraggly gray mustache. When he took off his cap, only a ragged gray fringe of hair showed above the ears and around the back of the skull. The rest was a shiny expanse of pinkish baldness, but his gray-blue eyes were keen and alert, and he had a long memory.

Just now, Al was thinking back over his career as a cop and the beats he'd covered. There was his first assignment to the Fifty-first Street station, when he was a smart-looking young officer with no bulge at the waistline, and his hair was jet-black and plentiful. Then there were the days he'd worked in the Tenderloin precinct. That was a job he didn't like, too many cases where he had to arrest women for soliciting. There was the time he'd patrolled the tough lower West Side water front watching for the wharf rats who stole from ships; and there was the hardest beat of all, the section of the upper East Side where the Car Barn Gang was the terror of the cops.

Al paused in his walk to help himself to a drink of water from a fountain and then resumed his tour. His sharp old eyes took in the people passing by and seated on the benches—nurse girls with babies and young children; shabby old men; young mothers who brought their own little ones to the park for their morning airing and sunshine vitamins.

Swinging his nightstick by its thong, Al turned aside from the main walk and followed a winding path that dipped down into a wooded ravine and then curved sharply around a boulder into a glen. A short distance ahead of him, the roadway ran close to the grass. There was no one in sight, and Al took advantage of the seclusion.

Producing a small, round silver-mounted

box from an inner pocket, he took a pinch of snuff between forefinger and thumb and thrust it up each nostril, inhaling deeply.

Once, when his wife criticized his snuff-taking, Al had said, "'Tis a nice, clean old man I am, darlin', and I find the snuff more soothin' than smokin', and more stimulin' than whiskey, and it keeps me head free of colds. So I guess I'm entitled to me one dirty habit!" and that had ended the argument.

The drive remained deserted for several minutes. Then a taxi appeared, a black-and-yellow job doing thirty-five or forty. Its driver, a pasty-faced, lantern-jawed fellow, didn't slow down for the curve, and it looked as if the car skidded, for it suddenly left the road and slithered onto the grass.

Al stepped behind a clump of bushes and got out his notebook to jot down the car's license number, but the plate had a big smear of mud over it. The taxi stopped, turned and moved slowly back toward the driveway, then the door was flung open, and a girl jumped out and started running, followed by a man.

The girl plunged recklessly through a stand of scrub willow and headed straight toward the spot where Al was standing.

As she came close, Al stepped out from behind the bushes, blocking her progress. Her cheeks were flushed from the exertion, she was breathing hard, and her eyes were wide with fear.

Al saw that she was pretty and well dressed in a smart blue crepe, with a loose-fitting wine-colored topper over it. She wore a wedding ring and an engagement ring.

Al took in these details quickly, and then the girl's pursuer came up, stopping short at sight of a cop. Al fixed him with a stern glance. "What goes on here?" he asked.

"This man," the girl said, getting the words out with an effort, "he's robbed me. He—"

"That's not so, officer," the man interrupted. "She took my wallet, with a considerable sum of money—"

Al studied the man. He was handsome, well dressed; too handsome, in fact, and too well dressed. His features were regular and refined, his mustache small and neatly waxed; his suit of fine worsted and smoothly tailored. Going back in memory through his rogues' gallery of faces, Al couldn't recall that he'd seen the fellow before, anywhere.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Francis Weathers."

"And the address?"

"298 West Seventy-fourth St."

"Do you want to make a complaint, Mr. Weathers? If so, you'll both have to come to the station—"

"Oh, it's not that important, officer," Weathers said, with a laugh.

But Al didn't seem to think it was funny. "If the lady's robbed you, like you say," he explained, "you shouldn't ought to let her go. But I can't arrest her unless you're willin' to press the charge."

The man stroked his mustache nervously. "Oh, no, officer!" He turned and bowed gallantly to the girl. "I wouldn't think of making a charge."

Al made a noise that was a blending of a Bronx cheer and a snort of disbelief. He turned to the girl. "You want to make a complaint, miss?"

The fear in her eyes deepened. "No, officer, I don't want to. I can't."

Al shrugged his heavy shoulders. The expression of disgust on his ruddy face deepened. He glared at the man and uttered one word, "Scram!"

Weathers turned as if looking for the taxi, but it had vanished. He started to walk in the direction it had taken.

The girl laid her hand on Al's arm. "If you wouldn't mind walking with me a little way, to where there are more people," she murmured.

"O.K." Al said, walking beside her. "But you shouldn't be afraid, when someone's robbed you, to press a charge."

"I'm not afraid of that," she said. "He really did steal my diamond brooch. I had it when I got in the cab with him and now it's gone. But it'd get into the papers, and my husband'd be upset. I'd rather get a duplicate of the brooch without his knowing."

"You shouldn't be letting the dirty crook get away with anything like that," Al told her.

"I know," she agreed. "It was my fault for going to a place like the Domino Club. It's just a clip joint, but my husband travels a lot, and I was lonely—"

"And you've got too much money, and no children to give you something to be interested in, and you don't like to sit home and read or listen to the radio. So you spend your time with a jerk like him!"—Al pointed his thumb contemptuously in the direction Mr. Weathers had taken. "Yeah, I know how it is."

By this time they were at Fifth Avenue.

"Thank you, officer," the girl said. "I'm Mrs. George Murray, Wyecroft Towers Apartments. You've been very kind and I deserve everything you've said." With that, she mingled with the crowd and disappeared.

Al was standing the next morning, looking down at the sail boats on the pond, when an old man known as Tom, who came to the park every day to feed the birds and squirrels, rushed up to him.

Old Tom wore a yellow sports shirt open at the throat, which revealed the matted white hair on his chest. The pockets of his threadbare sports jacket bulged with peanuts, morsels of bread, and other delicacies he always carried.

"Al, there's a corpse in the woods yonder," Tom said, his voice shaking with excitement. "In all the years I've been coming to the park, I—"

"Show me where," Al interrupted, for Tom was inclined to talk interminably if he once got started.

Tom led the way, turning aside into the path Al had followed the day before, down into the lonely glen that ran near the road.

As they walked, Al studied the old man closely. Tom was as excited as a twelve-year-old kid who follows the crime programs on the radio, but there was also something secretive and guilty in his manner, and then Al noticed that the handkerchief pocket of his homespun jacket showed a curved outline and that the point of a gold pin was sticking through the worn fabric. Al made a mental note of the fact for future reference.

Tom led the way to the space between two rhododendrons where the earth sank into a small hollow, and there Al saw the body of the man he knew as Francis Weathers.

He was still dressed in the good-looking dark suit, but his face was smeared with dirt and blood, and his eyes were glassy

and staring sightlessly. His clothes were rumpled and muddy, and it looked as if he had been dragged into his present position. For his trousers were halfway to his knees, and there were marks on his cream-colored spats where hands had gripped him by the ankles. His skull had been crushed in by some blunt instrument, probably the jagged stone nearby, on which bloodstains could be plainly seen. But it wasn't Al's job to go into that. The homicide division took care of murder cases.

Al blew his whistle, and in a few minutes, his brother officer, George Pachulski, arrived. Al told him the details and asked him to report the finding of the corpse, while he remained on the spot to see that nothing was disturbed.

A crowd was gathering, and Al was busy keeping the people at a distance from the body, so that they wouldn't trample the grass nearby and destroy any clues.

While he was so engaged, a man broke through the crowd, Bob Jordan of homicide. "Hi, there, Al!" Jordan boomed. "What you got there? Looks like a real murder!"

Jordan was a brash young fellow who had been to college and then decided to be a police-department career man. He was smart as the proverbial whip, and though he'd been in the department only a few years, he'd already solved some difficult crimes by his skillful use of scientific methods.

Jordan gave the body a hasty examination, and then listened to Al's report, taking notes.

When Jordan paused in his questioning, Al said, "I got an idea—"

"Never mind your ideas, Al," Jordan interrupted, with a patronizing grin. "When I want 'em, I'll ask for 'em!"

Al felt himself getting hot under the collar. "So ya think there's nothin' ya could learn from me, huh, Jordan?"

"Now don't get sore, Al," Jordan said soothingly. "But I'd rather ask what I want to know. Now, who was the guy found the body?"

"He's an old fella named Tom who comes to the park every day to feed the birds."

"Tom who? What's his last name?"

Al shrugged. "I dunno. I only know him as Tom."

"Where does he live?"

Al shook his head. "I dunno."

"Where is he now?"

Al looked at the faces in the crowd. Old

Tom wasn't there. "I guess he's around," Al said. "He comes to the park every day."

Jordan swore softly. "You should've held him. You may have let the murderer slip through your fingers."

"Ah, he's just a harmless old nut—" Al began.

"Harmless old nut, my ear!" Jordan cut him short. "Too many murders are committed by harmless old nuts!"

Al didn't like Jordan. He was too smart-alecky, altogether too damn' fresh with men who'd been catching criminals before he was born. "To hell wit' him!" Al muttered under his breath. "Let him look through one of his microscopes and find out who bumped the guy off!"

Old Tom showed up in the park the day following the murder, pursuing his usual routine of feeding the birds and chipmunks and squirrels and other "little people" of the woodland; but Al acted as if no suspicion were attached to the old fellow. He greeted him with his usual friendly smile when Tom passed the time of day with him, and didn't mention the killing at all. But he could still see the outline of the brooch in the pocket of Tom's tweed jacket.

On the following day, Jordan happened to be around when Tom was scattering popcorn to a covey of hungry pigeons.

"Is that the guy who found the body?" he asked Al.

"Yeah, that's him," Al said. "I told you he came to the park every day. He never misses."

"Was he here yesterday?" Jordan asked.

"Sure, he was. Didn't I tell you he comes every day?" Al's voice held a note of impatience. "Not every second or third day! Every day!"

"But he's an important witness. Possibly an accomplice!" Jordan exclaimed. "I want to question him."

Al nodded to where Old Tom was standing. "There he is. He loves to talk. He'll answer questions till the cows come home."

Jordan grinned sarcastically. "It's easy to see why you've never got to be anything more than a sparrow cop after all the years you've been on the force, Flanagan! You're too slow-witted." And he hurried to where old Tom was feeding the pigeons.

Al's face got red. "Slow-witted, is it?" he muttered, under his breath. "Ye'll eat them words, me fine laddy buck, afore this case is closed, I'm thinkin'!"

He watched as Jordan went up to old

Tom and engaged him in conversation. He could see that Jordan noticed the brooch in Tom's pocket, and that he was questioning him as to how it came to be there. Then Tom brought the brooch out and handed it to Jordan for inspection, and began talking. Al could see that Jordan was questioning him sharply, and that the old fellow was getting excited.

Finally, Jordan hailed a taxi and made Tom get in, and they drove away together.

Al sighed, "I'm afraid my young friend's goin' to be disappointed if he thinks Tom's mixed up in murder. Why, that kind-hearted old simp wouldn't kill a cockroach!"

He sighed again, then stepped into the shelter of a mass of shrubbery, helped himself to a pinch of snuff, and all was well with his world again.

Jordan didn't come to the park the following day, but he appeared strolling jauntily along the walk on the day after the fourth day after the finding of Mr. Francis Weathers' corpse. However, his manner wasn't quite as confident, as he greeted Officer Flanagan.

After they'd agreed on the beauty of the weather, Al asked, "Did you get old Tom to confess to the killin', Jordan?"

Jordan looked a trifle sheepish. "Are you rubbin' it in, Al?"

"No, I ain't rubbin' it in, Jordan," Al replied. "I ain't built that way. But I'm curious how old Tom got ahold of the brooch that Murray woman accused Weathers of stealin'."

"Oh, that!" Jordan said, shrugging his shoulders. "Tom claims he found it caught in a bush while he was feeding the birds that same morning, shortly before he found the body. He stuck it in his pocket, meaning to try and find its owner, but then when the murder business came up, the brooch clean went out of his head till I saw it sticking through the cloth of his coat and asked him about it."

All smiled tolerantly. "Another clue gone ker-flooy! You got anything else?"

Jordan hesitated, as if wondering whether he ought to confide in Al. "I've arrested George Murray, the woman's husband. He got home unexpectedly the night before the body was found, and he raised hell because his wife's brooch was missing. He finally got the whole story out of her, about how she'd been playing around with Weathers, and he went out, saying he was going to the Domino Club and have a showdown with Weathers. We've traced

him there and to other night spots, but can't find that he ever caught up with his man!"

"You think Murray done it?" Al asked.

Jordan shook his head. "Frankly, Al, no. As far as I can learn, all Murray did was go out and get stinkin' drunk. He was sleepin' it off when I found him at the apartment, and the fingerprints on the dead man's spats aren't his."

"Hm-m-m!" Al murmured. "The case ain't so easy, huh?"

"No," Jordan admitted. "The police lab tests don't get us anywhere, and the fingerprints tell us nothing." Jordan's voice took on a more humble note. "Listen, Al. I'm sorry I talked so fresh to you the other day. I acted like—"

Al nodded. "Yeah, but it's O.K., Jordan, I understand. You was excited. When I was your age, I was a rambunctious young horse's foot, too—"

"Thanks, Al. That's damn' decent of you to take it that way. Now, what was that idea you had about the case? I'm really up against a stone wall—"

Al smiled tolerantly. He found himself liking Jordan a little better. There's always hope for a guy who's willing to apologize and admit he's wrong. "O.K., son," he said. "Drop around here tomorrow, if you don't hear from me sooner." And then Al clammed up, and Jordan couldn't get anything more out of him.

After he got off duty, Al went home and changed to plain clothes. Then he took the Third Avenue El uptown to the neighborhood he'd patrolled many years ago, as a harness bull. He stopped in at various stores and bars, and called on various old acquaintances. At last, he got the information he wanted.

Finally, he walked along Ninety-ninth Street and turned in at a shabby apartment house between Second and First Avenues.

Al saw the name "H. Henderson 4-D" on a letterbox, and pushed the button. The door clicked and he opened it and went upstairs. He found the apartment and pressed the buzzer.

After a little delay, a woman's voice spoke from behind the closed door: "Who is it?"

"An old friend of Harry's," Al said. "Al Flanagan."

"Never heard Harry speak of you," the woman's voice said suspiciously.

"He'll be glad to see me," Al told her.

"I want to pay back some money I owe him. I'd have come long ago, but—"

The door opened a few inches. "I've never seen you before," the woman cried shrilly, and started to close it. Al, however, shoved his foot in the opening and forced his way inside.

"That's all right, ma'am," he said. "I never seen you, either. Where's Harry?"

"He's asleep," the woman replied. She was young, and good-looking, with rouged cheeks, and she smelled strongly of perfume.

"I'll go see him," Al said, starting down the hallway. "He won't mind me seein' him in his pajamas."

A man suddenly came out of a bedroom, in bathrobe and pajamas. Al knew him at once, the pasty-faced man who'd been driving the taxi for Weathers and Mrs. Murray. "Hello, Heisman," Al said. "Remember me?"

"Get out of here, you sneak, Flanagan!" the man screamed. "I saw you recognized me in the park the other day. But you're not going to pin any phony murder rap on me! Get out—"

Al Flanagan ignored the words and continued advancing steadily. "Yes, I recognized you, Heisman, or Henderson," he said. "You've always managed to keep your fingerprints out of the police department files, but we want to check them with some prints we found on a man who was murdered in the park, a man named Weathers, who made a business of stealing jewelry from women he picked up in the night spots. Last time I saw you, you were driving him and a woman. I recognized you from the old days, when you used to do the same kind of sneaky work—"

"I've ordered you out!" Heisman said, and his hand came up with an automatic, slipping off the safety catch.

"Killin' a cop'll only put you in the hot seat, Heisman," Al warned, and continued his advance.

He was close to the taxi driver. He could see the man's face now turned to hideous fish-belly white, the beady eyes narrow to pinpoints, the thin lips curled back in a snarl of hate. But Al Flanagan wasn't afraid.

"Drop that gun!" he barked, and enforced his order by lunging out with the heavy toe of his No. 11 police shoe in a vicious kick that caught Heisman on the shins.

The gun exploded. Heisman howled with

the pain and shock of the kick. Then Al Flanagan was on him, gripping his gun hand with fingers of steel that gouged cruelly into the sinews of the wrist. The gun clattered to the floor. Al got out his handcuffs, slipped them on his prisoner and dragged him to the door.

The fingerprints of the taxi driver Heisman, alias Henderson, matched those on the spats of the murdered Francis Weathers, and supported Al's theory that the two had come to the park to look for the missing brooch, believing that Mrs. Murray had dropped it there in the course of her flight—which was true—but it had been found by old Tom before they got there. Failing to find it, they had quarreled and fought, each accusing the other of a double-cross.

Jordan acted mighty decent about the matter; he included Al's good work in his report on the case, and apologized for his slighting remarks.

"I've acted like a heel, Al," Jordan said, offering his hand, "and I admit it. It just goes to show that an old cop's memory for crooked characters can sometimes be better than fingerprint files and rogues' galleries."

Al took the detective's hand. "That's O.K., Jordan," he said. "We all make mistakes. I've made plenty in my time."

Al went back to his sparrow-cop duties in Central Park and soon forgot about the Weathers murder. But one day, months later, as he strolled along the East Drive, he caught sight of a familiar figure wheeling a baby carriage.

It was Mrs. George Murray. She greeted Al smilingly and then threw back the hood of the carriage to let him examine the chubby, rosy-cheeked infant.

"We've christened him George, for my husband, of course, and Aloysius, for you. George Aloysius Murray!"

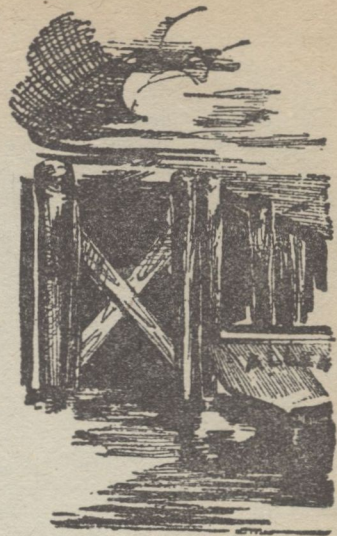
Officer Al Flanagan blushed and poked his stubby finger into the baby's ribs. "Congratulations, Mrs. Murray!" he said. "Guess keep's you plenty busy, heh?"

She nodded understandingly, and George Aloysius Murray crowed and squirmed with delight. "Gug-gug-guh!"

"What's he sayin'?" Al wanted to know.

Mrs. Murray listened to the inarticulate sounds the baby was making. When she looked up, she was smiling tenderly. "He's saying 'Cop—nice,'" she told Officer Al Flanagan.

By GEORGE E. TOLX



Already buried

A dead woman washed in by the tides . . . lobster fishermen bringing in "catches" of dope . . . a police chief suddenly old and tired of it all . . .

HILDA HARRISON was already buried. Dead two days, and gone. I thought about that, looking across the Seaside Hotel room through the haze of tobacco smoke. Obese Barney Harrison was still waving his sausage-fat fingers about, talking angrily. I caught only snatches of it.

" . . . trusted him like . . . son. He's wild . . . to pay."

My boss, Joe Parker, sat on a green mohair sofa, twirling his black Stetson, nodding from time to time, but not saying much. Joe looked gray and old and ineffectual. I felt old, too. Tired, embarrassed, and mad. I had just witnessed the death of Joe Parker's honor. He had been West End's police chief many years, but hadn't sounded like his old self that night. He had sat by, uncomplaining, while Barney Harrison ordered proceedings started against my brother, Pinky, charging him with the murder of his sister.

Two days and the whole world had changed. Two days since the old clam digger had found Hilda caught among the pilings under the hotel. Late afternoon, low tide, just as it was turning and starting in again.

"You'll pardon me, Barney," I said, wearily aware that he didn't like the use

of his first name, "if I still don't buy any of that."

West End's only two uniformed constables had just taken Pinky back to the bank of crumbling old cells behind the county courthouse. County Prosecutor Martin had gone, too, along with Barney's daughter, Amy. Al Stone, the ex-heavy-weight mauler, whom Barney had only a few months before taken on as a bodyguard, had just excused himself from the room on the grounds he was hungry.

Barney, a big man, phlegmatic, leaden-face, sighed and lurched to his feet with a groan. Paunchy in a plush way. As fully exhausted, I knew, as Joe Parker and I were.

"I wish it looked any other way, Red," he said. "I didn't like him playing around Amy, true. But I didn't have anything against him personally. It was even all right by me when Hilda sort of adopted him."

"Yeah," I snorted. "Everything's fine by you. Just burn Pinky and bring you his ashes to throw out in the Sound, and you'll be happy."

"If Pinky hadn't been mixed up in this drug traffic going on under everyone's nose," Barney retorted, "it wouldn't have looked so bad for him."

"He wasn't in on that," I snapped, "any more than he killed your sister. And especially in her nightgown. She was as much a mother to Pinky as she was to your daughter, Amy."

"Leave her name out of this, Gore!" Harrison blustered. He flopped down again in the specially made chair. I looked at Joe, who wiggled his black, whisk-broom eyebrows at me, meaning lay off. His hat was on the sofa next to him now. He fiddled absently with the empty fob attachment on the heavy gold chain that swung across his gray vest. He'd lost his quill toothpick again. He was always doing that, and having to use the nail of his left pinky finger. He did that then, and said, as he worried something out of his big, yellow teeth.

"I don't like it either, Red. I've always liked Pinky. It's just that facts always get around to point him out."

"Facts!" I jeered.

"Facts," Joe continued. "Pinky was Hilda's closest friend, even counting Barney, here. By her will, Pinky stands to collect every red cent she had."

"Who's the next beneficiary in succession? Barney?"

Joe didn't answer that one, but Harrison got purple. Joe droned on, repeating again the same bilge they had been trying to pound at me for two days.

"Pinky was the last person to be seen with her three days ago. They went for a ride in that pocket yacht of his. The next afternoon—"

"I read the papers!" I interrupted. "But she loved him like a son, and he loved her—"

"Everyone loved her," Joe broke in, "even me. She was a wonderful woman."

He got up and walked to the window, open over the sea court, looking out over the dully lighted shallow water that was now washing in over the sand bars, most of which were still exposed. Soon the water would be coming far up under the Seaside's pile foundation, silently covering again, with its black-emerald blanket, the spot where the old clam-digger had found Hilda's body.

"Your brother Pinky needed some money fast to close a deal on a drug shipment," Barney insisted. "We haven't got the goods on him yet. But that must have been his motive. He killed my sister when she refused to advance him the money for such a purpose—"

"Nuts!" I said. "The kid's made too

much dough out of straight lobster fishing. And his crews aren't the only ones being corrupted for that easy extra money."

"He got impatient," Joe Parker declared. The prominent vein in his left temple was beating dangerously. "This preliminary investigation has dragged out long enough."

"Investigation!" I snorted. "All you guys have done is convince yourselves the kid is guilty. You haven't made any genuine effort at all to uncover factual information. Everything you've tried to pound into me is theory."

"Theories like the mysterious boat ride Pinky and Hilda took the day she was killed. Theories like the hat without the hatpin found in his cruiser the day following her death. Yeah, all theories, Red. Even finding the missing hatpin stuck in Hilda's heart was theory."

"She went riding on that cruiser three times a week," I pointed out. "It was the only airing she got. Pinky was out to nail the lid down on a couple of his crooked, smuggling foremen. He took her along to show her he wasn't fooling—"

"His story—"

"And it's probably straight." I swallowed my anger again. "This case isn't over, Harrison! The guy who pulled this must have left something at the scene that will hang him. And I'm going to find it."

I lost patience then, stood up, and strode about the place, angry with the ostentatiousness of its furniture and drapes. I noticed how different it was from the staid three-room suite Hilda had had there in the hotel. There on the same floor, on the same open sea court side. I couldn't get it out of my head that there was something about Hilda Harrison no one knew yet that would be the key to it all.

"Well," Barney said, rising again from the huge chair, "all this is getting us nowhere. Prosecutor Martin will bring formal charges for the state tomorrow morning, and Pinky will be duly arraigned. Anything you uncover will be considered and brought out at his trial."

"Amy tried to arrange for bail this afternoon," I said, wondering how it would affect him. He shrugged after starting a little.

"Her checks still have to be approved by me."

"And you're going to turn this one down."

"I have no choice."

"I've got the money myself," I said. "I

just wanted to see how much you didn't have against him personally."

"Perhaps the court won't set any bail at all."

I looked at him hard, and then at Joe Parker, who was also standing now, looking helpless, turning his black hat over and over in his hands, waiting for me to break it off.

"Is that how it will be, Barney? You'll shove politics into it, too?"

"That's how it's got to be, Red," he said. He turned and padded to the door. He opened it for Joe and me. I saw the green hatred shining like love from his small, black eyes. Joe grabbed my arm before I could decide where I wanted to hit him. The next moment we were sweeping to the ground floor of the hotel in the elevator.

"I'll see you at headquarters in the morning," I said, as we crossed the lobby.

He looked at me quietly. "It'll be a tough one to buck, Red. Why don't you come off? They haven't got enough to do anything to him."

"I'll see you in the morning," I said, again.

"Yeah. Well, play 'em close to your belly."

He trailed off, molding the limp black Stetson to his head, looking old and alone. I wondered what the hell Barney Harrison finally had got on him, after nearly thirty years of service that was above reproach.

The sand-and-clam-shell topped road stretched bleakly down the hill from the highway into the boatyard, an eerie, luminous, wavering ribbon. A cold sickle moon. The creaking of many half-cabin lobster dories. Slurping of the black-green tide at pilings and counters of the dories. Smell of rotting things. The watchman was not at the gate.

Down the beach, I caught the faintly outrageous glare of a barnlike structure on piles. Pinky's yacht all right. Six-foot black lettering that spelled ALLEN on its side. The cruiser was tied up on the east side of the main wharf, a sleek white-and-red varnished thing with many gleaming brass fixtures snicking dim lights from the moon. Pinky's first love. Someone was moving about on board with a small flash.

I moved down the wharf, wraithlike and carefully boarded the cruiser. At the head of the ladder leading below into the cabin, however, I caught a clumsy foot on a deck

cleet. The light in the cabin was promptly doused.

"Come on the hell up out of there!" I commanded, standing to one side of the hatchway because I wasn't tired of living yet. I heard the ladder creak presently, and saw the dim, dark form inching up toward me. I tensed against a possible invasion, flicked on my pencil flash and immediately saw it was Amy Harrison. Her small, petite features were washed in fright. Snicked my flash off again, and urged her below with me into the cabin.

"What were you looking for, kid?" I heard her fluttery breathing in the darkness next to me.

"My hat. I left it on board the other night when Aunt Hilda and I went riding with Pinky."

"Hat's important, eh?"

"It was my hatpin that they found in her body."

I thought about that a long, dark moment, then got to my feet, flicking on the flash again.

"So, let's find your hat." I heard her sigh of relief and grinned to myself. She and Pink had been like "that" since before she went off to the exclusive Candle Lake Girl's School. They had taken up where they left off on her return, with Hilda's apparent approval, without Barney's.

We found the hat, and I sat her to one side while I searched for the answer to Hilda Harrison's death. I didn't even know what I was looking for. I lifted and pried under enough things to find it, but I didn't. Nothing made sense any more. Finally, I sat down on the edge of one of the low berths and tried to reconstruct as much of the affair as I knew.

I reached the point where Hilda's body had been found with the hatpin in it under the hotel when Amy hissed sharply.

I turned off the flash as I heard a stray shell pop under a careless foot.

"Wait here," I whispered, and started crawling up the ladder topside. As I put my head through the open hatch, I saw the sudden flash of light pointed at me, the simultaneous hiss and splat of hot lead breathing in my ear. Then the scrabbling of feet on the shells, as I pawed topside, hauling on my shoulder holstered .38 special. The noise of a car, badly choked, gunning, and roaring away on the highway.

Amy scrambled topside the next moment, and we made tracks for the highway, and

reached the gate just as the watchman came pounding up.

"Gore. Police," I said, and showed him the small badge I kept pinned in my wallet. He was satisfied, and didn't even seem interested in what had happened. Worried, though, that his delinquency might be reported.

"How did you get here, walk?" I asked, and Amy Harrison nodded, still frightened.

"The cars can't be taken without father's permission at night."

"Come on," I said, "I'll drive you back to the hotel." I led the way to the old heap I had left parked outside the gate. West End's battered but serviceable police car. I smiled tightly, wondering what Joe Parker would say if he knew what use it had been put to that night. Heap or no, she ticked off the first time, and I inched her away from the boatyard, up the rest of the hill, and then down onto the crooked main street, Harrison Avenue.

"Mr Stone came for me that night, and I struggled with him," Amy explained. "I dropped my hat and lost the pin in the darkness."

"You got back after dark?"

"We had to wait for the tide to clear the bars."

I nodded in the dim light of the dash panel, saying nothing, however.

"Your aunt came back to the hotel with you?"

"Of course."

I jockeyed the old car into a parking place in the lot alongside the Seaside Hotel. I invited her into the bar for a drink to settle her nerves.

In a booth in the bar, I noticed all the little-girl lines were gone, having not paid much attention at the inquest because of what was happening to Pinky. A small pack of delicately carved dynamite in their place. Smoky, blue-black hair topping it, violet-blue eyes, and an almost-laughing rosebud mouth which was sad then. She smiled wanly when I told her I was envious of Pinky and wished I were a few years younger.

"This Stone, is that a regular practice with him?"

"Father sends after me occasionally. I don't like Mr. Stone, but he seems to like me. Roughing me up, at least."

"You didn't mention any of this at the inquest," I ventured. "How long has it been going on?"

"I think," she said, and it was like a bomb falling, "everything started when Mr. Stone

tried to blackmail Aunt Hilda for an affair she was having. Dad never approved of her friends. I knew, but she had begged me to keep it secret."

"Your father knew about all this at the inquest, too?"

"He said it would cause a scandal if it got out."

"Or an innocent man's death," I said, hard. She started sobbing, quietly. I realized it would do me no good to get tough with her. "Who was your aunt seeing?" I found it hard to ask, because, after all, she was just a kid, and she had loved Hilda like a mother.

"I don't know," she replied, "but she tried never to see him at the hotel. Mr. Stone called on her a couple times and she got angry at him, too."

"You think it was Stone himself?"

"I don't know! I don't know!" She was really crying now and I knew the past two days had been a big strain on her, too. Didn't seem likely anyway. Stone wasn't Hilda's type. But then, I thought, who was anybody's type?

"You ever hear your aunt quarrel with Pinky?" I urged. "Accuse him of being mixed up with anything crooked?"

"Pinky told me she recently asked him if he was mixed up in the drug traffic in the area—"

"And?"

"Pinky got mad. He told her his foreman, just like those other men in the lobster business in the area, were being bribed to bring it in in spite of all his efforts to discourage it. He couldn't have afforded to fire all his men without crippling his own business." Tears were streaking her face now, running her pancake into pink mud.

"Why the hell don't you let the kid alone, Gore?" the sarcastic mouthful of pebbles at my elbow said. I turned and saw it was Al Stone.

He was big and handsome in a surgically made-over way, except for the broken-knuckled hand he put on my shoulder.

"Come on, flatfoot," he said, "scram. Barney doesn't approve of you any more than he did your brother. Get on your horse."

"You and I are going to tangle without a lady present one day," I told him, "and there'll be hell to pay. One of us is going to get hurt, bad."

"I'll drop around tomorrow morning. We can hash it over some then," he said. "But the little girl's bedtime is way past due."

I didn't argue because I wanted to take a trip to see Pinky that night. I excused my-

self, and Amy looked as if she were disappointed in me. However, what mattered then wasn't her opinion of me as a gladiator, but Pinky and his foolish neck, which the state would formally lay claim to in the morning.

Outside the hotel, however, on getting into the car again, I thought I'd postpone my visit with Pinky until morning. I didn't say anything about my booyard brush to Joe when I saw him, about ten o'clock the next day. We sat in his office, about two of three wall-thicknesses away from Pinky's cell.

"I just can't figure you any more, Joe," I said. I met his bland, quiet gray eyes squarely. "Since this new administration took over, you've changed a lot."

"They got me reelected," he pointed out. "Maybe I'm just grateful. Maybe," he added, "I'm getting old."

"You're not so damned grateful, nor so old either, as to let them pressure you into railroading an innocent man to the hot seat, unless they got something on you." I noticed that vein in his temple again. He was mad.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, quick resentment flaring into his eyes.

"I mean," I said, and a little too smugly, I knew, after I had said it, "that if I had suggested a couple years ago you were letting any political machine run your office you'd have swung on me. Now, you don't seem to give a damn. Have they got something on you, Joe?"

"Maybe," he repeated, "I'm just getting old." He grinned wearily, and hauled out a six-inch crowbar and started picking his teeth, wagging the hedges over his eyes as he concentrated.

"You're always shoving something big enough to be a wrecking bar in your mouth," I commented.

"Big teeth!" Then, "You know me better, Red. It's just that nothing like this has hit West End for years. I haven't got the organization to cope with it. There's really only you and me."

"So you're letting them bull you into pinning the rap on my brother, just because he happens to be a handy fall guy."

"A lot of those kids came back trigger-happy, Red."

"Yeah, but not Pinky. For that matter, Joe, suppose Hilda's dough was tied up in it? Suppose her lover was mixed up in the business, and needed some ready cash to clear a bundle?"

Joe's face got tight about the mouth. "Don't talk that way about her. She's dead

now, and I don't like guys that smear. What do you know about Hilda's lover anyway?"

He reached for me, but I ducked, swinging around and off the swivel chair I was in to avoid him. He stood glaring at me.

"Nothing much," I replied, "only that Hilda wasn't all she seemed to be."

"She was a wonderful woman." Joe insisted. "Some rat—"

"Stone." I supplied, and he nodded.

"... had something on her that would have ruined her. My hands were tied."

"So?"

"So don't make me draw you pictures," Joe stormed. "You can see why it would be crazy of me to let the kid out on bail. He'd bawl things up before we could get started. He knows too much and too little."

"I'd say," I said, catching sight of the sudden, silent shadow on the other side of the frosted glass in the office door, and nodding to him, and waiting until his eyes lighted with comprehension. "I'd say all this is just another smoke screen you're putting out for your new boss, Harrison."

I got up, tugging my lumpy gray tweeds into a semblance of order, taking a minute, to make sure someone was there. Joe got up, too, and came around fast to put a big, black, hairy-backed hand on my shoulder.

"You're talking big, Red Gore," he said, playing along after I had nodded and pointed at my chin and made motions for him to take it easy. "Even for a guy who's been around me fifteen years, and wears his badge in his wallet."

He swung on me, and any ideas I had about him getting old, even at fifty-two, were quickly forgotten. His fist landed like a sixteen-pound sledge on the right side of my jaw. The lights dimmed.

I sagged back up against the frosted glass in the door, and it broke with a tinkling, splintering crash. The goop standing flat-footed on the other side jumped like he'd been the one Joe had punched. There was a guilty, smug grin on his cruel mouth. It was Stone.

"Well, girls," he said, "romance on the city's time?" And, looking at Joe, "Barney wants to know if you got a confession out of that Pinky punk yet, and if not, what makes you so damned sure of your job."

It was almost funny, I thought. There was Stone, fully recovered now, and looking so assured, just as if he had a license to eavesdrop. He eyed Joe like a foreman might, and I stood ruefully rubbing the

side of my face, throwing thespian hate in Joe's direction. Stone was all fashion-plated out in his best sports togs, even down to the youth-affecting jacket. There was also that constant chronic look of disapproval of all things on his too handsome map. I don't know what made me open my trap, but I heard my voice saying:

"Pink's being held without bail. Isn't that enough for Barney right now? It's none of your business, anyway."

"Oh, you shouldn'ta said that, flatfoot," he said, smoothly. "Anything I get paid for is my business. And Barney is paying me to be sure you don't get your big feet tangled up in this deal any more than you have already."

"Look, you," I said, making the venom I felt for him ooze in my voice. "I don't like you, nor the company you keep. My boss might be able to toss me around some, and you might have been quite handy with your dukes in the ring once. But stay away from me. I play for keeps. No minute rest periods, and no gloves."

"You ain't so rough, Gore," he said. "Like I was saying last night, I could whittle you down."

"You got your chance, by God! Right now!" I cried. All the pent-up mayhem and worry for Pinky was about to bust off my vest buttons. I hauled back on my right, cocking it for a peg at his jaw. I felt Joe's hand on my shoulder again. I turned my head, saw the sudden warning in Joe's eyes. I rolled my head with the punch I knew Stone was throwing, but I caught most of it on the same side Joe had walloped me on. It staggered me back against the door again.

"That's enough, Stone," Joe said, menacingly, and caught his arm, jamming it up around his ear and then to me, "I'm sorry, Red. I didn't know he'd try that."

"Keep clear of me, Stone." I tried to shake my brains free of the fog. I was mad clean through, then, and some at Joe for pulling such a dumb stunt.

"That's only a sample of what I got waiting for you, pal," Stone said, hooding his eyes a little.

"You better go, Stone," Joe told him. He opened the door for him. Stone gave me one more dirty look before he went, almost too gracefully, slamming the door, like he owned the place. The door shut behind him so hard more slivers of glass fell out on to the floor, tinkling.

"That damned secretary and her ten

o'clock coffee," Joe swore. "If she'd been here that wouldn't have happened."

"It's all right," I told him, "it just gives me another ax to sharpen on that gang."

"Go easy, Red. They play rough."

"So do I," I said, angrily. "Once I get shoved into it! I want to see Pinky now, if you don't mind."

Joe shrugged and led the way out of the office. We went around back, through the alley, to the lockup behind the courthouse. Pinky was pacing grooves in the ancient cement. His face, a younger edition of my own, was worried and his eyes filled with fear. His hands were bruised, probably from beating them against the walls in his frustration.

"Let's talk, kid," I said. "But keep it soft." Joe had gone back to the turnkey station in the outer hall, leaving us alone.

"Well, get to it!" Pinky cried. "A fine brother you turned out to be! Letting them pin this on me! You know what I thought of Hilda."

"Keep talking," I said. "What did you think of her?"

He looked at me, closely, trying to read my mind. "How much do you know?" he asked, without committing himself much.

"She had a boy friend," I began, but he interrupted, and took it away from me.

"In the beginning," he said, "Hilda was good to me. Set me up in business."

"I knew that," I said. "Everyone in West End did."

"I gave her some of the romance she had wanted but missed. That's something none of you know." I gaped at him. "Amy and I are married now. Hilda knew it couldn't last between us, that it was wrong. She was glad when I married Amy. She bounced hard, though, and someone caught her. Besides, there was something else—"

"What?"

"I ain't saying any more—"

"You fool! It might be your life—"

"I'll get along."

"Yeah"—shortly. But when I looked up again, I saw that the wild, young Pinky was gone.

"We're going to have a . . . a baby," he muttered. All I saw in the once unmanageable kid brother's place was an anxious young lobster-fisherman, worried about his pregnant wife.

"So help me, Red," he bawled. "I'll kill them all if anything happens to Amy or that baby! I should have killed that Stone the minute he started crowding Amy and

me. Only Amy was so worried her father would find out and have the marriage annulled. Now—"

I put an arm around him and let him cry it out. Funny, how corny it all looks now on paper. But then I was thinking, no matter what the differences between brothers, when something big, like a murder rap, comes up, they remember they are brothers.

Outside the jailer's office, I tagged Joe on the back with an open hand, telling him about the kid and Amy being married.

"Also," I said, "I got a theory on how Hilda was really knocked off." He looked up. His face was gray and old.

"Yeah? How?"

"I'm not sure yet, so I'm not going to commit myself until I've checked over the location for possible clues."

I turned and left for the hotel, where I knew I would find Amy waiting for news of Pinky. The anger in my throat was a mountainous lump as I hauled the sedan out of the police garage. I still was not any closer to pinning it on Barney Harrison than when I'd started the night before. But I was close to something. I could almost feel it breathing on me. Only I still didn't know what it was! Or how it would turn out.

What had made Barney's and Joe's version of Hilda's death seem incongruous as hell had hit me back in Pinky's cell. For Pinky's story made Hilda out an amorous gal in her middle forties, with very young ideas. Even the youngest, however, weren't frisky enough to go boating on the Sound in nightgowns.

I was almost certain, now, Hilda had been killed in her own suite, and then dumped out the window onto the low tide sandbars which were sure to have been showing on the night she was killed. Tides changed an hour every day, I knew, and even last night, the outer, higher bars had still been exposed. Six hours to change, and gently push Hilda's broken, stabbed body up under the hotel out of sight until the next low tide. The hotel clerk was reluctant as hell to permit me admittance, even on official business, to Hilda's suite.

It wasn't any good, anyway. I spent all the rest of the morning, and the entire afternoon, going over it with a fine tooth comb. I found nothing, and when darkness fell again, I was exhausted, and mad, and as puzzled as I had been before. I decided to get hold of Stone and sweat him a little.

Again, I met reluctance from the clerk when I asked where Stone was. He softened up when I threatened to book him on obstructing the law. He indicated the bar with a nod of his head. I saw him telephoning frantically as I strode, stiff-legged, for the eggnog parlor where Stone had insulted the law the night before, and got away with it.

Stone wasn't drunk, and I knew I wasn't going to feel sorry. He knew something was up when the bartender slammed the telephone down hurriedly, and came over and whispered across the bar at him, motioning toward me as I came in. I made a mental note to also paste the desk clerk one for good measure.

Stone's face lighted with an almost benign smile. He thought he was going to enjoy it, too, I knew. He put his half-emptied glass of beer down on the bar, stretched his legs a little, like a professional, when he stepped away from the bar stool. The place was clearing of people quickly. The bartender put away the best liquor, and pulled the string on the storm tarp over the bar mirror.

"Your nose is too long, copper," he snarled, meeting me about ten steps from the bar. He immediately stuck out a left hand that was sloppy the way most heavy-weight left hands are when they've been out of the ring for a few years.

"Just long enough to give you the needle, chum." I caught it with my right, parrying, grabbed it tight, about the wrist. I jerked it up, turned my back to him, levered down over my shoulder, bending and lifting. Stone went up and over and landed on his broad beam end with a helluva crash, stunned. I took advantage of the few moments to frisk him. I tossed aside the neat .38 he had tucked up under his arm.

"Too heavy for you to be comfortable at what you're going to be doing the next few minutes, anyway," I said. I helped him to his feet, twisting my left hand into his shirt front and yanking him up.

He started a roundhouse right, and I knew why he had retired. It went whistling over my head as I crouched and pumped three short rights into his midsection, hard, stiff ones, with all the leverage I could get into them. He fell over me, almost paralyzed.

"Come, come, champ," I taunted, and straightened him up again, holding him at arm's length. He started another half-hearted swing, and I beat him to it, clubbing

with my right until his face was in need of a surgeon again. He was blubbering.

He fell back against the bar when I let him go, hands holding his bleeding face. When I came over, he came upright suddenly, all the black malevolence he might ever have had stored up inside for anyone pointed at me from his mean eyes.

I bent to avoid the kick he aimed, but too late, and caught it in the pit of my stomach. My breath was gone, and the sickening pain inside held me helpless. He swung and landed, and I went down in a heap. He was over me in an instant, the boot raised. Through the blur in my head, though, I saw he was more than half shot himself.

I rolled against the one leg he had solid on the floor, hard. It brought him down like big timber. I was on top of him, my hands at his throat. I couldn't even see him for the wheels and bells in my skull.

The red wave of anger fell on me as I lifted his head and slammed it down again and again, until a couple of the braver patrons pulled me off. I waved them away, flashing the official brooch in my wallet on them, then dragged Stone into one of the booths in the bar.

"Now, tough guy," I said, breathing hard, and glad it hadn't happened a few years before, when he was in better condition, "who was the monkey courting Hilda Harrison, you?"

He shook his head, mumbling.

"Who is it?" I almost screamed it and started for him again.

The desk came up then, touching me on the arm, quietly.

"The occupant in room 420 left a message to have Mr Stone call on him," he said, and I thanked him, and thought fast. 420 was the sea court side, the same side Hilda's suite had been on.

What I had been thinking since I had heard of Hilda's boy friend was true. She had rarely left the hotel premises, except for those rides with Pinky and Amy. That was what had made it look so bad for the kid. Now I was certain she had seen her man in the hotel, that she had had him maintain an apartment of his own there, so she could visit him after Barney and Amy had turned in.

"Come on," I said, dragging Stone to his feet, and scooping his gun up off the floor where I had thrown it. "Come on, chump! Let's take a trot on up to room 420 and meet your payoff man."

The cold eyes of the Seaside's paying guests followed us across the slick floored lobby, into one of the elevators which dropped us off at the fourth floor. 420 was to the right. I pushed Stone in ahead of me, his gun in one hand.

"It wasn't," I started to say, but half a second later there was action, and plenty of it. Two shots crashed out hollowly in the room, and then it seemed the chandelier fell on me. Like diving headlong into an empty tank. The noise in my skull reverberated like a bass drum. I caved in on top of Stone.

Then I got the dim impression of someone bending over me. I felt the .38 being removed from my hand. I was powerless to prevent it. I noticed something swinging back and forth like a pendulum. I heard the soft grunt as the person stood up, sighed, turned and padded easily for the door. Instead of clearing, the noise got louder in my cranium. I knew I was taking the count.

When I came to the first thing I saw was a ring of pants legs. I twisted and saw the still crumpled body of Stone.

"Get up, Red," Joe Parker said, and almost gently handed me to my feet.

"What's the deal?" I blurbed with a fuzzy tongue.

"You just killed Al Stone," Joe said, turning the black Stetson over and over in his hand. My head cleared fast.

Joe went on, "Barney saw it from the window of his apartment across the court, three stories up. He ran down and notified me."

I turned to Barney Harrison who was looking out of hate-filled eyes at me. Amy sat across the room on a sofa, weeping softly. Parker paced nervously, shaking his head. The manager and chief clerk were throwing the fits expected of them in the adjoining room, looking in occasionally. The coroner was standing by, awaiting instructions.

"Where the hell do you pack all the hate you have inside you, Barney Harrison?" I cried, standing over him. "You saw *me* fire the shots?" His pop eyes were bulging with anger, that I should dare question him.

"Well. . . well—" he fumed.

"The lights were off, weren't they?" I probed. "You heard the shots through the open window after seeing the flashes of light in this vicinity. You came running—no more. Right?"

I stood over him, demanding an answer he couldn't give. Joe Parker came over and took me by one arm. I shook him off, then

turned to face them. I wanted them where I could see their faces. I still wasn't sure.

"I know," I said, "or pretty damn near know who actually killed your sister, Barney." He looked up, fear in his eyes.

"Your brother, Pinky, killed Hilda," he insisted. "And you killed Stone because you had your own private little ax to grind with him. Remember saying that to Chief Parker, here, just this morning?"

"Oh, hell, Barney, you don't believe that yourself. No one else does either, really." I let him have it, both barrels. Even Amy was startled, I knew. "Did you know you're going to be a grandfather soon?"

I thought he sprouted wings, the way he covered ground to Amy's side and commenced his harangue again.

"Pinky's baby, Barney," I said. "They've been married several months now. And aren't you ashamed of the way you've acted all these years, causing all this trouble? All this hatred and killing is your fault. If you hadn't hated so many things so damned thoroughly, your sister wouldn't have been driven to the death she found."

"You're accusing me?"

"Indirectly, yes," I told him, and looked then at Joe Parker, whose gray eyes were no longer bland or quiet. They were insane with the suffering and indignities he had had piled upon him by Barney Harrison for years.

"How about it, Joe? Want to take it from here?"

He covered us with his police special, backing to the wall nearest him so none of us could get to him without first taking some lead.

"I had to kill her," he said, hoarsely. "She was an addict before I met her . . . before—" He looked around the room, and his eyes filled with tears. "She said Barney drove her to it, hounding her. I loved her as I never cared for anything else, more than my own damned fool life, more than the silly job I've held too long." Everyone sucked in his breath, sharply.

"It was easy to get some for her at first. But when the big ones learned who it was for they put the squeeze on me for a free gateway. Barney didn't know it, but Stone was their contact man. I didn't want to kill her! I didn't want to kill anyone."

"Why, then?" I pounded it at him walking slowly toward him. He motioned at me with the gun.

"Don't come any closer, Red. I'm nervous

as hell tonight. I like you, guy. I could have killed you down at the cruiser last night. But I just wanted you to keep on thinking the way you were, until I could pick off Stone and put the whole deal on him. He was expecting a payoff from me tonight. He got it."

He moved along the wall, directly in front of the open window, now.

"Hilda lost her mind that night. Threatened to give us all away if I didn't get a bundle for her. I couldn't. The Coast Guard made wholesale arrests on the Sound yesterday. She . . . she would have gone completely mad without a cure in a few more months, and she didn't want Barney to know. I . . . I guess I've caused too much grief already."

He turned his head, looking out and down. I leaped and caught at him. My fingers snarled in something and came away with it as Joe jumped free. He didn't even scream.

The tide only changes every six hours, high to low and back to high. It moves up one hour, inexorably on each position every twelve-hour cycle. One hour, no more. It was still low tide that early evening. It was four stories and the length of the pilings down. Fifty feet, maybe. Wet, hard-packed sand is as hard as cement. It doesn't give much. I looked out, saw his crumpled body on the bar below, probably in the same spot Hilda had landed.

I looked down at what had come away in my hand. It was his watch chain. The missing six-inch quill toothpick was screwed back into its socket again. Joe's wrecking bar, the pendulum I'd seen swinging dimly when the lights went out a few minutes before. He had found it a little too late. I motioned to the coroner to take over then, and took both Amy and her father by an arm, leading them out.

"Let's go see Pinky," I said, more to Amy than anyone else. She was crying, and I hoped the shock didn't cause any trouble with the baby.

Barney Harrison paddled along on the other side of me, as we walked toward the elevator, strangely quiet. He blew his breath out of his florid, veined cheeks from behind oddly pensive eyes that kept returning to the toothpick which I had in my hand.

I wondered if he were cured of his hate for things that weren't Harrison. I wondered if he'd ever get used to having a lobster fisherman and a small-town chief of police for relatives.



By
**ROBERT
P. TOOMBS**

Sleep no more

A book salesman who dreamed of a "tiny white cottage"; a blonde who was leaving her own world to be an "actress"; an escaped murderer to whom a life meant nothing—all snowbound in a boarded-up summer hotel. . . .

I PUT in ten rotten hours at Pine Spring's dinky hotel; roaches crawling over the floor, people yelling and scuffling in the halls. Then someone started shooting in front of the Colorado Feed and Livestock Corporation. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and high time I checked out.

The clerk shook his head. "There is a mob forming on the south side of town. Better be careful."

"Wonder if Blake's at the courthouse?" I asked, but my mind was on Maita, the girl at the hamburger stand. Today she was going to renounce this town forever and become an actress.

"Sheriff Blake? Perhaps he is. Something's going on over there, too. Would you mind stopping back and letting me know?"

"Sure," I lied, and beat it out to my car.

He was standing on the courthouse steps, a white Stetson slanted above his leathery face. I grabbed a set of books out of the car and began my second assault in two days.

"Sheriff Blake," I began. "I'm selling—my name's Stern—and I'm selling—"

Voices echoed faintly a few blocks distant on Pine Spring's main street. Shouts—screams.

He drew me inside the foyer without seeming really aware of me, then turned and ran down the marble hallway to his office. I'd already been in there yesterday and met Ryerson, a special deputy from out of town. Nobody seemed interested in my law books.

Blake's office had one of those swinging-door counter effects. You are supposed to

wear out your elbows, but I swept right in and deposited my books on his desk.

Ryerson heaved in through another door. "You again?"

Blake caught his arm. "Get that call through to Denver?"

"Yeah."

"Now listen—" Blake sat down at his desk and grabbed the phone, an unlit cigarette dangling between his lips. Ryerson eased his bulk onto a cleared space, head cocked expectantly. The line crackled. "But I want the D.A.!" Blake shouted in exasperation. "Who's this, his secretary? . . . Busy, hell! We've captured Hoag, but I ain't sayin' we're gonna keep him long. There's a crowd here bent on a lynchin'. We need help. Got that? . . . This is Blake at Pine Springs!" He gazed at me, blue eyes introspective, switched his glance to Ryerson. "There must be a storm brewin' the way this phone tears your ears off."

I shifted my feet, cleared my throat. "It's a privilege to have these books on your desk, sheriff. They're the finest law books ever to hit Colorado. They—"

He slammed the receiver on the hook. "Ryerson, listen. That crowd will be heading for the jail. Only Slim and Pete down there. You got to bring Hoag up here, maybe get him out of town. Why didn't they send someone with you? Hell's bells! When's this man-power shortage gonna end?"

Ryerson slapped a hat on his bald head. "I'll take him out the back way—"

"In a minute. In a minute. You got cuffs?"

I—"He looked at me. "Get out of here with those confounded law books!"

A girl in a cheap fur coat thrust her head in the door. "Sheriff, is the road open through Lemont Pass?"

"Hi, Maita!" I waved.

She gave me a wintry smile. "Sheriff, I asked you if the road—"

He pushed his hat to the back of his head. "No . . . yes. What d'you think this is, a travel bureau? My God! Ryerson, get these people out of here!"

Ryerson was big enough to do it. Maita Dalman stuck out her tongue at him, plunked her chewing gum on the window ledge, then fled.

I left, too, propelled by his muscular fingers on my arm. At the end of the hall, he relaxed his grip. "You know, son, those books might go over big in Denver, Sioux City or—Get it?"

"Thanks. How far's Denver?"

"Look"—he had the door open, pointing toward a blur of mountains at the edge of town—"take Lemont Pass."

I cut the wisecracks because he was moving away fast, sauntered to my car and dumped the books on the back seat.

Maita was struggling with the door of a rattletrap coupé, bumper to bumper with mine. I walked back and lent a hand.

"A star is born," I grinned, helping her in. "I woke up dreaming about you this morning. Now you're running away—"

She fluttered her eyelashes. "Why, Sterny."

"Be serious! Why don't you shelve this yen for show business? You belong in a little cottage—"

Her blue eyes grew stormy. "Just because I broke down and confided in you like . . . like an uncle, you hand me a cheap line!"

"You're crazy! Listen, I—"

She slammed the door in my face."

I stood and watched her drive away. My ears were burning and I made a few unpleasant remarks. Something cold and wet fell on my face; I looked up. The sky was growing dark, freckled with twisting clouds. Pine Springs lay like a speck on a rumpled blanket in all this vastness. I jumped in my car and headed toward the nearest gas station.

There was the rattletrap just drawing away from the pumps. Slim fingers fluttered at me, and I waved lustily, then could have bitten my hand off at the wrist.

The station attendant was staring after

her admiringly. "Some blonde!" His expression changed as loud, angry shouts swelled again from the main part of town. He paled. "They been at it all day. It makes me kinda sick. Somethin's gonna bust loose."

"What'd this fellow do they're after?"

"Hoag? He murdered some guy, robbed a bank over near Clymer. We've got him in our jail here, and the boys are tryin' to get him out! String him up, I guess."

The voices fell away to a murmur. A clanking began, as of steel hitting against iron; then a fusillade of shots.

"Listen," I asked, "can I get over Lemont Pass? I think that's the name of it."

"Huh? Oh, usually you can this early in November, but I dunno. It's more'n likely snowin' up there now. The young lady in the other car asked me the same thing, and I told her she better lay over 'til the weather settles. She said she'd just quit her job and this town was already a memory!"

"Thanks." I let in the clutch.

"Hold it!" he shouted after me. "Someone wants to see you."

Sheriff Blake piled out of a car and came up. "Hey, Stern. That your name?"

I nodded impatiently.

"I've decided to take a set of whatever you're selling."

My expression must have indicated that I thought something was plenty fishy.

"Joe," he said to the gas attendant, "just forget you saw me talkin' to Stern here, eh?"

The young fellow screwed up one eyebrow. "Anything you say, Sheriff. I . . . I gotta get busy inside."

When we were alone, Blake leaned close. "Ryerson said you were heading toward Denver?"

"Yes."

"How about taking a couple of passengers, straight through?"

"No."

He turned his head and spat, let his gaze drift back over me, calmly speculative.

"Now listen," I said grimly. "I'm a salesman. If I wanted excitement in my life I'd get it in some other line. Anyway, I have calls to make in a few towns between here and Denver."

"You seem to know what I'm talkin' about."

"I can guess."

"Yeah? Can you guess what'll happen to Ryerson if he tries to drive a car over

mountain roads with a rat chained to him? Me or the boys can't go. We've got to keep showin' ourselves to the crowd or they'll wise up."

I squirmed uncomfortably, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel. Finally, I sighed. "Where do I pick 'em up?"

A twinkle crept into his eyes. "Right here. They're on the floor of my car."

"Holy—" I shifted into reverse and backed alongside.

Blake opened the doors, glancing casually up and down the street. "Hop to it!"

Two figures squirmed across the intervening space. I didn't even see what Hoag looked like. Blake threw a robe over them and slammed the door. "All set. Now, Stern, don't get any fool notions that you're responsible for our little playmate. You're a private citizen, just drive. Ryerson's doing a job. He gets paid for it. Understand?"

I swallowed, and said nothing.

He glanced up and down. "Now get the hell outa here! And, thanks, fella."

I waved my hand and whirled out into the street. A bright splash of sunlight blazed on the yellow hood of the sedan, then disappeared. Long after I started the climb into the mountains I kept recalling the voice of that mob. It was unpleasant to think about. I lowered the window and let the cold, pine-scented air sweep over my face.

It was snowing, a fine powder that thickened, swirling and spitting against the windshield. The road grew steeper, corkscrewing upward in impossible curves that dragged us down into low gear.

"It's a blizzard!" I shouted back to Ryerson.

He cursed, sitting half upright, one hand down under that robe. Maybe his feet were planted on Hoag. I was worrying about Maita. Once I saw the tracks of another car ahead. Then I rounded a curve, hit a level stretch and sloughed to a stop. The rattletrap was in the ditch, slanted far over on its side with snow showering in white gusts. She had the trunk open, busily getting out a set of chains, her hair whipping wildly in the wind.

"What's up?" Ryerson growled. But he could see for himself. He kicked out with his foot. "Keep down, you!"

The robe subsided.

I climbed out stiffly to look the situation over.

Maita grimaced, pulling her coat tighter, shivering. "Have you a r-rope?"

I shook my head, clambering around her

car, slipping and sliding. She ploughed in my wake. It was there to stay, right running board completely buried in the ditch.

"It's getting dark, you'll have to leave it."

"But—"

"Do you know this road? Any houses up ahead?"

"I d-don't know. Maybe resort h-hotels, but they'd be closed."

"We may have to break in."

She frowned. "What about my car? It isn't much, but the d-darn thing has to get me to Denver."

Ryerson leaned out. "Does that dame live around here? We gotta lay over someplace. Ask her—" The wind flung the rest of his words down the mountainside.

This was a hell of a place for a discussion. "That guy's a deputy," I explained, throwing her chains back in the trunk, and grabbing out her suitcase. "He's taking a prisoner to Denver."

"Geel!" She was blowing on her fingers. "Where is he, in the trunk?"

Ryerson was bellowing, "Snap it up, you two!"

I helped her into the front seat and scrambled around to my side.

The wheels spun, caught hold, and we lurched ahead. The next two miles were tough; I couldn't see a thing. Maita scrubbed at the windshield with a soggy rag and our breath steamed it up again. The radiator boiled and gurgled. We smashed through a drift and Maita slid almost into the windshield, bounced back.

She grasped my arm. "Isn't that a building? See? There to the left."

A sign said, "Temple Inn." A road led toward it and I cut in, skidding to a stop.

Ryerson was scrubbing a clear spot on his window. "Yuh can't see it for the trees here. Get up, Hoag."

The big figure that untangled itself wasn't pretty. Black hair plastered down over a bulging forehead gave him a grotesque appearance. The steel cuff chaining his wrist to Ryerson's clinked as he sat back on the seat with lowered head.

Maita drew in her breath sharply, and I reached out and gripped her hand.

Ryerson fumbled for a cigarette. "You take a look, Stern. If we gotta bust in, we'll do it."

I nodded. The wind almost tore the door from my hand. Maita scrambled out, too, lugging her suitcase. I grabbed it and we started ploughing through the drifts.

A man's bundled figure loomed up ahead, and we stopped short.

A fur cap came down to the level of his black eyes; a sallow face, sharp chinned. "This place ain't open to the public," he said flatly. "You lost?"

"There's two more in the car. I'm afraid you'll have to put us up."

He rubbed a mittened hand over his chin, eyes narrowing. "Two more?" Muttering something I did not catch, he walked past us, heading for the car.

"Isn't he friendly, though!" Maita snapped.

"To hell with him. C'mon." I dragged her along and we emerged from the trees directly in front of the inn. Two stories high, possibly eighteen or twenty rooms, it squatted lonesomely in the dusk. A car stood before the porch, a buffalo robe draped over the radiator.

She ran up on the porch ahead of me, emptying the snow from her high-heeled shoes. "D-darn it, I'm nearly froze!"

I unlatched the door and the wind swung it open. We found the lobby quite large, desolate, dust lying heavy on couches and chairs. A kerosene lamp on the center table helped dispel the gloom, but the only cheerful note was the fireplace with its smoldering logs.

Ryerson and Hoag stumbled in, followed by our host who battled with the door, finally got it closed. Ryerson's gray eyes swept the entire lobby suspiciously while Hoag stood with lowered head, rivulets of water dripping from his hulking shoulders. Almost, it seemed, I could hear the sullen voice of the mob, discordant, crying for blood.

Ryerson headed for the couch, dragging the other with him like a hound on a leash and Maita shrank closer to the fire.

"Don't be scared, lady," he said. "Hoag here kinda enjoys the delay. He was that anxious to leave Pine Springs, but he ain't in no hurry to reach Denver!" There was rather an awkward silence. He shoved the other down and dropped beside him, sitting with legs laxly extended, panting heavily. His heavy neck bulged as he craned his head toward the door. Hey, you, come around here where I can see you."

Our host shambled across the room, drawing off his mittens. "The inn's been closed a month, mister. I'm Sedgewick, the caretaker. Don't know as I should—" His eyes

clung to Hoag, shifted to Maita. "O' course, if the young lady's cold—"

"Damn right she's cold," Ryerson sniffed. "We're all cold. How long d'you suppose it'll be till they get the road opened up?"

Sedgewick shrugged. "No tellin'. They send plows through as often as they can."

Maita slipped out of her coat. "You mean we're marooned in this dump? Stern, you ought to sell him a set of your books!"

I made a face at her. "I'm thinking about food right now. How about it, Sedgewick?"

"Well, there's canned stuff. The inn's opened sometimes 'round Christmas. But—"

"There must be a phone!" Maita declared triumphantly.

He rubbed the side of his jaw. "It's gone dead. I . . . I got a call a while ago, seems as how my wife is pretty sick. They wanted me to come—" He lapsed off, staring at the snow-encrusted windows. "I got to try it. You folks will have to manage for yourselves."

"You won't get far," I declared. "The wind's piling up drifts."

"I know these roads better'n anybody. I've driv 'em all my life." He began putting on his mittens.

I glanced at Ryerson. His gaze was boring into Sedgewick.

"Where's your wife at?"

"She's stayin' with her sister, about four miles from here."

"O.K., But you just forget about seein' me an' this feller here"—nudging Hoag. "I don't want visitors. Get it?"

Sedgewick nodded, edging toward the door. Cold air and a flurry of snow roared into the room, then it banged after him.

Presently, we heard the motor of his car as he backed and turned, grinding away down the drive.

"There's something fishy about him," Maita said. "If he was staying here right along wouldn't he have a big stack of wood for the fire? There's only a few sticks."

We looked at the near-empty woodbox.

"I dunno." Ryerson shook his head, eyes squinted almost shut. "Stern, hunt up the phone an' see if it's really outa order."

I prowled behind the desk in the shadows, stumbling over a large globe map on its tripod. The phone stood on a small table and I lifted the receiver, jiggled the hook. "It's dead all right, Ryerson."

"Look at the cord."

I picked it up, feeling foolish. "It's been cut!"

Ryerson grunted. "Uh-huh."

"I think he was afraid of you," Maita suggested. "He could see you were an officer. Maybe he was hiding out up here!"

"Uh-huh. Maybe." He peered around at me. "We'll sit tight. A plow'll come over this road eventually."

"That's swell!" I said acidly. "Come on, Maita, let's hunt up the grub, if there is any."

We took the lamp and explored a black hall leading down through the length of the inn. At the rear, stairs mounted to the upper floor, but there was a door to the right. It led us to a dining room, and an enormous kitchen beyond. Wind and snow scraped loudly around the outside of the building.

Maita opened a cupboard and found coffee, a few cans of pork and beans. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes sparkling. She was the right size and shape to be called beautiful, but I gritted my teeth and strove manfully to keep from telling her so.

"You look like a thundercloud," she said. "Quit moping and help me get a fire going in that stove. I'm sorry I slammed the car door in your face. Honest!"

Finally, I grinned, sailed my hat onto a table, shrugged out of my coat and went to work.

Later we took a tray of stuff to Ryerson. He grunted out thanks, nudging his prisoner. "That coffee smells good. You want coffee, Hoag?"

The other man looked up at me then, such a dead, blank glance that I stirred uneasily.

Ryerson was fidgeting, feeling in his vest pocket. He brought out a knife and a plug of tobacco. Using both hands, he cut off a chew and pushed it into his mouth. The steel bracelet on his left wrist gleamed in the firelight. Hoag's hand flopped helplessly wherever it was dragged during this operation.

Maita fled.

"I'll give her a hand in the kitchen," I muttered, but stood irresolute.

After a minute Ryerson raised his eyes. "Sure. Why not?"

In the kitchen, Maita stood leaning against the table. The lamp on the sink smoked and wavered and I turned it lower.

"Sternly!"

I faced her, pulling a mask over my features.

"I'm frightened! That . . . that man's plotting to get free. You can feel it! He doesn't say anything, doesn't look at you, just thinks!"

I managed a laugh. "C'mon. Let's clean up the dishes."

She gripped my arm. "You feel it, too. Don't pull the he-man stuff on me, Sternly!"

"O.K.," I flared, "he gives me the creeps! So let's go back in there and behave like adults instead of a couple of pantywaists!"

We marched back in and pulled chairs up to the fire. Hoag had decided to eat. His short, blunt fingers clutched the cup as if it were a bowl while he drank noisily. Ryerson didn't eat much; sat waiting for his man to finish. Once Hoag lifted watery eyes, giving Maita a steady appraisal. His eyes were green. I went over, casually settling upon the arm of her chair. Abruptly, he averted his glance, and she flashed me a grateful smile.

"Might as well sleep," Ryerson decided suddenly. He rose, dragging Hoag up with him. "D'you mind bringin' a light, Stern? I'll have a look upstairs."

Maita jumped up and went over to her suitcase. "I have a flashlight. It's easier than carrying a lamp."

He stared after her, then shoved Hoag forward.

She handed it to me, and watched us up out of view.

Dust rose beneath our tread. Hoag at my back, made me feel as though snow was being rubbed up and down my spine. The hall was cold and black, drafty. The first door on the right was unlocked and I led the way in. None too large, but with a bed and dresser, it seemed to satisfy Ryerson. He nodded and I lit the lamp. There were extra blankets in the closet and I dug them out.

Hoag's eyes shifted around only once. He seemed not particularly interested. If it were an act, it was a good one.

Ryerson glanced into the bath then turned. "Just a minute, Stern, before you go." His hand slid under his arm beneath the coat, came out with a heavy revolver. In one smooth motion he reversed it, extended the butt. "You keep this"—the corner of his eye was on Hoag—"he knows there ain't no key to the cuffs. I threw it away when we started."

I looked him in the eye, took the gun doubtfully.

As he closed the door after me, I saw Hoag eyeing him with a baleful glare.

"Ryerson's no fool," I said to Maita later, "but damned if I'd sleep with a fellow like Hoag tied to me!" We were standing in front of the fire, me watching the soft high-

lights in her tawny hair. She stared unseeingly into the shadows. "Nerve," she whispered, "that man Ryerson's got it! But that's his weakness, too, overconfidence."

The wind sang down the chimney in a minor key. Finally, I stirred. "How about some sleep yourself?"

She shivered. "Are you kidding? You couldn't drive me up into one of these rooms!"

"Why not flop on a couch here by the fire?"

"You . . . you'll be handy?"

"Sure. I'll borrow another couch if you don't mind."

We pulled up another couch and found blankets in a cupboard back of the office. I made a game of tucking her in snugly, then straightened abruptly and flung her over to the fire. I felt her eyes following me, but when I glanced over, she closed them quickly.

The wood would barely last out the night, but I decided that I'd wait until daylight to forage for more. There was a furnace of some sort in the basement as indicated by the open registers in the floor. I took off my shoes and curled on a couch. The gun was under the pillow, flashlight on the floor. Sleep was beyond question for me. The fire caved into glowing coals; an eddy of smoke shaped itself into a tall, hulking figure and I remembered the words of the fellow at the gas station: "He murdered some guy." I gazed over at Maita; finally closed my eyes.

A hand was shaking my shoulder. "Sterny!"

I sat up quickly, peering at Maita, wide-eyed, in the faint, gray light of dawn.

"Sterny, didn't you hear it? A noise upstairs."

I pulled on my shoes. "What'd it sound like?"—reaching for the gun and flashlight.

"I don't know. Something fell!"

"You wait here," I whispered. "If Ryerson's in trouble—"

"Don't you go up there!"

"Be quiet." I ran lightly toward the stairs, the white circle of light wavering ahead of me. At the top I doused it and stood listening, getting myself in hand. There was no sound. Only the wind crooned.

I took a firmer grip on the gun. The heavy sag of it felt reassuring. Then I opened the door of the bedroom, snapping the flashlight into life.

Ryerson's still form sprawled on the floor, face up. The bracelet still looped his wrist, but the connecting chain was severed, neatly filed!

Somehow, I forced myself to kneel by that dead figure. There was an ugly wound on the right side of the skull, horribly deep. "See you in the mornin'," he had said. The hotel suddenly seemed to be closing in, shrinking. A cold sweat seeped over my brow. Hoag would want no living witness in this latest crime! And Maita—all alone down there.

I rose shakily and edged into the hall, closing the door after me, then sneaked down the stairs. Maita, clutching a blanket around her shoulders, read the expression on my face. The back of her hand sprang against her lips, stifling the quick cry. Then I had her in my arms, her face pressed against my shoulder while my eyes swept the lobby, gun held ready.

It happened then, with unexpected suddenness, the most ungodly scream echoing thinly up through one of the registers from the basement below! Maita's head jerked back. Neither of us breathed. I thrust her down upon the couch. "I've got to go after him!" Her hand was cold when I closed her fingers over the gun. "Stay here, and look sharp, I whispered. "If anything moves, shoot!"

She pressed her lips tightly, looking down at the gun. I jerked a heavy poker out of its stand by the fire, and with the flashlight in my left hand, raced toward the kitchen. Stairs led from there down into the basement. There were probably other entrances which he might use, but I had to take a chance on catching him before he came up. The man must be mad or was the scream meant to lure me down there? I battled a surge of fear. This was distinctly not my line. Afraid I'd lose my grip altogether, I yanked open the door and plunged down into the cellar.

A wall of musky air rose up to meet me. There were boxes, bins, white-washed columns between the stone floor and the ceiling. Cobwebs girded the raw rafters overhead. My search was systematic, through room after room. Then I saw a man's foot, toe up, sticking out from behind a large packing crate!

I tried to speak, but my voice was a hoarse, desperate croak. "Come out, damn you!"

The foot moved, wiggled.

I charged around the end and found Sedgewick, back propped against the wall, fingers stemming the red river of blood at his chest. His eyes were wild, flitting in the rays of the light. "Stabbed me," he choked. "Hoag—"

I dropped to my knees. "Sedgewick! How—"

"I figured they'd come through the pass,

waited all day for 'em, thinkin' Hoag would pay heavy if I got 'im away. I parked down the road and came back."

"You killed Ryerson!" I accused.

He nodded weakly. "I was a fool to free Hoag, damn 'im. He's got my gun, but there's a revolver in the desk . . . office . . . get 'im." His head fell back. There was only the sodden drip of water splashing from a drain pipe, or was it blood? Once again I knelt by a corpse.

Things were clearing in my brain. That's why Sedgewick had been watching the road. Now Hoag was armed, while I scouted him with a poker! I had to get back to Maita and the revolver.

I was running, back up the kitchen stairs, two at a time. Then sense came back to me and I grew cautious; crept quietly into the kitchen, the cone of light splashing ahead of me on the opposite wall. There was no window, and the room lay dark and still. A breeze, as the basement door swung shut behind me, and my back went numb at the savage jab of a gun! Some blind instinct saved me from whirling, and dying quite futilely.

"Freeze!" The whisper trailed from his lips, a mere wraith of sound, ugly.

Idiotic, that I chose *this* moment to reason: He killed Sedgewick with Ryerson's pocket knife!

The poker was jerked from my hand. Another flashlight sprang into brilliance and he prodded me toward the table, frisking my pockets. "Where's the gun?" he breathed.

I shook my head.

"The girl's got it then. Light the lamp and we'll get her out here, unless you wanta be smeared!" His tone was venomous, barely audible.

I was trembling with rage, sweat pouring down my face, but I laid down my flashlight and did as he commanded.

"Now call her. And if you mess it up, it'll be too bad for you an' for her." He slipped over to one side of the door, pressing back against the wall. His gun covered me, an automatic, the other half of that grim bracelet dangling around his wrist. His left hand hung by his side, fingers tensing, relaxing.

I stiffened. "If you hurt her—"

The gun raised level with my eyes.

"Maita," I choked.

His lips drew back in a snarl. "Better than *that*, guy!"

"Maita!" I called loud and clear. "Come here a minute."

I realized that if I didn't get her to come through that door, if she grew suspicious beyond the threshold and faltered, he'd shoot her, not me, for she had the gun.

"Sternly!" She was coming. The lighted lamp on the table helped to guide her, gave her confidence.

Hoag's eyes were on me. Below the matted hair at his temples a muscle jumped, twitched.

She emerged abruptly from the gloom. "Sternly, I—"

He struck at her arm, and the gun she held so loosely fell to the floor. She stumbled to one side with a scream.

I strained for the leap forward, but he had me, eyes glaring triumphantly, gun steady.

I licked my lips, wishing God would strike me dead. My hand shook as I extended it. "Come here, Maita."

She flew to me, and I put my arm around her shoulders. We watched him stoop, pick the gun from the floor and shove it into his hip pocket. He gestured toward the door, no hint of emotion in those green eyes.

We went into the dining room, from there into the lobby where he stopped us with a nod. "Get over to the fire," he growled at Maita. His eyes never wavered from mine. Craftily, he kept a good distance between us, the muzzle of the automatic pointing directly at my head. And yet he knew every step she took; knew when she reached the fire and turned. His lips curled away from yellow teeth. "You're cluttering up space, but I ain't going to blast you to hell yet!"

I waited, thinking of that other gun. In the desk, Sedgewick had said. If Maita only knew, and I could grapple with him long enough—

"I need dough, lots of it, to get out of this damn state," he rasped. "Shell out!"

"My wallet's in my coat, over on the couch."

Clever, this fellow. His eyes never shifted.

"I'll take a look," he said, and sprang directly at me! I reeled back, his gun clubbing the side of my head, lights blazing and hurting inside my skull.

When I came out of it, staring around dazedly, I was propped in a chair, my wrists bound to the heavy, carved arms with stout wire!

Hoag was over by the couch, going through the pockets of my coat. Maita stood back against the mantel, her face drained of all color, turned in my direction. The

contents of her purse lay scattered on the floor.

Hoag looked up now with a low curse, the wallet in his hand. "A lousy two hundred bucks!" He swung toward Maita. "I thought this guy had dough!"

"He . . . he probably doesn't carry it with him."

"Yeah? But he's dressed good, maybe worth plenty? When he wakes up I'll find out. How about getting me some breakfast?"

She stared at him silently.

His face darkened. "I said how about breakfast?"

She moved away from the mantel hurriedly. He followed her toward the kitchen with a long, slinking stride, dropping the gun in his coat pocket.

I remained slumped over, but as soon as they were gone, straightened, tugging desperately at the wire. It was hopeless. My wrists were bound against the arms of the chair so tightly it was impossible to get any play. He had done the job well, and yet so simply. Two thin loops of wire on each wrist, a few twists of the ends—and they held! I sat back. If I could, somehow, get Maita to look in that desk drawer, and at the same time distract his attention—Something came to me. Maita wanted to be an actress. Maybe—Swiftly, I planned the thing out, but all too quickly their steps approached from the dining room.

Maita was carrying a tray. She paused when she saw me move. "Sternly. Are you—"

"Shut up!" Hoag barked, staring at me curiously.

"I'm O.K.," I said quietly.

He grunted, and motioned Maita to place the tray on the table in the center of the room. "And take a chair where I can keep an eye on you!" he ordered.

She sat down not over twenty feet from me, hands gripped together in her lap. Hoag drew a chair up to the table facing us, and commenced bolting his food.

"Miss Dalman's a well-known actress," I said. "You better go easy, Hoag."

He glanced up, sneered, but went on eating.

"Don't think I'm pulling a corny wise-crack," I ventured, "but this setup reminds of that play you were in called 'The Desk.'"

"Oh!" Maita was watching him. "Yes, it does."

Hoag's head was bent low. He wolfed his food noisily. I held my breath.

His head jerked up. "You an actress, huh?"

She nodded.

I leaned forward. "You should have seen her in that play. She was the whole show!"

"I remember," she said softly, and her expression was innocent when Hoag looked at her.

He scowled. "Shut up, you two. I'm tired of hearin' you gab!"

I leaned my head against the back of the chair, peered beneath lowered lids at Maita. She let her glance drift casually over to the desk and back again!

Hoag dragged a sleeve across his mouth and stood up, eyeing me.

"I'll make you a proposition," I began abruptly. "How about letting us go? I've got some money, a couple of thousand, in a Denver bank."

He stared at me, head to one side. That bulging forehead glistened in the light and that swept through the windows. Then he sauntered closer. "Yeah? How would I—"

"I'll write you a check."

His lips twisted in a derisive grin.

"I'm good for it!" I exploded.

"You're nuts! A check, he says!" His eyes grew crafty. He thought a minute. It was only too apparent that he was thinking of the difficulties involved, and that he'd doublecross me once he got the check. But I was playing for just one thing.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Write the check!"

My heart leaped. Maita was watching tensely. I managed to keep my voice cool. "My check book's in my coat."

He found it, tossed it in my lap, began untwisting the wire on my right wrist.

"You'll probably find a pen in the drawer of the desk, Maita," I suggested carelessly.

She got up and started over. He watched her out of the corner of his eye. "There's one lying on top. Bring that, girlie!"

Inwardly, I cursed his sharp eyes. Maita hesitated, picked it up and started back. "Oh, the point's broken." She turned and retraced her steps, walking around behind the desk. The move was so natural and logical that Hoag never tumbled. He returned his attention to me, fingers untwisting the wire. What could I do?—he probably reasoned, with only one hand free, while he had two guns, the one he had taken from Maita still nestled in a hip pocket, the automatic in his coat.

Maita was pulling open drawers. There was a brief silence. "I've found one," she said slowly.

I knew by the tone of her voice that she had the gun!

Hoag pulled the wire free. I flexed my fingers, once, twice. As he straightened, I smashed my fist into his face with everything I had! He staggered back, hand flashing toward his pocket.

"Drop it!" Maita's voice snapped across the room. The revolver in her hand spat flame, bringing a shower of broken plaster from the ceiling.

He was crouched, half turned, snarling like a beast but with hands motionless.

"Next time it'll be you!" Her voice trembled, broke. "Now get back!"

Blood was staining his face. My numb fist attested to that. I was jerking frantically at my other wrist, fingers slipping, twisting at the smooth wire.

He leaped toward her. The revolver roared again, but she missed. He knocked her back against the desk, jerking at the weapon, kicking at her feet.

I came free and dove headlong across the room, crashing into his knees. Maita screamed, and he came down on top of me. The gun was in his hand now, flashing downward savagely, grazing my head. Then I caught his arm, my fist once again smashing into that contorted face! I was growling like a fiend, his features dimly visible through a red haze. How enough strength flowed into me I'll never know, for he was all bone and muscle. But I came out magically from beneath the heap, took the gun away from him, and, as he got to his knees, threw him over on his back with a wild haymaker that caught that bloody face for the third and last time!

He lay still, while I hung over him with my arms still working, trying to get my breath. Then Maita was at my side, steadying me, holding me up.

"Oh, Sterny!" She was half laughing, half crying. "It was beautiful—"

We hung onto one another, there in the middle of the room, me mumbling something about her being a great little actress.

Echoing from the road outside came a roaring, panting bedlam.

She rushed over and cleared a spot on the window through which she could see, then came flying back into my arms. "Snow-plow!"

"Who cares?" I panted. "D'you hear? Who cares?"

Her eyes were shining. "I don't!" she whispered softly.

THE END

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In the edge of night

By GROVER KIDWELL

THE fact that Noel Shelton, successful citizen of the village of Davis Gap, in the Poplar Creek section of southeastern Kentucky, was an ardent reader of crime and detective stories may have helped him to decide in his mind the actual reasons that lay behind the tragic killing and what looked like a very strange suicide.

Quite a few persons in the village, some of whom couldn't read at all, made fun of Shelton behind his back for reading "sech stuff." A plumb wilful waste o' time, they thought.

Eighty-four-year-old "Aunt Becky" Bodkins, for instance, who herself couldn't read a word, and who was a see-all, know-all sort of person who always took a leading part in all kinds of sensation gossip, thought Noel Shelton's conduct was most scandalous. She would often make comments about Shelton to her eighty-eight-year-old husband, "Uncle Jermy."

"He thinks because he's the richest man in these parts, Jermy, he can do jest about as he pleases," she would remark bitterly. "But I say he oughter be settin' a better example afore folks he maybe thinks ain't as well ed-e-cated as he is. Ain't that right, Jermy?"

"Yes, yes, o' course, honey," would invariably squeak Uncle Jermy, who had never been able fully to master his ABC's, and who had been Aunt Becky's "yes" man for nigh onto sixty-six not-too-peaceful years. "Yes, o' course, honey. Sittin' up till ungodly hours to read that kind o' truck! Makes me mad as a hornet to think about it. A good almanac and things about hawg and cattle raisin' 'ud be my kind o' redin', if I could read. The weather and meat is two mighty important subjects, it seems to me, 'specially meat."

Noel Shelton knew all along, of course, that he was being discussed unfavorably. But he paid the busybodies little mind except occasionally to remark, to this per-

son or that, that the great men of America—even presidents—had often seemed to get pretty much of a kick out of reading detective and mystery stories.

"And if they could enjoy that kind of writin' sometimes," he said, "who am I that I can't enjoy it all the time?"

Anyway, that's how things stacked up in Davis Gap when, late on a spring afternoon, Albert Hackler and "Big Jasper" Green met by accident at Noel Shelton's sawmill, two miles from the village. Hackler carried a fishing rod and said he'd been doin' a bit o' castin' fer bass. Green remarked that he himself was jest foolin' aroun'.

Big Jasper Green was the husband of prosperous Noel Shelton's sister.

Albert Hackler had once tried rather desperately, over a period of several weeks, to "keep company" with Nell Baird, the young woman whom Noel Shelton intended soon to marry. Hackler had shown no bitterness toward Shelton because the latter had won the girl's favor, but he was deeply disappointed and had told more than one friend that he knew he'd never love anyone but Nell Baird.

In face and form, Albert Hackler looked more than a little like lumberman Noel Shelton, although, unlike Shelton, he was not of a happy or friendly nature. People had often spoken of how closely they resembled each other.

At quittin' time, Noel Shelton and his two visitors departed for Davis Gap together. The few men who operated the small mill lived nearby with their families. So it was that Shelton, his brother-in-law, and Albert Hackler presently found themselves alone on the road leading to the village. At several places the road followed the banks of Poplar Creek, winding about the ends of rugged bluffs and under high gray cuffs. A mile from Davis Gap a foot-

path turned from the road. It was a short cut to the village. It led Shelton and his companions across a low ridge and down into a stretch of woods which was more or less flat. Here the forest was deep, shadowy, and silent. Big trees towered everywhere above dense undergrowth.

When the three men reached a point where the footpath crossed a clear stream, Noel Shelton halted.

"Jest a minute, fellers," he said, and stepped to a round pool. From the pool he took a quart bottle. He shook the bottle to stir up its contents.

"Likker with rock candy and a little glycern in it," he said. "I sweat a lot these days, and afterward I cool off too quick and take cold, if I ain't plumb careful; so I thought it'd be a good thing to take a snort of this ever' day after work. I keep a bottle of it hid here in this cold water. The chill seems to make it better to drink, somehow. Try a shot?" He held the bottle out to Albert Hackler.

"Got a good kick?" Hackler wanted to know.

"You know what cawn likker is. The rock candy and glycerin jest make it taste different."

Hackler took a drink. Jasper Green did likewise when the bottle was passed to him.

"Good stuff," Hackler commented, "though the fust cawn I ever drunk fixed up as a medicine. Uncle George says it'll knock a cold more often than not," he added, referring to Dr. George Hackler, the only fairly well educated man living at Davis Gap. Long ago George Hackler had graduated at a medical college, and his learning made him outstanding among the rest of the Kentucky mountaineers living in and around the village.

Shelton took a drink and returned the bottle to its place in the water.

Three days later, after an early supper, Big Jasper Green walked leisurely into the kitchen where his wife was washing dishes. It was a neat, spotlessly clean kitchen, and of late Ann Green had had reason to be especially proud of it, for now it held four articles which were recent presents from her prosperous brother Noel: a large, glistening range, a white enameled sink, a checkered covering for the floor, and a new pump which brought water from the deep drilled well which had been put down before the house was built. Ann had, in fact, the most

modern kitchen in that particular neck of the woods.

Almost plumb up-to-date, that was how Ann felt. She was a pretty young woman, slender and dark and with pink in her cheeks.

Big Jasper's false smile was working nicely today, and there was what appeared to be a kindly light in his eyes.

"Jest happened to think of somethin' Ann," he began. "I understan' Widder Lawson and her gal are in want ag'in, and I'd like fer you to take 'em a ham and a poke o' meal. And I reckon you better go right away, honey. You can do the dishes when you git back."

It was quite a distance over to Widow Lawson's log hut, south of the village, and Jasper knew it would be dark before his wife returned. He figured that he would have plenty of time to "fix" Noel Shelton and get back to the house during her absence, if Noel quit work at the usual hour and started home at once. Since he lived closer to the woods than any of his neighbors, Jasper felt he'd be able to sneak into the woods and then back to the house without anybody being aware of it. He'd plug his brother-in-law with his .38 caliber gun, and because there were lots of guns of that caliber everywhere, he'd be no more likely to be suspected than somebody else. He would carry the body a good way from the footpath, and it would be found by a searching party which he himself would head after things looked like something must have happened to Noel Shelton.

Just like that. It would be plumb simple.

Ann Green looked at her husband with frank surprise in her dark eyes. It was not often that Big Jasper was so thoughtful of needy folk.

"You bet we'll help the Lawsons, Jasper," she said warmly. "I didn't know they was hurtin' ag'in."

"Happened to hear it today, gal." He started to leave the kitchen, hesitated. "Fer the Lord's sake, don't let a soul know I tol' you to do this, honey. Don't want people to think I'm soft."

"Soft? That ain't bein' soft, Jasper. It's bein' good and fine. It's bein' like I want you to be, always."

She stepped toward him. He guessed her intention and turned away. Somehow, he didn't want Noel Shelton's sister to kiss him. Not now.

So Ann only patted his back as he withdrew.

In a few minutes the young woman left the house, carrying a large basket. Not only was she Noel Shelton's sister, but she was like him in many ways. To the items which her husband had mentioned she had added coffee, sugar, and several cans of vegetables.

Jasper watched her from a window until she passed through the gate and disappeared behind a little hill. Then he took his revolver out of a dresser drawer, examined it to make sure it was in good working order, and went outside.

The sun was setting.

Big Jasper glanced searchingly to right and left as he walked out to his barn, a hundred yards from the house. He saw no one. He did not enter the barn, but went behind it. He paused there, peering this way and that. The edge of the woods was only a few paces away.

Presently, he was gliding swiftly among the trees and bushes.

Jasper Green was not afraid to kill Shelton; he knew that after the murder his conscience would not hurt him at all, not ever.

But he did think of the law. He pondered over the vengeance the law takes upon a murderer. But he was being very careful, very cautious. He knew he was going about this thing in a shrewd and cunning way. The law would get nothing on him.

True, there were two deputy sheriffs in the Poplar Creek section, but it was a laugh to think of either of them getting to the bottom of a crime such as this would be.

In a little while he reached the footpath which Noel Shelton would follow on his way to his house in the village, the house which was kept neat and comfortable for him by a middle-aged woman who had known him all his life.

And now Jasper's nerves began to grow tense. Alert for every sound, he walked as softly as a lynx stalking its prey. He was ready to leap for cover if he should hear someone approaching. His right thumb was hooked in his belt, a few inches from the gun in his hip pocket.

Jasper was fairly consumed with his desire to kill the brother of his wife. He must kill him now. Noel must not be allowed to live even one day longer.

Big Jasper drew near the stream where Shelton kept his bottle of "fixed up" liquor. Dusk was now stealing through the woods. Shelton was due to come along very soon.

Jasper was within twenty paces of the

stream when a slight noise, like a bottle clinking against a rock, came to his ears. At once he froze in his tracks. A moment, and then Jasper stretched to his full height to peer among the trees and bushes. But he saw nothing move by the water. Too many trees and bushes stood between him and the stream.

So he crept on a few paces, watching, listening. He halted again. He stepped from the path to higher ground. He got a view of a portion of the stream.

And now he saw something. A man was sitting on his heels at the edge of the brook. Jasper saw a black hat, a black coat, and the bosom of a gray shirt. It appeared as if the man had just now taken a drink and was carefully returning the bottle to the pool of cold water.

Jasper Green drew his gun. Grimly, he lifted it and took careful aim. He was sighting at the bosom of the gray shirt.

The gun barked. Just once.

The man by the water leaped half erect. He turned half around and flung out his arms. He staggered four or five paces from the stream and pitched heavily to the ground. He lay face downward, motionless, with his feet toward his murderer.

Big Jasper was trembling a bit now as he strode forward, gun held at ready. Through the dusk he stared hard at his victim's still form.

"Got him. He never knowed what hit him."

Jasper's glance went to the stream, to the pool that held Noel Shelton's bottle.

The whisky! Jasper needed somethin' to settle his nerves after pullin' off this hyar killin'. He shore did.

He stepped over to the pool, picked up the bottle. The stuff would give a feller a kick even if it had been doctored up with rock candy and glycerin.

Today the bottle was a little more than half full. Jasper drew the stopper. Quickly, he raised the bottle to his lips and took a man's-size drink.

He lowered the bottle and stared at it. He frowned. The dam' stuff had a mighty queer taste somehow. It was supposed to be sweet, o' course, but now it was plumb bitter-sweet or somethin'. It shore was. Well—

He drank again. He shook his head and made a face. The dam' stuff didn't taste like it did when Noel gave him a drink. No, it didn't. Gosh, but it tasted queer!

He replaced the stopper. He bent far over

to return the bottle to the pool. As he straightened, he felt a sharp pain in his chest. Then, a second later, it seemed almost as if invisible hands were clutching his throat.

What was the matter, anyway? He was growing sick. He was growing weak. And the pain inside him was growing steadily worse. And his throat— Why, a man would feel like this if he were being strangled, wouldn't he?

That stuff— Good Lord! Had the stuff poisoned him?

He glanced wildly at the body of the man he had murdered; the body lying there in the dusk, face downward, so quiet, so lifeless.

No, he would not carry the body to a spot away from the footpath, as he had intended to do. He was too weak, too sick.

He staggered away through the woods. His feverish brain roared; his heart throbbed frightfully.

He had got something from the bottle that was killing him. Terrible pain was destroying his life, and a horrible fear had taken possession of him. He wanted to cry out, though he knew it would do no good, no one would hear. Anyhow, he could not lift his voice. He could only gasp as he staggered, half blindly, through the silent woods.

When Ann Green returned from Widow Lawson's cabin and passed through her living room and into the kitchen, she heard a noise near the kitchen door, as if someone were kicking the porch steps. She went out, wondering if Jasper were back there and what he was doing. She found him lying stretched on the ground. He was panting, gasping. When she cried out to him, he mumbled something she could not understand. She was sure he was out of his head.

Badly frightened, Ann ran to bring the neighbors. A few moments later Jasper was carried into the house. Then somebody went after Albert Hackler's uncle, Dr. George Hackler.

But Big Jasper Green died before the doctor reached him. He died without speaking, without being able to speak.

The doctor examined the dead man's lips, the inside of his mouth, his eyes.

"Frankly, Ann, it seems that Jasper poisoned himself," he said. "Strychnine, I believe, and, maybe, another poison mixed

with it. He must have been insane. He could have killed himself a lot easier than he did."

Jasper's gun was found protruding from his hip pocket. Its cylinder contained five cartridges and one empty shell. The doctor put his nose to the muzzle of the gun. The smell indicated, he said, that it was fired very recently.

But it was not Noel Shelton who was murdered!

Because he decided to try his luck in a poker game in one of the houses near his mill, Noel did not come home at dusk, and so he had no opportunity to find a dead body or to drink from the bottle which he kept in the stream, hidden there in the cold water for use as medicine. When word was brought to him of the death of his brother-in-law, he rode a horse to Davis Gap, coming the two miles by the wagon road.

That night a heavy rain fell, and Shelton, if he thought of his bottle at all, knew that it would be washed away. And, of course, somewhere it would be dashed against a rock and broken. That had happened once before.

Early the following morning Albert Hackler's body was found by two lads who were on their way to the village. It was soon discovered that Albert had been shot with a .38 caliber gun. So a few Davis Gap folk—and both deputy sheriffs of that locality—at once began to believe that Jasper Green had killed Hackler and had then taken his own life with poison he had ready in his pocket.

But that did not make sense to other Davis Gap folk. Why would he have had poison for that purpose? He did not need it; he could have shot himself after killing Hackler. And then, too, it was known to everybody that Jasper Green and Albert Hackler were friends. Why would Green have murdered his friend.

A plumb puzzlin' sort o' thing it was. It shore was.

"I reckon the fack o' the whole matter is," declared Aunt Becky Bodkins, "that they's some sort o' rip-snortin', hell-sent human monster runnin' loose aroun' hyar. I 'low he managed somehow to give Jasper a drink o' pizen, and then Jasper, when he found he was pizened, took a shot at him and missed and the monster got away and Jasper went home to die. Then the monster went prowlin' through the woods to do

some shootin' on his own account, 'stead o' more pizenin', and he happened to run onto pore Albert, as fine a man as ever lived, and fed him lead. And I'd say this monster is still amongst us waitin' to do more devilment. Don't you think I'm jest about right, Jermy? Answer quick and don't argue."

"Yes, yes, honey, o' course," squeaked Uncle Jermy. "Nothin' less than some sort o' rip-snortin', hell-sent human monster. I think you jest about hit the nail on the head the fust pop, Becky. Er, was that the fust pop?"

"Fust pop er no fust pop, am I jest about right?"

"Yes, yes, honey, o' course. Didn't I jest say so?"

"And now," said Aunt Becky, "since Noel Shelton has et up so many o' them-air crime and pective stories, it's time fer him to git busy and shield us all from this hyar fiend killer with some good, straight-from-the-shoulder pective work. Am I right, Jermy? Am I right?"

"You shore air, honey. You shore air."

That was just what Noel Shelton was trying to do at that very moment—learn the mystery behind the tragic deaths of Albert Hackler and Jasper Green. Noel's "detective mind" was working. It was surmising, guessing, putting two and two together, deducing. And finally Noel thought he saw the light. After turning many things over in his mind, he decided that, after all, it was possible that he had been rather bitterly hated, not only by one man, but by two, or, if not hated, had been very much in their way.

To make sure, he called at the home of Dr. George Hackler.

"Lissen, doc," he began, "have you missed any poison lately?"

"Yes, Noel, I have." The doctor eyed him narrowly. "I got to wondering and—Well, I took stock, and a quantity of poison is missing."

"And had Albert been foolin' aroun'? I mean—"

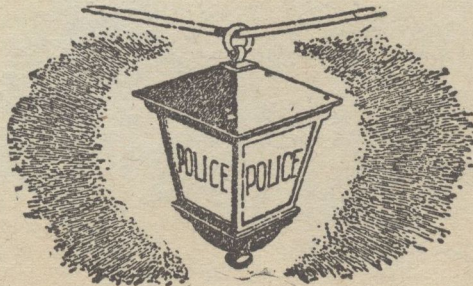
"You've already shown me what you mean. Albert must have stolen some poison from me, and I'm probably thinking somewhat as you yourself are thinking, though I'm at a loss to figure the thing out completely."

"I can help you, doc. I kept a bottle in the branch where Albert was killed. Albert knowed it was there, and thought I'd be the next to drink. I know, now, why Jasper Green decided to kill me, but I don't know jest why he picked the place where I had my bottle."

"I see." The good doctor frowned in thought. "It won't do a bit of good to spread it, Noel. Let's just let the whole matter drop. What say?"

"Suits me."

As Noel Shelton went home, he muttered to himself, "Yep, that's it. In the edge o' night, and in his excitement, Jasper Green thought he was murderin' mé, fer Albert Hackler looked a right smart like me. And then, to settle his nerves, and, of course, without noticin' he'd killed Albert instead of me, Jasper drunk the poison Albert had jest then put out fer me. Albert thought that if I was out of the way, he might still have a chance to marry Nell Baird. And my brother-in-law knowed that if I died before I married Nell Baird, my sister Ann couldn't help but come into all the money and property I've got. Well, as shore as I ain't president of the United States, Ann is lots better off without a husband like Jasper Green."



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