

STREET & SMITH'S

# DETECTIVE

STORY MAGAZINE

JUNE



BRITISH  
9<sup>d</sup>.  
EDITION



**DAFFODIL  
MOON MURDERS**  
A NOVELETTE  
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C. RAYL



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STREET & SMITH'S

# DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE

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# An Irishman's Job

By FRANK R. READ

*Mike O'Shea was a smart cop. He never thought that he'd resort to a baby book to help him solve a murder that stumped the best of 'em.*

## I.

MIKE O'SHEA was bitter. "And who has a better right to be bitter than me?" he asked himself as he reported off duty at midnight from the lonely call box at the far corner of his beat.

Mike straightened his tunic, carefully aligning the rows of service and decoration ribbons that ran in parallel lines above his left breast pocket. His face was grave as he studied the neat black-and-yellow ribbon with a star on it. That particular ribbon represented ten years' service on the police force, ten years of pounding hard pavements, ten years of working while others slept, or at least after the sun went down and part of the population slept. Mike scowled, walked hurriedly toward the business section of town.

Patrolman O'Shea cut a fine figure as he walked down Broad Street. He was compactly built, erect, neither too tall nor too short. His Irish blue eyes usually twinkled, though for the time being they were serious and shadowed. The black hair under his cap could have been lifted from a magazine ad for hair dressing. Several late female homegoers cast surreptitious glances in his direction, and slept more soundly for the knowledge that they were protected by such fine men as O'Shea.

At the corner of an alley, midway be-

tween Oak and Mimosa Streets, Mike entered the Owl Restaurant.

"Hell-o, Mich-ael! Long time no see!" The Greek owner flashed him a toothy smile. "Hungry? Or you gonna wait for your father? For you two, I could maybe find a nice T-bone steak."

"Thanks, Pete. You do that. We'll have it in a booth. I want to have a private talk with dad."

"Sure! Sure, Mich-ael! I understand. Private! You wouldn't be coming to see your father during his working hours if it wasn't important, I know. I'll serve you in the end booth."

Mike nodded, and turned to look out the window. Diagonally across the street, on the opposite side of the alley, stood the offices and warehouse of the Central Construction Co., where his elderly father, Dan O'Shea, was night watchman. Even as he watched, a light sprang on halfway up the alley, a door opened, and the scrub woman, with her inevitable shopping bag, emerged. His father's figure was framed for a second in the rectangle of light before the old man closed the door behind her. Mike watched the woman walk through the long alley toward Water Street, the next street paralleling Broad.

"Better drop those steaks on the grill, Pete. I just saw dad let Mrs. Coleman out

the side door. He'll be here any second now."

The sound and aroma of sizzling meat filled the restaurant, and Mike looked out the window again. Pete turned down the heat, and walked up the counter to stand across from him.

A large figure emerged from the alley. Mike instinctively stiffened as he recognized Ugly Uhle. Ugly paused under the lamp at the corner of the alley, lighted a cigarette, then turned and strolled leisurely down Broad Street.

Before Mike could comment, another figure slithered ratlike out of the alley.

"Dirty Joe Jones," Mike said as he drew in his breath. "I don't like this, Pete. What could be keeping dad? Is he usually this late?"

"Sometimes, he is this late, Michael. Usually he takes a quick turn about the building after Mrs. Coleman leaves, then comes right over for his supper. Sometimes, he—" Pete didn't finish the sentence he meant to sound reassuring.

Another figure walked out of the alley. Even Pete recognized Wee Willie Wade. Mike O'Shea slid from the stool and headed for the street door.

"Keep an eye on the building and the alley," he called back over his shoulder. "I'm going after dad."

Central Construction Co.'s building was never meant to keep out burglars. Mike merely pulled open one of the metal shutters always left unlocked for emergency entrance by the fire department. He snapped on lights before him. A low groan guided him to his father on the third floor.

Dan O'Shea, unconscious, was lying before the closed safe in the cashier's office. His snow-white hair was red from the pool of his own blood in which he lay. Mike dropped to his knees and felt for the old man's pulse. He had never noticed before how fragile his father had become. Mike's probing fingers finally located the feeble indication of a heartbeat.

Again the familiar bitterness swept over the patrolman as he rose to his feet and headed for a front window. "Dad shouldn't have to work so hard. I should be earning enough to—"

He raised the sash, Pete, standing on the pavement before the restaurant, looked up.

"Call an ambulance, Pete! Dad's been slugged."

The sound of his only son's voice was

like a magnet that dragged old Dan O'Shea back from the eternal soft, comforting velvety blackness into which he had been gently slipping.

"Sure, Michael, and it's you. What brings you here, lad?"

"I came looking for you, dad. What happened? Who did it?"

The fact that he was dying, the fact that his head hurt so badly that it added his old brains, never occurred to Dan O'Shea. All that mattered was that young Mike had come looking for him, that something was troubling his son, something that couldn't wait until morning to be dealt with at home, that his son needed his help or he wouldn't be here.

"What happened to me can wait. What's troubling you, lad?"

"Nothing, dad. Quick! Tell me what happened? Who did it?"

"Out with it, Michael! What's troubling you? Don't be fibbing, or it's me black-thorn stick I'll be taking to your back as soon as I'm off me own. Not a word will I speak until you tell me your trouble."

Mike O'Shea shrugged. He had been face to face with his father's single-mindedness often enough before. Never for a moment did he doubt the old man's determination not to speak until he heard his son's story. Mike bowed to the indomitable iron will. Hurriedly, briefly, he let his trouble spill from his lips.

"Dad, I've been passed over again. Both for the detective force, and for a uniformed sergeancy. The men that got the promotions had lower marks and ratings. They— Oh, hell, dad, they were practically political appointments. It wasn't fair to the rest of us. I'm resigning from the force. The Board of Commissioners meets tomorrow. Friday—it's today, now. I want my resignation on their desk, or I'll have to wait another month to resign. That's why I came looking for you tonight. I wanted to tell you what I was going to do. But it's not important, now. Hurry. Tell me what happened to you."

The old watchman moaned softly, and closed his eyes. The lethal lethargy that was waiting to pounce on his ebbing life moved closer. Realizing what was about to happen, the old man rallied his scattered wits and opened his eyes again.

"Mike . . . Mike, lad . . . Don't resign . . . Sure and the force hasn't treated you too badly, what with paying in to the

pension fund and holding your seniority open for you while you were in the army. Sure and time will remove them that's blocking your promotion—"

"The back of me hand and the sole of me foot to the force, dad. What happened?"

"Don't say that, Michael! Police work is an Irishman's job. Though there are some of other blood that make good, it's still mainly an Irishman's job. Think what it means to have an O'Shea, a Kelly, an O'Meara, or a Donahue at your side when troubles come. Verra comforting, it is. Promise me you won't quit for a year—"

"I promise, dad. Quick. What happened?"

Old Dan O'Shea felt his body assume a lightness, as if it were drifting into space. The pain in his head lessened in intensity. Automatically, like a phonograph that was running down, he began talking, the words coming slowly from his stiffening lips.

"I locked the door behind Mrs. Coleman, and began me quick round before supper. That . . . that tin box they call the safe has always worried me, Mike. Sure, I've told you what precautions I always take."

"Yes, dad, I know. What happened?"

"I saw the face of the dial had been moved, and came in here. Sure, it had been moved to sixty-seven. I set it on thirteen tonight. It had been moved and prints left on it since Mrs. Coleman cleaned in here an hour or so ago. After that, I knew nothing. I . . . Mike, lad, anyone could have opened that safe. I know. You remember I worked for a safe company when I was naught but a spalpeen like yourself. Those prints, Mike—you've said that even the dumbest crook never leaves them."

"Dad, didn't you hear anything? Think! Did you smell anything? Did you notice anything else?"

"No . . . I . . . I . . . never knew what . . . what . . . hit me. It's getting dark, lad." His eyes were staring unblinkingly into the blinding ceiling light. "Reach into . . . me vest pocket and hand me . . . hand me the horn rosary that was your mither's. 'Tis verra dark, lad . . . Thanks . . . Sure, and I'll be closing me eyes . . . for a bit of rest now."

Out on Broad Street a banshee, in the form of the municipal ambulance's siren, wailed approaching death.

Quietly, on a brightly lighted office floor, far from the green land of his birth, the soul of Daniel O'Shea was welcomed by its Maker.

On the following day, the three-man Board of Police Commissioners held their monthly meeting. It was a typical board—Chauncey deL. Blaine, a non-partisan banker, gave the proceedings its aura of respectability; Patrick Cullen, a successful contractor and contributor to political funds who, though partisan, was above reproach; and lastly, Jack Portland, who was a heel and a wardheeler, and the member who frankly followed the dictates of the incumbent political organization.

Normally, the board rubber-stamped such business as was placed before it. Normally, it never met just after a murder rocked the city.

It may have been that Patrick Cullen's contracting business caused him to take an interest in the murder of another construction company's watchman. It may have been that because the day was a legal holiday, and the banks closed though others worked, that Chauncey deL. Blaine wanted some way to pass the day. Whatever the cause, Patrick Cullen proposed that the commissioners take an active hand in the investigation, despite Jack Portland's vehement and worried protests to the contrary. Chauncey deL. Blaine seconded the motion, and it was so ordered.

Chaos reigned supreme among police personnel. A precedent was being established and a well-organized department does not like precedents. Squad cars raced about the city gathering up witnesses, and others who might possibly be witnesses. Lawyers for the three suspects, who were lodged in the detention wing of headquarters, scanned law books and phoned learned judges for opinions. Crooked politicians and honest fat police captains jointly sweated, for an unheard-of thing like this could gather momentum and end in an avalanche that buried the just and the unjust with equal discrimination. Unreasonably, everyone felt resentment toward young Mike O'Shea; everyone, that is, except his colleagues. It was as if he personally were responsible for all that had happened.

Young Mike was the first to appear before the board. Briefly, he told of going to meet his father, and of finding his father, and why.

"So, young man," Chauncey Blaine spoke in his best executive manner, "you were going to resign because you were passed over."

"Yes, sir."

The banker studied him. For the first

time since he had been appointed to the board, he felt that a situation had arisen that he was capable of handling, a diletante, dissatisfied employee. Chauncey cleared his throat.

"Young man, I remember your case very well. In fact, I was the one who turned thumbs down on your promotion. In fact, if it were not for your apparent excellent record, I would have recommended dismissal from the force. There was absolutely no political significance. It was—"

Jack Portland jumped to his feet before the red-faced banker could continue. "Mr. Blaine, we must not allow ourselves to be detoured from our main purpose. If the board explains every reason for its decisions, we'll never get anywhere. Let us stick to the business in hand."

Patrick Cullen's eyes narrowed craftily. "By all means, Jack," he agreed, and turned to Mike O'Shea. "Now, officer, explain to the board what your father meant when he said he took precautions about the safe."

"Yes, sir. When dad was younger, he worked for a large safe company. In those days, the safes were sent from the factories with the locks set on one of a half dozen combinations. It was up to the purchaser to have the combinations reset, and few ever did. Dad could tell by looking at it that the safe in the Central Construction Co's office had never had the combination reset. So every evening when he reported for duty, before the staff left for the day, he entered the cashier's office, and, when the safe had been closed for the night, carefully wiped the combination clean, and set the dial on some odd number. Last night the number was thirteen."

"What did he hope to gain by that?" Patrick Cullen asked interestedly.

"He knew a smart burglar wouldn't leave fingerprints, but he thought that a thief might neglect to turn the dial back to the number it was set on, enabling dad to discover that the safe had been tampered with hours before normal discovery would be anticipated. Exactly that had happened last night."

"Ah," Chauncey deL. Blaine interrupted, "but the thief did leave identifying fingerprints."

Patrick Cullen ignored the interruption. "Officer, did your father ever tell you the standard factory settings?"

Mike O'Shea did not like the question. He nodded uneasily.

"What were they?"

"I'd rather not say, sir. The—"

"What you say," Patrick Cullen snapped, "will be confined to this room. What were the combinations? The board orders you to answer."

Mike rattled off the more common standard factory-set combinations.

Patrick Cullen leaned back in his chair and sighed. "'Tis too true. One of those very combinations is on my own office safe, but I only use it for protecting my records from fire."

"That's exactly what the president of the Central Construction Co. said when dad suggested that they get a new safe or at least have a different combination setting on their present one."

Patrick Cullen colored. "No one could have foreseen what would happen to your father, lad. Sit here beside me while we listen to the other witnesses. There'll be more questions I'll want to ask you."

## II.

CAPTAIN CARTER, of homicide, a man who had risen spectacularly from patrolman to captain in ten years, was the next one to enter the room.

"Here, gentlemen, are photographs of the fingerprints we found on the safe. They are very poor prints, but readily identifiable." He dropped several sets of glossy photographs on the huge conference table.

"Identifying the prints is your job, captain," Patrick Cullen said, as he brushed them to one side. "The prints don't interest us. What progress has been made?"

The captain gazed uncomfortably at Mike O'Shea, and cleared his throat. "We have turned up a taxi driver who was parked near the Water Street end of the alley that runs beside the Central Construction Co.'s building. Incidentally, the route through the alley is the only possible way the murderer could have gained admittance to the building. Though the taxi driver is not definite about the exact times, or order of their appearances, he said—I am quoting his exact words: 'Mr. Uhle entered the alley. Then the dame you say is Mrs. Coleman came out. Then Dirty Joe Jones entered, followed soon after by the guy you say is Wee Willie Wade,' end of quote. I personally have questioned them thoroughly. I don't believe they know a



thing. They are the only persons who used the Water Street end of the alley. However. Mrs. Coleman is a tartar. I'm holding her. The Broad Street end was under observation by Patrolman O'Shea and Pete Leonidas. Only those I have already mentioned were seen entering or leaving the alley."

"But . . . but, why are you holding Mrs. Coleman?" Mike spoke, knowing well that he was stepping out of his place.

Captain Carter scowled, but answered, "Just routine, trying to determine what became of the twenty thousand dollars in bills that was in the safe."

"Twenty thousand?" The news rocked Mike O'Shea.

"Yes. We've been keeping a lid on that fact. Today is a legal holiday, though a lot of folks are working. It is also the regular weekly pay day for the Central Construction Co. Because the banks are closed today, Central drew their pay roll yesterday. There was some silver, too, but the thief didn't bother with that. He took only the bills."

"Did you find the weapon that killed dad?"

"Yes. It was a wrecking bar."

"Were the same fingerprints on it that appeared on the safe?" Mike asked.

Captain Carter looked embarrassedly at Jack Portland.

"Were there prints on it?" Chauncey Blaine echoed Mike's words.

"No, sir," Captain Carter answered. "The bar was wiped clean."

Jack Portland shuffled noisily and rose to his feet. "Gentlemen, Captain Carter is a busy man. I suggest that we let him get back to his work."

"I agree," Patrick Cullen snapped, "but I have one question to ask before he goes. Surely, Captain, by this time you have some theory and are setting about to prove it. Although this may seem irregular, I want you to outline that theory to the board."

"Well, sir, with Patrolman O'Shea here, I'd rather not."

"Don't be a fool, man. You don't think the lad killed his own father?"

The captain's face crimsoned.

"Speak up," Patrick Cullen snapped. He glanced meaningfully at Chauncey Blaine and added, "Or will it be necessary for the board to put it into the form of an order?"

"Oh, no," the captain said. "My theory is

that the robbery was an inside job. Who else could know the combination but an employee? Furthermore, I'm inclined to believe that the killing of Daniel O'Shea was an accident. I think he was slugged to simulate a robbery, either by Mrs. Coleman or by his son. Unfortunately, he was hit too hard and died. Possibly he had passed the bills from the safe to one of his accomplices. It's a known fact that Daniel O'Shea was heavily in debt."

"You have been misinformed about the debt, captain," Mike said evenly, trying to keep his temper under control. "Back in the boom days, dad co-signed a note. When the crash came, he, like lots of others, lost all he had. But he considered the debt an honest one, and has been paying a little on it over the years. There was only a hundred dollars remaining to be paid."

Surprise flooded the captain's face. "There were thousands due less than a year ago."

Mike nodded. "I nearly cleaned it up with my war bonds, army savings, and termination pay. Dad protested, but I did it and dad knew it."

"How do you account for the unidentified fingerprints on the safe?" Chauncey Blaine asked the captain.

Again Captain Carter looked appealingly at Jack Portland before answering. "We have only young O'Shea's word that his father said the dial was wiped clean last night. Almost anyone could have accidentally left their fingerprints on the knob during office hours—a truck driver passing through the offices, a delivery boy, anyone." The explanation was so weak that he colored and looked again at Jack Portland.

The wardheeler gushed, "I don't think we should keep the captain from his business. Remember, gentlemen, he has a murder investigation on his hands."

"By all means, let's not detain him," Patrick Cullen said. "Send in the suspects, and send them in without their lawyers."

Before closing the board room door, Captain Carter turned and faced Mike O'Shea. "Patrolman O'Shea, I want to talk to you after the board is through with you. Don't leave this building without reporting to me. That's an order!" The door slammed behind him.

While waiting for the suspects to appear, Jack Portland diligently pointed out to Patrick Cullen the unconstitutionally of the board's actions.

Chauncey deL. Blaine ignored their con-

versation and studied young Mike with an expression of quizzical dislike tinged with sympathy and a little respect. Though he never allowed an employee to upset a well-regulated department, he, nevertheless, grudgingly admired their ill-advised attempts to do so.

Mike O'Shea automatically picked up a photograph of the prints found on the safe and gazed at it, while bitter thoughts cruised through his mind. That he shouldn't have mentioned the political appointments, he was well aware, for Captain Carter was one of those who had risen without sufficient merit. That he was to be kicked ignominiously from the force, he was also well aware. In fact, he knew that a murder charge, of killing his own father was hanging over him. The one thing he couldn't understand was Chauncey Blaine's dislike of him. He had never, to his knowledge, seen Blaine before he entered the room today.

The board room door swung open and Dirty Joe Jones, badly battered, was pushed into the room. He stood swaying weakly on his feet; only his eyes were animated. They burned hatred for the men he faced.

"I ain't talkin'," Dirty Joe croaked. "I got rights, see! My lawyer tole me so. I ain't sayin' nothin' 'cept I didn't slug the ole guy. I liked him. I ain't sayin' another word." And he didn't.

Ugly Uhle was the next to appear.

"Gentlemen"—he spoke with the assurance of the well-coached—"I have only this to say: I am innocent! And that fact has already been established by the police force." He held out his ink-smearred fingers. "Prints were found on the safe dial. They weren't mine. As soon as possible, my lawyer will have a habeas corpus petition signed. That's all I'm saying."

Never for a moment did the board doubt that his lawyer would be successful. Jack Portland nodded. Chauncey Blaine smiled sourly in distaste. A puckish light burned in Patrick Cullen's shrewd eyes. He turned to the suspect seriously.

"Surely, Mr. Uhle, you'll satisfy an old man's curiosity and answer one question. Oh, it has nothing to do with the matter in hand. How old are you?"

Ugly's eyes narrowed, became wary. "I'm not talking. You have my record in that folder before you."

"So I have." Patrick Cullen skimmed over the record. "Uhm-m-m! Thirty-five. That's wrong. You must be older."

"Well, I'm not," Ugly Uhle snapped. "That's correct. I had to have a birth certificate during the war, and I got it from the City Hospital. I'm thirty-five."

The puckish light burned more brightly in Cullen's eyes. "I suppose it's true, but it's unbelievable. I can't understand how a person could get so ugly in only thirty-five years." He doubled up with laughter at his own joke.

Jack Portland slapped his thigh and howled appreciatively. The others grinned.

"I should be kicked," Ugly said good-naturedly. "I've walked into that old wheeze more times than I care to remember. Gentlemen, may I return to the comparative quiet of my cell? At least there, I'll be spared more bovine humor."

Patrick Cullen didn't hear the remark. Wiping tears of laughter from his eyes, he waved Uhle away.

Wee Willie Wade shuffled in.

"I didn't do it. See my lawyer." His lips snapped shut, and didn't open again until he was led from the room.

During the uncomfortable silence that followed, Mike O'Shea studied the photograph. Finally, Chauncey Blaine cleared his throat importantly. Mike folded the print and slipped it into his tunic. His hand felt the envelope containing his typed and signed resignation. His fingers lingered momentarily upon it, and the death-bed promise to his father burned across his brain.

"What now?" Chauncey Blaine asked the other members of the board.

Jack Portland rose to his feet.

"Gentlemen, there are several other matters concerning this case that should be presented. Frankly, out of deference to Patrolman O'Shea's presence, they are being withheld. If there are no objections, I suggest that Patrolman O'Shea report to Captain Carter's office. He can always be recalled."

"By all means," Chauncey Blaine agreed.

"Run along, lad. Come back when Captain Carter is through with you." Patrick Cullen patted Mike's shoulder.

As Mike was closing the board room door, he heard Jack Portland's voice crackling in a businesslike tone.

"In view of the fact that the prints of all three suspects are different from those found on the safe dial, I—"

Mike closed the door. For a moment he stood in the empty corridor. To his left was the captain's office, to his right, the street entrance. He turned right.

Peter Cassidy, the retired patrolman who acted as doorkeeper, stared unbelievably at young Mike's approach. Without a word of greeting, though he couldn't have missed seeing the approaching man, he rose and entered a nearby washroom.

Mike's face burned. He was tempted to follow his old friend, but reason came to his rescue. Quickly, he passed on out to the street and into the back room of a nearly friendly café. Beads of perspiration streaked down his face when he removed his cap. Realization that there was an order forbidding him to leave headquarters, had dawned on him. The old doorkeeper had preferred to ignore him rather than enforce that order.

Over a bottle of beer, Mike reviewed the case in his mind. That one of the three men now in custody had murdered his father, he had no doubt. And yet, there were the prints on the safe dial, and those prints matched none of those of the suspects. He pulled the photograph from his pocket and studied it. His eyes widened at what he saw.

The knob of the dial was smudged, as if the person who had opened the safe had used gloves. The prints were only on the shiny face where the combination numbers were engraved. There were no prints on the dial knob, nor on the safe door.

Mike sipped his beer and concentrated. Obviously, he reasoned, the prints were planted. But by whom? He reviewed what he knew of the suspects. He couldn't believe that any one of them had the necessary knowledge to elaborately fake prints. Mike studied the photograph again.

The door to the back room opened. The friendly bartender entered with two bottles of beer, and carefully closed the door behind him. He didn't speak until he was seated across from Mike.

"Fella," he drawled, "orders are out to pick you up for questioning, orders from Captain Carter, counter-signed by the Board of Commissioners. Now, don't get sore. No one believes you murdered your dad. I just came into ask you if there is anything I can do to help. Tony has his cab outside. You know that soon some of the boys will be coming over here for lunch. Orders are orders. If they don't see you, it's not their business."

"I get it." Mike gulped his beer. "Thanks, and thank Peter Cassidy, too. Tell Tony to bring his cab to the side door and take me for a drive in the suburbs. I have to think this thing out."

"O.K., Mike. No, don't pay me. It's on the house. And, Mike—"

"Yes?"

"Us guys are rooting for you, fella. Good luck!"

In the back of the suburban-bound cab, Mike relaxed. He had racked his brain for a solution that fitted the facts. None was forthcoming. He rested his head on the upholstery, and allowed his mind, as he often did in moments of despair, to review the happy days of his childhood, before the death of his mother. Sometimes, under those circumstances, his subconscious mind would come up with a solution to his problems.

He remembered his mother well. How she would hold him on her lap and read to him from his collection of fairy tales. He smiled at the thought, for he always wanted her to read from a book, thicker than the rest, that was on the narrow shelf that held their library, and she had read the most fascinating stories of all from that particular book. Not until years later, when he was patrolling the City Hospital beat and had met most of the personnel there, did he realize that his mother had manufactured the tales, for the book was his "Baby Book," a gift from the City Hospital to all mothers of babies born under its roof. A germ of an idea popped into Mike's head. Alert, he sat up.

"Say, Make," Tony, the driver, spoke without appearing to do so, "there's a prowler care on our tail. They ain't closin' with us, but they ain't lettin' me shake them, either."

Ahead of the cab, the spires of the City Hospital stood silhouetted against the bright sky. Its sprawling buildings covered five acres.

Mike O'Shea reached a decision. "Tony, drive to the office entrance of the hospital. I'll get out there."

"O.K. I'll slither around a bit, pausing at all the doors, and you can jump out before the tails catch you."

"That won't be necessary, Tony. Just drop me at the front entrance."

"O.K.! O.K.!"

The cab coasted to a stop. As Mike paid off the driver, he noticed the police cruiser pulling up behind them. Patrolman Jim Sweeney and Ed McGovern were in the front seat. Mike ignored them and entered the hospital. Jim Sweeney stepped from the prowler car and followed him into the building.

Mike walked slowly along the corridor to a room over which a sign lettered "Records" burned dimly. Without hesitation, he approached a dark-haired girl, one of many behind the counter.

"Hello, Nancy."

The girl looked up, her dark eyes flashing a welcome. "Hello, Mike, what brings you here? Surely, it isn't me, so don't bother turning on the blarney. Oh!" Her hand flew to her mouth. "Your father! I'm so sorry!"

"Skip it for now, Nancy. Can I look at some of the hospital records? I have an idea—"

"Mike, you know better than to ask that! The records are sacred. Nothing but a court order—"

"I know, Nancy. It isn't just curiosity. I'll get a court order, if necessary. But, in the meantime, a lot can happen. After all, the order is only a formality to balk the curious, and you know it."

"I know," the girl admitted with a sigh, and opened the latched gate in the counter. "Come in, Mike, and good-by job, Nancy."

Jim Sweeney, standing just inside the door of the record room, tried to ignore Mike O'Shea's presence as he emerged from the rows of files where the hospital's records were kept. But Mike refused to be ignored.

"Hello, Jim. You going toward headquarters?"

"I could," Jim admitted.

"Fine. How's for a lift that far?"

Mike O'Shea, with Jim Sweeney at his heels, entered headquarters. Peter Cassidy, the doorkeeper, smiled at Mike, and frowned at Sweeney.

"It's O.K., Pete," Mike said. "Everything's O.K., now."

"Glad to hear it, Mike. You don't know how glad I am."

Mike and Jim Sweeney headed down the corridor toward Captain Carter's office. Jim Sweeney pulled off his hat and mopped his forehead as they approached the door to the board room.

"Cripes, Mike, I'm glad to hear everything's O.K., or that you think it is. I didn't intend to pick you up, but I intended to stick with you until— Hey! You can't go in there. Captain Carter wants—"

The board room door slammed behind Mike O'Shea.

The three men were in a huddle over

a pile of papers spread out before them. They looked up when the door opened. Jack Portland's mouth popped open. Patrick Cullen grinned. Chauncey Blaine's expression was one of blank surprise.

"Where've you been, boy? We've been looking for you," Patrick Cullen said.

"I've solved the murder. I know who killed dad."

"You've solved—"

"Yes, sir. Will you have Captain Carter bring the suspects in again?"

"That I will." Patrick Cullen nodded to the secretary. "Now you, lad, tell us what happened. Who killed your father?"

"If you don't mind, Mr. Cullen, before I do, I'd like to ask Mr. Blaine why he dislikes me. Why he stopped my promotion?"

"That's easily explained, young man." Chauncey Blaine cleared his throat. "It's because of your tardiness. Your attendance sheet showed that out of the last thousand roll calls, you were late over three hundred times. Those last minutes were just the same as if you had put your hand into the taxpayers' pockets and removed money equal to the amount of time you lost."

Mike O'Shea recoiled as if he had been struck. "I . . . I . . . I've never been late for a roll call. It's a fetish with me to be on time. You can ask my district captain. Anyone in my district can tell—"

Jack Portland jumped to his feet. "Possibly, some papers in Patrolman O'Shea's record became mixed with those of another applicant for promotion. Perhaps—"

"Nonsense!" Chauncey Blaine snorted. "O'Shea's name was distinctly typed at the top of the sheet. I—"

Patrick Cullen turned noncommittal eyes on his fellow board members. "Forget it for the time being, gentlemen. Here is Captain Carter and the suspects."

The captain shuffled slowly into the room behind the three suspects. "Gentlemen, how can I help you? I'm a very busy man. I need every possible moment to prepare the evidence to hold young O'Shea when he is taken in— Oh, there you are, O'Shea."

"Just a minute, captain," Patrick Cullen snapped. "The lad says he has solved your case for you. That right, Michael?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then out with it."

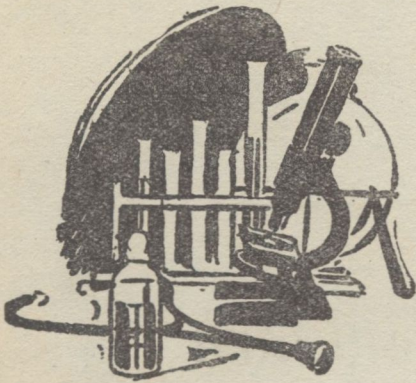
"Yes, sir. As all of us know, the only way an outsider could gain admittance to the Central Construction Co.'s building was by

way of one of the windows or the door opening onto the alley. And only four people used that alley. The three suspects and Mrs. Coleman. Mrs. Coleman is innocent, for I saw dad alive after she left. He closed the door behind her."

"You can't hang it on any of us." Wee Willie had lost his whine and become cocky. "You can't hang it on us on account of those prints found on the safe."

"Can't I, though!" Mike retorted. "Those prints on the safe will point out the guilty man, and they'll be the death of him!"

The three-man board and Captain Carter jerked erect. The suspects paled. Mike continued.



"This is what happened: The murderer had entered the building before Mrs. Coleman left. Dad always accompanied her as she cleaned. She cleaned the third-floor offices first, and worked down, cleaning the various smaller offices. While she was doing that, the murderer was opening the safe in the cashier's office, using gloves to prevent leaving fingerprints. That's why there are no prints on the handle of the safe. He had no trouble with that tin box."

"But the prints?" Wee Willie gasped.

"I'm coming to them. If the murderer hadn't tried to be too clever, he would have probably got away with it. The case might never have been solved. But the murderer had to be a little cleverer than was necessary. So he faked a set of prints in case he was seen leaving the building. He was getting ready to leave, with his pockets crammed with bills, when dad came back upstairs. Using a wrecking bar, which he either brought with him or picked up in the company's store room, he killed my father."

"But the prints? You still haven't ex-

plained whose they are, or how they were put there?" Captain Carter spluttered.

Mike grinned. "Captain, take the suspects down to identification, and take impressions of their toes. You will find a set of prints that will match those left on the safe dial. That is the only way a strange set of prints could have got on that dial in the brief time the murderer was in the building."

Patrick Cullen rose to his feet, and banged his gavel on the long table. "I suggest that every promotion made by this Board of Police Commissioners be temporarily rescinded, and all records of candidates for promotion, as well as the records of the successful candidates, be re-examined. Secretary, will you put that in the form of a motion?"

"I object!" Jack Portland jumped to his feet. "It would cause too much confusion. Good men like Captain Carter wouldn't know where they stood. They—"

"I second your motion, Mr. Cullen." Chauncey Blaine was emphatic.

"The motion has been made and seconded, secretary. Type it up as an order." He turned to Mike O'Shea. "Now, lad, tell us how you figured it out."

Mike smiled, "Well, sir, I knew the suspects weren't too smart, and I knew the murderer had neither the time nor the means to elaborately fake prints. The more I thought about it, the more puzzled I became. Then I remembered my own baby book. I remembered that my footprints were on the very first page. Large hospitals have been footprinting babies for years. Footprints, like fingerprints, never change."

"So the murderer took off his shoe, and put his footprint on the dial just to confuse the police."

"Yes. He knew he had probably been seen entering the alley, and he was. His fingerprints were on record. He took a long chance on getting clear because of his own unknown footprints. Perhaps he had done the same thing before."

"Well," Chauncey Blaine sighed, "we'll soon know who the rascal is. And I, personally, will see to it that he gets—"

"I can tell you who it is now, Mr. Blaine," Mike broke in.

"You can? Who?"

"The murderer is Ugly Uhle. I was first tipped off to him when Captain Carter said the cab driver who was sitting on Water Street saw Ugly enter the alley, Mrs. Coleman

leave, and Dirty Joe and Wee Willie Wade enter, in that order. When questioned more closely, he was not sure of the order or the time. But his subconscious mind made him give the correct answer without hesitation when first questioned. That put me onto Ugly Uhle. Then Mr. Cullen's crack about his looks caused him to say where he was born. When I left here, I went to the City Hospital and checked his history in their record room. It was Ugly Uhle who killed my father. There is no question about it. The prints of the tips of his toes matched the prints found on that safe dial."

"Humph!" Chauncey deL. Blaine cleared his throat. "Young man, I've an idea that there is about to be a responsible job vacant

in homicide. Now, I'm not promising you anything—please don't misunderstand me. You'll have to take an examination like all the rest, and if the matter of tardiness can be cleared up, why there's no telling—"

"There's no telling," Patrick Cullen grinned, and stuck out his hand. "Thanks, lad."

Jack Portland held out his hand. "Nice work, Patrolman O'Shea. I'll remember it when your examination papers are submitted for grading."

"That Portland," Patrick Cullen grinned. "Trust him to throw out his political net, even now when we are about to investigate some of the queer fish that have recently come out of it."

THE END

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## *City in the Dark*

The city feels the weight of nightmare hordes.

Darkness, silence, six thousand years of black  
Press down. All flames are dead, their bright, bare swords  
Trampled, trodden beneath the witches' track.

Two headlights drive their double fleshing wedge!

Shattered, shaken, the blackness reels in pain!  
The midnight cracks, as a dagger's slashing edge  
In a fabric will rend the cloth in twain.

Then black again. Back to the nameless feast,

Shouting, chanting, loud in a toneless tongue,  
Night's minions crawl. The dark, a tameless beast,  
Crouches, dreaming of times when earth was young.

SAMUEL M. SARGENT.



# Daffodil moon murders

By V. E. THIESSEN

*The farmers thought old Carter crazy with his talk of planting according to the phases of the moon, but time showed he was crazy like a fox —to the tune of many thousands of dollars.*

## I.

ED Fox lay across his bed, in that last minute of idleness before putting on his tie. He was looking at his red-headed wife, Fredrica.

"All those lily plants, acres and acres of them," Fredrica was saying. "I've never seen anything so green and beautiful."

"You should see a daffodil field in bloom, Ed said. "There's a gorgeous sight for you." He got up, wrapped his tie around his neck, knotted it efficiently. "So you think you'll like being a bulb farmer's wife?"

"I'll love it." Fredrica held her hand to the light and smiled at the two rings.

Ed kissed her, smearing her lipstick. "Wonder what dad's got up his sleeve?"

"Up his sleeve?" she repeated.

"Yes. You don't think this bulb growers' meeting is just for the neighbors to meet his daughter-in-law?"

"I hadn't thought much about it," Fredrica admitted.

"Well, I have. He's got something big up his sleeve. He's announced that he will read a monograph on planting and working daffodils in certain phases and lights of the moon."

"I didn't know your dad was superstitious." Fredrica looked at Ed questioningly.

"He's not. That's just it. When I left for the army five years ago, he was the

least superstitious man I knew. Now I come back ready to go into the bulb business myself, and I find he has developed the reputation of being a crackpot about moon phases, and working daffodils in the light of the moon. He's got something up his sleeve, and it's damned big, too, if you ask me."

"Better get your coat on," Fredrica urged. Your dad wanted us downstairs early, to meet the guests as they arrive."

"O.K." Ed shrugged into his coat. He wondered how many people there would be. Only a few of the neighboring bulb growers, his father had said.

He hoped there would not be too many new faces, and that the party would not last too long. Still, if he were to grow lilies and daffodils on the two acres he was buying from his father, the friendship of neighboring bulb growers was important.

Ed put his arm around his wife as they reached the top of the stairway. The smell of cooking and the rattle of pots and pans from the kitchen drifted up the stairway.

"Funny thing, your father acted as if he didn't expect to like me," Fredrica said.

"You noticed that? Well, you're right. When dad got my cable telling him we were married, he figured it was just another war marriage, and wrote me a pretty critical letter. He's always had a dream of me taking the two east acres, and settling down beside him to raise daffodil and lily

bulbs. He had even picked out his best friend's daughter for me. Dad figured you might ruin all his dreams."

"He needn't worry. We'll buy the land from him and raise bulbs. That's what you both want."

"I know. As soon as dad found out that you weren't going to try to run my life or change things, he liked you."

"I'm glad," Fredrica said, as they rounded the landing and started downstairs.

"Fredrica!" Ed's fingers tensed, bit deep into his wife's arm, felt the little quiver that ran through her. She, too, saw the form sprawled at the bottom of the stairs.

Ed loosed her arm, and dashed downstairs.

He dropped beside the motionless figure. He laid his hand gently on one shoulder and felt the rag-doll limpness.

"Dad!" he gasped. "What is it, dad?"

Then he saw that one side of his father's head was crushed.

"Don't look at him," Ed said quickly. "Don't look at him, Fredrica."

It was all he could do to force himself to look closely. His father held something clenched tightly in his right hand. Ed gently opened the hand.

The older man held the stem of a daffodil, a broken, crushed stem that bore testimony of how tightly he had gripped it. The flower had been torn off, leaving only the crushed stem.

Ed felt Fredrica's hand on his shoulder, grasping him. When he looked up he knew his expression must be mirrored in her eyes; they were wide with shock and horror.

"Steady, Ed." He could tell she was holding back the tears, trying to help him.

He closed his eyes, fighting the bleakness, the empty feeling. After a time he opened his eyes and looked at the reddish shafts of light glinting off his wife's hair. This faint odor of her perfume made him aware of her closeness and he breathed deeply, drawing some measure of strength from the familiar scent.

"I'll be all right now," he said "Dad was murdered, Fredrica. If he had fallen downstairs, we would have heard him."

Ed saw his wife's hand go to her mouth, very closely. He had the feeling that he was watching the act in slow motion. He could see her hand pressing hard against her mouth, lipstick smearing as she fought for her self-control.

"I'll call the police," he said swiftly. "Come on."

He rang the operator and got Deputy Sheriff Netz of the Crofton police on the phone. Netz's voice was high-pitched, smug, almost the tone of voice in which choice bits of gossip are exchanged. Ed did not like the voice.

He told himself not to be a fool, and sketched the situation tersely.

"I'll be right out," Netz assured him. "You hold everybody you see around there till I get there. Don't tell them nothin', just hold them."

"Right," Ed agreed, and hung up the phone. He took one quick step and put his arm around Fredrica. "The sheriff wants us to hold everyone, not to mention what's happened till he arrives. That means the guests, too, I guess. Can you do it?"

He felt the tension in his wife's body, felt, too, her strength as she replied, "If I have to. If it will help find the killer. How long will the sheriff be?"

"A half hour. It's ten miles to Crofton, dirt road."

Ed drew his wife into the single room that served as both living room and dining room. He closed the hall door, shutting them away from his father's body. He could hear the homy, routine sounds from the kitchen. A moment later a man came in carrying a steaming bowl of rice. He set the rice on the table and stared at Ed and Fredrica.

"Honey, I don't believe you've met Ivor," Ed said. "This is Ivor Huffman—my wife, Fredrica."

"How do you do." Fredrica held out her hand.

"Ivor has been with father for ten years," Ed explained, "ever since mother died. He lives in a little room off the potting shed and comes in to cook and keep house for dad."

Ed saw his wife's glance go around the house, and he suspected that according to feminine standards, Ivor was not a very good housekeeper.

He saw Fredrica flash her smile at the little man, enchanting him; yet knowing her, Ed sensed the strain in the smile.

"You do me honor." Ivor bowed low, with a continental flourish, an extreme of courtesy reserved for special occasions. He was a little man, with a red complexion, and bright, birdlike eyes.

"Chop suey?" Ed asked, sniffing.

"Sure, just as you always liked," Ivor



replied. "Better open that door, though, don't want to keep all the kitchen smell in here."

He started toward the hall door. He had short legs, and he walked in a series of mechanical jerks.

Ed tried to insert himself between Ivor and the door. Ivor paused once, looking at him. "What is it?"

Ed gulped, unable to think of an excuse.

Ivor shrugged, pushed past him and opened the door.

"Carter!" Ivor's cry was like a child's, shrill, surprised and hurt, "What is it, Carter?" He dropped on one knee.

"You knew this?" he asked Ed a moment later.

"We found him just a few minutes ago. I've called the police. We are to keep the guests here, tell them nothing."

Ivor closed the door, so gently there was no sound beyond the clicking of the latch. "The visitor must have killed him."

"What visitor?"

"While I was in the kitchen I heard someone knock and heard Carter answer the door. There were two voices muttering for a few moments. Then I heard the door open again. I was browning the meat for the chop suey and didn't look to see who was there."

"Did you recognize the voice?"

"I can't be sure, but I think tonight I can find out who killed him."

"Why, Ivor? Why would anyone kill him?"

Ivor shook his head, unwilling to explain. "I'll find who killed him."

"You'll tell the police what you know, Ivor?" Fredrica asked. "You'll help them all you can?"

"I better get the chop suey on," Ivor said. "Bulb growers will be here any minute."

"This is it," Ed said, as the door knocker clattered. "People are beginning to arrive. We have to be natural, as if nothing has happened, as if there has been no murder."

They stared at each other. Ed set his face into immobility and opened the door.

An old man and a young woman entered.

"Hello, Ed," the man said. "Glad to see you back."

"Mighty good to be back," Ed replied. He turned and greeted the young woman, "Hello, Flossie." She was dressed in a tight dress revealing a figure that was young, full, voluptuous.

"Hello, Ed. I've missed you." Flossie's eyes met Ed's. She smiled up at him, a smile that was friendly, inviting.

"Fredrica, this is Henry Billings and his daughter, Flossie," Ed explained. "Mr. Billings is one of father's oldest friends. Folks, this is my wife, Fredrica."

"Where is the old rascal?" Henry Billings asked. "What's he up to anyhow, with all this moon nonsense?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Ed saw his wife's hand form a small fist, knuckles whitening.

"He'll be back in a little while," Ed explained. "Someone came for him, and he had to leave. He asked me to receive the guests, and to go ahead and start dinner in case he didn't get back in time."

"What about this paper he was going to read about the effect of the moon. What's he up to anyhow?"

"All that will come later," Ed said. "Won't you sit down? Ivor is finishing up the chop suey, and the other guests should be here soon."

"Thank you." Henry Billings sat on one end of the sofa, Flossie sat at the other end, crossing one nylon-encased leg over another.

"Cigarette?" Ed proffered a half filled pack.

"Thanks." Flossie Billings took one, looking directly into Ed's eyes as he held his lighter for her. She drew in a deep breath, blew smoke into the room, and looked across at Fredrica.

"You, sir?" Ed held the pack toward Henry Billings.

"No, thank you. I never smoke."

"Of course. I had forgotten."

Ed saw the faint glance of surprise that his wife gave Henry Billings.

"Mr. Billings has none of our generation's vices," Ed said swiftly to his wife.

"I shouldn't exactly call them vices," Billings protested. "I simply never learned to smoke or drink." He smiled a saintly smile at Fredrica.

"You miss a lot of fun," Flossie said to her father, then turned to Fredrica. "I've been admiring your hair, Mrs. Fox. I wonder if you are going to find anyone here to do it properly?"

Ed saw his wife's smile become more fixed. "I do it myself," Fredrica murmured. "Just a plain lemon rinse."

"How interesting, and how fortunate for you, if you are going to live out here in the sticks with Ed." Flossie turned her attention to Ed.

"You *are* going to stay here, aren't you? It's all your father could talk about, once he knew you were coming."

"Yes. I'm buying the two east acres. You

know the little experimental plot is there."

"That's where Carter grows his moon daffodils," Henry Billings said.

"You mustn't be a hermit, now you're back." Flossie smiled at Ed, threw a glance at Fredrica. "Of course, I mean you, too, Mrs. Fox. You must come and see us, both of you. You needn't pay any attention to any talk you may hear. There hasn't been anything between Ed and I for years."

Ed thought. "Confound you, Flossie. There never was anything between us, at least not for long." He looked across the room at Fredrica's fixed expression and winked at her. He saw one little line of her mouth move, as the tension went out of her.

The rattling of the door knocker made him jump. "Excuse me," he said and went to open the door.

He did not know the man who stood outside. He waited, saying nothing, and the man pushed on into the living room. He was middle-aged, dark. He had sleek black hair that looked as if it had never been mussed or rumpled. He wore a driving glove on his right hand, and carried the left one.

There was a moment of awkward silence, then Flossie gurgled in amusement.

"Of course. Carle is new here. You don't know him," Flossie said. "Carle, this is Carter's son, Ed. That lovely red-headed thing you're staring at is his wife. Ed, this is Carle Holt; he bought the old Stromberg place last year."

"The old Stromberg place? That's across from the mail carrier's house, isn't it?" Ed asked, recalling the geography of the neighboring farms.

"Yes," Carle Holt agreed. "The mail carrier and I are neighbors. Lin ought to be along any minute. He was just getting into his car as I left my place."

The knocker clattered and Ed opened the door to admit the local mail carrier, Lin Blake.

"Evening, Ed," Lin greeted. "Howdy, everybody."

"This is Lin Blake," Ed introduced the man to Fredrica. "Lin, this is my wife, Fredrica."

Lin smiled. "Pretty name, Fredrica Fox." He looked around and settled himself in a chair next to Fredrica.

Small conversation began to float between the guests.

Carle Holt asked suddenly, "Got a match, Ed?"

"Here." Ed flicked his pocket lighter.

Over the flame Holt murmured, "Like to

talk to you if we can get a corner to ourselves."

"Sure." Ed drew him aside to a pair of chairs in one corner of the room.

"About that two east acres of Carter's," Holt said abruptly.

"Yes."

"I've been trying to buy them from your dad. He says he's saving them for you, won't sell at any price. I thought maybe you'd consider a trade, after you get them. I've some good land, down the valley, and I'd pay a good bit of difference, just to get my holdings nearer together."

"Sorry," Ed said shortly. "I'm not interested."

"I could make it mighty worth your while. After all, it might be better for you two, newly married and all, not to be too close to your dad."

"You don't have enough money to make me sell out one of dad's ideas," Ed said bluntly.

"O.K., if that's the way you feel about it." Holt shrugged his shoulders.

The door knocker clattered brazenly, imperiously.

"This has to be the sheriff," Ed thought. He looked across the room at his wife, noticing that already her smile was wearing thin.

When he opened the door, relief surged over him in a flood of emotion. A star glittering on the coat of the man who stood outside told him this was the law at last.

Sheriff Netz was thin, tall, emaciated, with a complexion like brittle brown paper. He thrust abruptly past Ed into the room with its high-pitched imperiousness. "You must be Ed Fox, I know the rest of these fellers. I'm Bill Netz, the deputy sheriff of Crofton. Where's the body?"

"Body!" Henry Billing came up from the couch in a swift reaction.

"Yes, body!" Sheriff Netz said. "One of you killed Carter Fox, and I aim to find which one. I'm warning you, none of you leave this room till I say you can."

Henry Billings ran one hand through his white hair in a sort of childlike bewilderment. His daughter Flossie seemed, for the first time, to be utterly incapable of thought or movement.

In the corner, Carle Holt stabbed the butt of his cigarette into an ash tray, looked tensely at Ed, and Ed knew he was thinking of the offer he had just made.

Ivor Huffman came in with a bowl of steaming chop suey.

"Might as well take that back to the kitchen," Netz commanded. "Nobody eats till I get through questioning them."

"Not that anyone wants to eat," Flossie Billings told him sharply. "But that star doesn't make you quite as important as you think."

"I'm the law, young lady, better remember that," Netz shrilled at her.

"Come along, sheriff," Ed said, breaking the tension. He opened the door leading into the hall.

Netz scowled at the body, bent to look at the crushed head, then looked up the stairway.

"Don't seem like a fall would have bashed in his head like that," he commented.

"He didn't fall downstairs," Ed told him. "Fredrica and I were in the room upstairs. We would have heard him fall."

"Yeah," the deputy grunted. After a moment's examination he rose. "Doctor'll be here directly. I don't reckon he'll help much, though. It's plain to see he had his head bashed in. Right-handed feller done it, too."

The guests had all gathered in the doorway. They stood gaping at the body, unable to speak. Netz herded them back into the living room, and closed the door behind them.

"I want to talk to you one at a time. I'll use the kitchen. You come in first, Mrs. Fox." He pulled thin lips back, revealing tobacco-stained teeth in a grim smile.

Conversation languished. Ed found memories crowding thoughts of when he had last seen these people, before he had gone into the army. He could see his father's face as it had been then, and the memory was a sharp, painful thing.

He jerked his thoughts from this memory. He must watch the reactions of the persons in the room. His father's murderer might be among them.

They were all nervous. Watching them, one by one, as they went to be questioned, Ed was unable to reach a conclusion regarding any of them.

Finally, it was finished. The sheriff came into the living room. "You can all go home now," he told them.

"There's plenty of food, in case anyone is hungry," Ed suggested.

Nobody was hungry, though. The guests left, quietly, hurriedly.

"Did you learn anything?" Ed inquired when the last one had gone.

Sheriff Netz stood wide-legged and truculent. "Nobody had any reason to kill him, unless you had a reason."

"Don't be a damn fool," Ed said wearily.

"I reckon he fell and hit his head on the bottom step."

"I tell you, we would have heard him."

"Had the door shut, your wife says."

"We could hear a man fall downstairs, door open or shut."

"Newly married, ain't you? Honey-mooners. Might a-been billin' and cooin' and not heard the house fall down."

"Why, you—" Ed began hotly.

"I'll see about having the body picked up. There'll be an inquest, of course." Netz leered at Ed. "Good night, Mr. Fox."

## II.

LATER, the ambulance came for Carter Fox's body. Ed stood staring out the upstairs window, watching the lights of the ambulance receding in the darkness.

Beside him, Fredrica laid her hand on his arm. "Better get some sleep, Ed. You'll need all the strength you have for tomorrow."

"I can't sleep," Ed grated. "My mind keeps circling, questioning. I keep wondering who, and why." He looked at his wife. "I'm going back to the potting shed to Ivor's room and ask him what he knows. I'll make him tell me somehow."

"You don't think I'm going to stay here in the dark alone, do you?" Fredrica protested. "I'm going, too."

"Come along. Maybe we can get to the bottom of this. That fool Netz never will, I'm sure of that."

They slipped into coats and went out the back door of the house. The moon was just rising, an orange blob of color that silhouetted tall Oregon firs behind the house. Among the firs the ridge line of a small building jutted blackly against the horizon.

"It's only a hundred yards," Ed said. "There's a path through the trees." He snapped the switch of his flashlight and white light lanced along the carpet of fir needles.

Holding Fredrica by the hand, Ed went up the path to the potting shed. There was no light in the single room that was the core of the structure.

"Gone to bed," Ed grunted. "I'll wake him, anyhow." He rapped smartly on the door, the panel amplifying the blow to a small thundering. There was no reply.

Ed thundered again on the panel, and called, "Ivor! Hey, Ivor. Open up." There was no answer, and Ed pushed the door open and flashed his light inside.

He shut the door again, very quickly, backing away from it, blocking the inside from Fredrica's sight.

"Not here," he said swiftly. "Guess he's gone somewhere."

Ed could feel the tension in Fredrica's hand all the way back along the path; knew she suspected something was wrong. Inside the house he said, "Go on up to bed, and I'll join you in a moment. I want to make a phone call."

He waited till she had vanished through the doorway to the stairs; then got Sheriff Netz on the phone.

"I have more bad news for you," he said swiftly. "Somebody bashed Ivor's head in the same as dad's."

When he turned from the telephone, he saw that Fredrica had not gone upstairs. She stood in the doorway, looking at him with wide, frightened eyes.

Sleep, slow coming, was like a drug. Ed knew it was late morning, and that his telephone was shrilling, but the mantle of drowsiness was heavy.

Again and again the telephone rang, till at last he struggled awake, and hurried drowsily down the stairs to answer it.

"This is Oscar Mills, your father's lawyer," a voice told him. "I heard of your misfortune, and am sorry to have to intrude upon you. Unfortunately, however, the pressure of time does not permit the usual courtesies. The bank informs me that they have sold the mortgage on Carter Fox's property, and that the new owner intends to demand payment within the week, or start foreclosure."

"Mortgage?"

"Yes. Didn't you know?"

"No," Ed said slowly, "I didn't know."

"Carter Fox borrowed ten thousand dollars on his land there. The mortgage was due yesterday."

"Ten thousand— What on earth for?"

"I couldn't say. At any rate, you know about the danger of foreclosure."

"How are the chances of getting a new loan?"

"Rather poor, I'm afraid. Carter borrowed the limit when bulb prices were booming. Now, the new bulbs are coming in from Holland and Japan, and the banks are hesitant about large loans. You can get five thousand, maybe six, but not ten."

"Thanks," Ed said dully. "Can you arrange for me to see dad's records at the bank?"

"I think so. When would you like to come in?"

"I'll be there by noon." Ed hung up the receiver slowly. The events of the night before, buried in the solace of sleep, were sharp in his mind again. He had the sense of being oppressed by some inexplicable malignity without reason, too deep for him to understand.

He walked slowly back upstairs. Fredrica lay, asleep, one hand flung above her head.

Ed looked at her a moment, debated waking her and decided against it. He should be back from town within an hour or two. She might not even wake before he returned.

He scribbled a note telling her he had gone to the bank, propped it up where she would see it, and dressed hurriedly.

It took him twenty-five minutes to drive the ten miles to Crofton. The roads were dirt, washboardy, and he drove slowly, trying to put facts together in his mind.

At the bank he found they were expecting him. The records were available, and inspecting them, the reason for the mortgage immediately became apparent.

Carter Fox had cashed a check for two thousand dollars every January for five years. The checks had been made to cash, and there was no record where the money had gone.

It began to look as if the clue to his father's death lay somewhere in the past, in hidden facts, in blackmail. Ed wondered how this tied up with his father's sudden conversion to moon superstitions. The conviction was slowly growing in his mind that the superstition and the blackmail were intricately linked together, linked into a wierd pattern of death.

"About the mortgage," Ed said. "I should like to refinance the property."

The banker shook his head. "I'm afraid we couldn't loan much more than half the present mortgage. The inflow of foreign bulbs is going to knock property values down quite a lot."

"What did dad figure on doing about the loan?"

"I don't know. He did say there was nothing to worry about, that he was good for it when it came due."

"Who owns the mortgage?"

"An investment firm in Portland. They probably bought it for some private investor."

Ed left Crofton in a maze of bewilderment. An additional call to his father's lawyer had shed no light on any source of wealth that was not known, yet from his

own observation Ed knew his father had not been worried before his death; in fact, he had been jubilant, as if he had just found the key to a fortune.

Ed was unaware of the bumps and dust as he drove thoughtfully home. Two miles from home the Billings farm lay on his left, and he could see the figure of a woman in a bright print dress standing in the yard. In the distance, on the next rise, his father's house showed against the horizon.

Flossie was waiting for him when he reached the junction of the county road and the Billings' own road.

She stood in the dust of the road, a little breathless from running. He had to stop the car.

"Hello, Ed." She smiled up at him.

"Hi, Flossie. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing in particular. Just wanted to talk to you."

"I have to go in a minute," Ed said. "I left Fredrica alone in the house. She was asleep when I left."

Flossie's glance lifted over the valley to gaze at the Fox house. "A half hour won't do her any harm. Come on in the house for a drink, Ed. Father is in town, and I want to talk to you alone."

"I really haven't time, Flossie."

He watched her full red lips make a little pout. "Ah, come on. You didn't used to be so stingy with yourself."

Ed looked steadily into her eyes. "Get this straight, Flossie. There never was anything between us. There never can be now. You'll have to leave me alone."

Her eyes flashed. "Pig!" she shot out hotly. Then her voice changed, softening again. "Come on in for a drink, Ed. I promise you won't be sorry."

Temper rose in Ed, temper and disgust. He said shortly, "I was interested in you once, Flossie, might even have married you. Now do you understand?"

"Pig! You're a pig, Ed Fox, like your father was before you. You Foxes seem to think you're a bunch of angels, and you're nothing but pig, dirty, filthy pigs!" Her eyes flashed with rage.

Ed knew, watching her, that he had forever made her his enemy. He reached through the open window of the car. His fingers clutched her arm, and pulled her toward him.

"What do you mean, I'm like my father? You been working on him, too?"

"Let me go, you pig? Let me go." She jerked her arm free, whirled, swishing her

dress, and walked insolently up the driveway to the house, her hips swinging brazenly as she walked.

Ed treadled the starter, and the motor whirred back to life. He backed the car a few feet, gunned the motor and tore up the driveway after her in a cloud of dust.

She had reached the house as he got there. He slammed on the brakes viciously, cut the motor, and got out.

She was in the living room of the house, facing him as he slammed angrily inside the house. Her eyes were hot with anger.

"You get out of this house!"

He walked toward her, seized her shoulders. "What's this about dad? What do you know about him?"

"I'll never tell you."

He shook her so hard that her head flew back limply, drunkenly, shoved her away so that she fell on the sofa; half lying, half sitting, facing him. Her eyes were filled with terror.

He came over to the sofa, put the tips of his fingers gently, very delicately, against the smooth skin of her neck.

"Ed! I've never seen you like this," she gasped.

His fingers did a delicate tracery on her neck. He said softly, "What did you say you knew about my father?"

"You wouldn't choke me, would you, Ed? I'm afraid of you."

Ed looked at her, stared at the fear in her face. "Why did you call dad a pig? Tell me!"

She tried to speak, but could not get the words past the lump in her throat.

Very gently, his fingers pressed tighter.

"Ed! You're going to kill me, like someone killed your father."

"Why did you say that about my father? Why did you call him a pig?"

Words tumbled out, fear-driven, careless of consequence. "Carter caught me in a pick-up truck, parked in the woods yesterday, just before you got home."

"Who were you with?"

"Carle Holt. Carter cursed me, called me names, said he was glad you hadn't married me. He threatened to tell my father. I hated Carter for catching me. That's all I know."

"You said my dad wasn't so good himself."

"I just meant that he was crazy. Everybody knew he was crazy, with his talk of the moon's rays on daffodils. That's all I meant, Ed."

He stood up, looked down at her fear-

ridden body. "You better watch yourself. One of these days your father is going to find out what you are like. He's a good man, Flossie, too good for this world, but if he finds you out he'll kick you out of his house."

"He won't find out." Fear was leaving her, to be replaced with defiance. "Damn you, Ed Fox, my life is my own! What I do is none of your business."

"That's the way I want it." Ed felt sick, disgusted, as he walked to the car. He drove home as rapidly as the road would permit.

Fredrica was on the porch, and came running to meet him. The afternoon sun sent reddish glints from the high spots of her hair. She seized him, clung to him.

"I was so lonely when I woke up and found you gone. I've missed you terribly, darling."

Emotion swelled in Ed. He crushed her, hard, against him and slid one hand over her hair. It was as if it were aflame, sending warmth into him, cauterizing the unclean feeling in him with its fire.

"What did you find out?" Fredrica asked, over the steaming cups of coffee in the kitchen.

Ed summarized tersely the mortgage situation, the yearly checks, the hopelessness of another loan.

"Your father wasn't worried, Ed," she said. "He must have had some plan in mind."

"I don't know," Ed said, discouraged. "We can search his papers and find out."

Fredrica was looking at him with an odd expression in her eyes. "Is that all you learned?"

"All?" Ed asked, puzzled by the question. "What do you mean?"

"I was upstairs, watching the road for you to come home. I saw you stop and talk to Flossie Billings, then go inside with her. I thought perhaps she had told you something about your father."

"She did. It doesn't help much. I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind."

"Of course, Ed." She didn't look at him.

For a moment anger surged in him. How could she think he was interested in another woman, as soon as this after their marriage? The anger passed as swiftly as it had come. He remembered Flossie's innuendos the night before and realized that his own unwillingness to explain must make her wonder about things. After all, she had a right to share things with him now. He opened his mouth, to tell her about Flossie, and realized suddenly that he could not do it.

"Come on," he said abruptly.

"Where?"

"I've had enough of ugliness. I'm going to take you to the experimental plot, the two east acres. I want you to see a plot of daffodils in bloom."

### III.

THEIR car wound over a hummocky trail, fir needle carpeted. Westward, the sinking sun threw a ruby haze through the firs. Along the trail, between the fir trees, daffodil plants bathed in the ruby sunlight. There were no blooms here.

"These have been cut," Ed said. "The blooms must be cut before they go to seed in order to preserve the bulbs. Just over the hill is dad's experimental plot. Dad lets them bloom there, collects pollen and makes crosses."

They turned up over a hill, descended.

Fredrica gave a little gasp. "Oh, how beautiful!"

The yellow trumpets of King Alfred daffodils caught the rays of the setting sun, held them and threw them back in chest-swelling beauty. Here and there some new variation of white or yellow clustered about a fir tree.

"It's beautiful," Fredrica said again.

"Funny," Ed murmured.

"What?"

"Some of these have been cut. All through the blooms are daffodils that have been cut. Dad used to let everything bloom here."

Ed got out of the car, dropped to his knees, and inspected several of the small plots.

When he came back to Fredrica, his expression was one of astonishment. "This must be dad's moon experiment. Every fourth daffodil has had its bloom cut off. They're cut very carefully, too; you have to look closely to be sure. This experimental plot is about a tenth of an acre of usable soil. That means, at fifty thousand bulbs to the acre, there must be about four or five thousand bulbs here. Dad must have five hundred or a thousand of his specially cut bulbs here. The whole thing has to make sense, somehow."

"Sense?" Fredrica said. "Why should anything so beautiful make sense?"

Ed put his arm around her, looked at her, sympathy flooding him. "How have you stood this mixed-up week?"

She turned her lips up, and he felt the warmth of her love when he kissed her.

"Lood, Ed," she said, "where the sunset hits those daffodils. They seem almost pink."

Ed stared at her, wide-eyed, "By the gods of beauty, you've hit it. By Heaven, you've hit it," he said.

"Hit it?"

"Pink daffodils. That's what dad did. He found the perfect pink daffodil." Ed looked at Fredrica, astounded, marveling. "Five hundred or a thousand bulbs. That means he must have started ten years ago. Oh, the old fox! Effect of the moon—The clever, practical old rascal."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we needn't worry about money any more. Come on back to the house, and I'll tell you what I think."

His mind whirled, as he drove back. Everything clicked into place.

Back in the house, Ed explained: "Growers have been looking for a good pink daffodil for years. Some pale varieties have been found. Some pink tinges, but no one has ever found a deep, true pink daffodil. Dad must have found it, ten years ago. He was working on it then, when I was a kid in high school."

"Would a pink daffodil be worth money?"

"Would it be worth money! It would be pure gold, that's all. Look at the King Alfred daffodils you saw. There's a million-dollar crop of those bulbs harvested every year. Bulb growing is a big business. Van Der Graaf, one of the big growers, sold a new variety for ninety thousand dollars a few years ago."

"But why the moon phases, Ed? Did they have something to do with developing the pink daffodil?"

"Not with discovering it, with concealing its discovery. You see daffodil bulbs are grown by clones; that is, they divide each year, so that each year your stock doubles. You can see that it would take a number of years to get any quantity of new bulbs, from a single fortunate cross. But instead of announcing his discovery, dad began to increase his stock. He figured on getting a good stock of bulbs, then selling a bunch of them at fabulous prices. He could get huge prices for half of them, save half, and still keep four or five years in advance of the growers who bought starting bulbs from him.

"It was easy at first to conceal his discovery, just to keep the blooms clipped so that no one would see one of the pink flowers. But as his stock grew to several hundred, it was difficult to clip so carefully

without arousing suspicion. So he faked this moon superstition, to let him work at night, clipping and destroying the unopened buds, with no one to see or care what he was doing. Just a crackpot, he let people believe, and all the time he was building a fortune."

"Your father," Fredrica interrupted. "He had a daffodil stem in his hand when we found him. Do you suppose—"

"Of course," Ed said. "That was the announcement he was going to make about his discovery. He must have had a daffodil in full bloom. He was going to show us the perfect pink daffodil."

"And the bloom was torn off. That means the killer has an idea of trying to get the bulbs."

"Of course," Ed said thoughtfully. "The mortgage, that's it. That's the answer. Whoever bought the mortgage from the bank is connected with the killer."

"Do you suppose that's it, Ed? Do you suppose it is as simple as that?"

"I don't know," Ed replied. "There's one person that might throw some light on the matter; dad's friend, Henry Billings."

"Let's go ask him."

"I'd better go alone. He may not talk with you there. Suppose you scout around the house, look in dad's bible, and places like that, see if you can find any letters, or notes that might prove we are right."

Ten minutes later, Ed was parking in the yard of the Billings place. Henry Billings, inspecting bulbs in a lean-to off the back of the house, waved a hand in greeting.

"Hi, Ed. Come on over."

"Henry, I want to talk to you about my father. I thought as his best friend you might know a couple of things."

"Sure, let's go into the house."

Ed sat in an overstuffed chair, lighted a cigarette, as he considered the best way to approach the facts. He decided to ask about the bulbs first.

"Did dad ever hint to you of a great bulb discovery?"

Henry Billings furrowed his brows. "Not till a day or two ago. I think anyone who knew him knew there was something in the wind then. He had an air of suppressed excitement— You know what I mean."

He had a daffodil in his hand to show us when he was killed. The killer tore the flower off. It was a perfect pink daffodil."

"A perfect pink. Good Heaven, man, you don't meant it!"

Watching him, Ed wondered if his surprise were genuine. "Another thing"—Ed

changed the subject abruptly. "Someone was blackmailing him. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes," Henry Billing said. "I do know a little about that. He talked to me about it. About five years ago, he came to me and asked me what I thought about blackmail, whether one should pay it if it were financially profitable to do so. I told him I would not, personally, but that circumstances would alter cases. He seemed about to tell me about it, then changed his mind, and said something about that he might as well pay till you came home from the war. That it wasn't really blackmail. Just sort of protecting an investment."

"How much was this protection?"

"Two thousand a year."

"Could he afford it?"

"He could at first, but I've worried about it for the last few years. Last year he mortgaged his place, and I asked him about it. He said not to worry. I worried though, for he wasn't making two thousand a year on land that ought to make ten thousand. He neglected everything, puttering around with some sort of craziness about planting daffodils in the right phase of the moon."

"Will this theory hold water?" Ed asked.

"Dad had discovered the perfect pink daffodil. He was getting a small stock of bulbs together, neglecting everything else. Five years ago, someone found out what he was doing, threatened to make his discovery known. He was afraid of theft, once it was known, so he chose to pay the money for silence, as an investment, till he could get a good stock on hand. Then, too, he wanted me to be here when he announced the discovery."

"Possible," Henry admitted. "Still it seems quite foolish. It's like Carter though, the shrewdness about the moon, and the foolishness of paying blackmail because he wanted you to share his triumph. That was Carter, shrewd as his name, but too tender-hearted for his own good."

Henry rose. "I keep a diary. Maybe if I check over it, I can find some clue to help with your idea."

There was a knock on the door. Henry Billings went out of the room to the front entrance to answer the knock.

"Hello, Ed." Flossie entered the dining room from the kitchen. She came across the room, swinging her hips. "I saw you come up," she said. "I was upstairs looking out the window. Saw your wife, too, hiking up the road. That must be her at the door."

"Fredrica?" Ed got up suddenly to go to the door. Flossie stood close to him, suddenly brushed his lips with hers. "Darling," she said.

He thrust her from him, harshly. Fredrica and Henry Billings stood in the doorway, gaping at them.

Fredrica's eyes were clouded, hurt. Ed saw her start to speak, but instead she thrust a sheaf of letters toward him.

"Here, Ed." She had found her voice, was keeping it even with an effort of will. "I couldn't wait, once I found these, so I walked over to give them to you. I can see I shouldn't have been so impatient."

He took the papers, searching for words. He saw tears come into her eyes; then she whirled, ran from the room. He took a quick step after her, but Flossie grabbed him, clinging to his arm. Her eyes gleamed with mischievous satisfaction.

He heard his car roar into life outside, and he knew that Fredrica had her set of keys, and was taking the car. He hurled Flossie from him, roughly, brutally, looked at Henry Billings.

"Better keep this daughter of yours away from me," he said harshly, "or I may do something I'll be sorry for later."

Ed whirled, rushed through the door. He got outside in time to see the car take the rise toward Crofton.

He thought, "She'll be back in a few hours. Once the shock wears off she'll start thinking. She'll know it was a frame." He looked at the letters she had given him, grunted in satisfaction, thrust them into his pocket, and began to walk up the road toward home.

A car came up over the hill, zoomed down toward him. It was new, shiny, with vast areas of chromium plate. It slid softly to a halt in the dust of the road. The sleek face of Carle Holt looked out at Ed. "Want a lift?"

"Thanks." Ed got into the car.

The motor purred and the car slid easily forward. Carle Holt wore driving gloves, and drove with one hand. "Pretty smooth bus, eh?" Holt said. "I had to give a bonus of a thousand to get it, but it's worth it."

"Nice to be able to afford that," Ed said, hardly aware of what Holt was saying.

"Sure," Holt agreed. "I took thirty thousand clear profit this year off a couple acres of Croft lilies. I guess an extra thousand won't break me."

The car slid to a halt. Ed got out,



thanked Holt, and walked up to the house.

Inside, he went through the house to be sure he was alone. He got the papers from his pocket, spread them out on the table.

They were proof that his guess had been right. They contained offers to buy starting bulbs of the pink daffodil. There was ever a letter from Holland, and one from a house in England. Altogether, they represented a market for about a hundred bulbs, and the average price was around five hundred dollars. They represented the biggest bulb bonanza since the discovery of the Croft lily.

Ed went to the telephone and called the bank. "Who holds the mortgage on this place now?" he asked the banker.

"Finker Trust and Investment Co. Confidentially, Ed, they're not much good. We found that out after we had already sold them some of our paper."

"Did they buy for themselves?"

"I couldn't say. They're probably just a front."

Ed pondered as he hung up the receiver. Whoever was behind this effort to get the pink daffodil had displayed a rather thorough knowledge of Carter Fox's doings all along. It looked as if it were someone close to him. It might have been Ivor Huffman; except, of course, that Ivor had been killed.

Ed bundled the letters together, and put them in his pocket. If only Fredrica would return. He wanted to talk to her about this.

Minutes dragged into hours. Ed sat, his mind recalling the scene at the Billings house. It was inconceivable that Fredrica could have taken Flossie seriously.

Long after midnight Ed gave up and went to bed. He set his alarm for four in the morning. Finally, after much turning and twisting, he drifted into the realm of sleep.

He sprang out of bed at the first tinkle of the alarm, snapped on the light and began to dress. Fredrica had not returned. Fear lay in him, a fear too acute to put into words. He grabbed the bundle of letters, stuffed them into his pocket, and without bothering to shave, went out into the still dark outdoors.

When he reached the highway in front of the house it was about four thirty. About four forty-five a car sounded and lights flashed over the hill. He stepped out of the road, flagged the car.

"Morning, Lin," he said to the driver.

"I thought you might still be on the same schedule. Could I ride in to town with you?"

"Sure thing. Hop in." Lin Blake, the mail carrier, shifted the car into gear, heading toward Crofton. "Yep, I still go in before daylight, pick up the mail. Train schedule hasn't changed, comes in at four, the mail is put up by five, and if I get right out with it I can be back to my bulb farm by nine in the morning."

"I figured I could ride with you," Ed said. "Wanted to ask you a couple of questions."

"Fire away."

"Remember these?" Ed got out the letters that Fredrica had given him, and displayed the envelopes.

"Sure thing, especially that one from Holland. We don't get much foreign mail."

"Did you deliver them to dad personally?"

"Can't say for sure. Sometimes he was up at the house, I get there around six. Sometimes I just left the mail in the box."

"As far as you knew he was alone when he got these?"

"I couldn't say. Sometimes Ivor was with him."

The dark, unlighted bulk of Crofton lay ahead. "Better drop me at the railroad station," Ed directed.

At the station Ed saw he had been right. His car was parked at the side of the station. He went inside and beat on the glass to rouse the attention of the man who was dozing in the telegraph office.

"Yeah," the operator said. "There was a red-headed girl went out on the train last night. I don't exactly remember where she was going, but I noticed her. She was a looker, all right. The ticket agent will be down in a couple of hours. He can probably tell you where she got her ticket to."

He came in about eight o'clock. "Yeah, I sold her a ticket to Los Angeles on the *West Coast* streamliner last night."

"Gone! Fredrica was gone! The fear in Ed became a dull, certain ache. The murder of his father no longer seemed important. Pink daffodils didn't matter. He had to find Fredrica and set this right between them.

"When does the next train leave for Los Angeles?" he asked.

A hand touched him on his shoulder and he glanced around.

"Hello, Ed."

Sheriff Netz was looking at him, without expression on his face.

"Never mind about that train, Ed," Netz said.

"What do you mean?"

"Sheriff and I want to talk to you. Come on down to the station."

At the station Ed met the sheriff of Crofton, a big, ruddy-complexioned man. "Want to ask you about this, Mr. Fox," the sheriff rumbled. Netz perched himself on the edge of the desk, watched Ed with the expression of a boy pulling wings off a fly.

Ed took the letter the sheriff pushed across the table. It was in his own handwriting, addressed to his father. It had been written just after Ed's marriage, in response to a letter from his father. Glancing over it, Ed wondered how he could have been so hot-tempered.

"I wrote it," Ed said. "Dad had written criticizing my wife. He hadn't even met her. I was pretty hot when I wrote this."

"Guess you were," Netz agreed. "Guess you were mad enough to bash him over the head, when you got a chance."

"Easy, Netz," the sheriff cautioned. "Just being angry doesn't mean murder. There's usually a better motive than that."

"Let's lock him up," Netz suggested. "Search him and lock him up, till we get to the bottom of this. He was about to get out of town, anyway."

"Was, huh?" The sheriff furrowed heavy brows at Ed. "I don't like to do this, son, but I guess we'll have to sort of hold you as a material witness. Got to have you at the inquest tomorrow. Look him over, Netz, and see if he has anything on him that will help explain the murder."

The whole thing was like a nightmare. They searched him, took the letters regarding the pink daffodil from his pocket.

"Letters," Netz said. "Letters from Holland and England." He opened the letters, glanced through them, and looked at Ed with a gleam in his eye.

"Here's the motive, chief," he said. "Money." He threw the letters on the table in front of the sheriff.

The sheriff read the letters thoughtfully. "What about your wife?" he asked Ed. "Was she in on this?"

Ed's eyes were filmed with a new fear. "No," he said quickly. "She didn't know anything about it."

In his cell it struck him all at once. There was more than the danger of con-

viction of murder. Even though he succeeded in raising money on the pink daffodil in time to forestall the mortgage, it would be too late. He knew as surely as he knew that he was here in jail, that tonight there would be a shovel working in the two east areas, and that by morning the last of the pink daffodil bulbs would be in the back of someone's car, gone.

He began screaming for the sheriff. Finally, he raised a turnkey. "Sheriff's not here," the man said shortly. "He's gone out to the Holt place. Don't expect he'll be back today."

"Then get me Sheriff Netz."

"Deputy Sheriff Netz went to Los Angeles after a woman. Nobody is here."

"Get the sheriff on the phone." Ed raved. "I've got to talk to him."

The turnkey laughed and walked away.

Ed sat, on the edge of the cot, mind whirling. There had to be some way to beat this. With Netz on the way to Los Angeles, and the sheriff running down some false clue, there was no one to help him. In some way he had to get outside help.

It seemed too easy. Before his mind had even stopped whirling, the turnkey was back again. With him was Carle Holt.

"Heard you were here," Holt said. "Thought I'd drop in and see if there was anything I could do."

"There's a lot you can do," Ed told him. "How would you like a piece of the biggest bulb discovery since the Croft lily?"

"For what?"

"A quarter interest for twenty-five thousand dollars and your help for the next twenty-four hours."

Holt shook his head. "That's a better offer than I have," he said "but my word is given. Wish I could deal with you."

His words threw fear again into Ed. What if he had figured this wrong. What if—

"I'll be out to your place tonight," Holt said. "If you get to worrying, just remember I'll be there."

Ed gaped at him. "Why my place?"

"The pink daffodils are there, aren't they? I wouldn't want to lose my share of the pink daffodils. Don't worry, pal." Holt smiled easily, left Ed staring after him.

After the third time, the turnkey wouldn't even answer Ed's calling. By afternoon he had exhausted himself.

He spent the night gazing at the wall. Bitterness lived in him, fear gnawed at him.

He had lost his father and his land, his father's discovery. He might even lose his life. But worse than all that was the thought of Fredrica. He had lost Fredrica, too.

Time was a haze without meaning. Darkness came and went. Dim morning light entered his cell. He thought at first it was a dream. The woman stood, slim figured, outside his cell. Her face was familiar, beloved. He stared at her uncomprehending.

"Ed! Ed! don't you see me?"

He leaped for the bars. He had hold of her arms. Her lips were against his face. "Fredrica," he gasped.

She said, "We caught him digging daffodil bulbs last night. You know who it was, of course."

Ed nodded. "It could have been only one man. What does he say?"

"About the murder, nothing. The sheriff says he will have to hold you both till he can get to the bottom of it. But the theft points out the motive for murder."

"I thought you were angry, had gone home to Los Angeles."

"I'm sorry, Ed. I thought at first the Billings were the ones to watch. The whole thing was so obvious. I figured they were trying to break up our marriage, so I gave them what they wanted. Took the streamliner, got off at the next town, and called Carle Holt."

"Why Carle?"

"We had to have money for the mortgage. He had money and didn't mind taking a chance. He seemed to be the logical one. I got him to pay off the mortgage for some of the bulbs."

"Go on," Ed said softly.

"That's about all. When I heard you had been arrested, I knew the killer had found out the mortgage had been paid, and with you in jail he would try stealing the bulbs. I had men waiting to get him."

"About the murder," Ed said. "I know how we can make him confess. Try this every hour." He leaned forward, whispered swiftly.

He watched her slim figure recede, wondered how he deserved her. His panic of the night before was replaced by courage, the knowledge that his plan for forcing a confession was psychologically sound.

Four hours later he knew he had been right. Fredrica and the sheriff stood in the corridor.

"Our man's confessed," the sheriff told him, unlocking the cell door. "Funny thing,

sending him a pink daffodil on the hour, every hour. He got wilder and wilder, every one they brought in. Finally, when the fourth one came in, he broke down. Sure was a surprise, turned murderer and thief."

"It had to be Lin Blake," Ed said. "Who else would have seen a pink daffodil before daylight. Lin passed dad's place every morning while dad was clipping blooms. He had to see them eventually. Who else would have access to dad's mail, steaming letters open, keeping track of his business conditions, till the time looked ripe to strike? Who else would have a chance to collect blackmail without any suspicious moves? Lin learned of the mortgage, realized instead of just hush money he might get the whole thing. He took the mortgage through a shyster firm, then when he found Carter ready to announce his discovery and probably ready to prosecute him, stole the one pink daffodil, and hoped to foreclose or steal the bulbs, if necessary, before anyone else found out about them. If he had got the bulbs last night, he probably had a plane reservation to New York booked. He would have gone abroad, and pretended to make the discovery there.

"Not only that, who else knew I was in the railroad station, to arrange my arrest so easily? Who else would have known of that letter I wrote my father, and managed to get it into the hands of the police? He planned this a long time."

"Yeah," the sheriff agreed. "It's simple enough, when you look at it that way."

"One thing I don't understand," Ed said to Fredrica. "What kind of deal did you make with Carle Holt?"

"I offered him a tenth interest in the bulbs for twenty thousand dollars," Fredrica said. "He was glad to take it."

"But you were taking an awful chance. How could you be sure he wasn't the murderer?"

"Why, Ed." Fredrica smiled at him. "Whoever struck your father was facing him, hit him a right-handed blow. Haven't you ever noticed Carle always wears gloves, especially on his right hand? He has an artificial arm, he lost his own at Anzio."

"The thing I don't get," the sheriff said, "if Blake tore off the only pink daffodil bloom, where did you get the pink daffodils you were sending Blake?"

"Lacquer," Ed said shortly. "I had Fredrica take them down to the auto shop, and have the blooms sprayed with lacquer."

# The murderer



## and the mute

By CHARLES LARSON

*It was just a mark, such a little thing to  
cost a man his life, the loss of a fortune.*

HE came into the Georgia Street Receiving Hospital at nine o'clock that night, a little more tired, a little more wet, but still very polite. At the desk, he removed his hat and waited for the nurse on duty to notice him. When she finally glanced up, he smiled before handing her the paper he'd prepared. He'd been to many hospitals, and one morgue, and at each one of them he'd smiled. He considered it a point in civility.

Puzzled, the nurse unfolded his paper, read it slowly.

"I am deaf and dumb. There is no need to raise your voice. I am able to read your lips. I am looking for my wife, Mrs. Julia Kevin. Age: forty-two. Height: 5' 6". Weight: about 145 lbs. She is also deaf and dumb. Missing from my home since ten o'clock this morning. I would appreciate any information you could give me. Please speak distinctly. Thank you."

It was signed: "James Kevin."

Compassionately, the nurse raised her eyes. She was quite a young nurse and not entirely used to the sad, unhappy things that go on in hospitals, but she was learning. Clearly and distinctly, she said: "Yes, I think we can help you, Mr. Kevin."

Kevin continued to watch her lips in-

tently for some moments after she'd ceased speaking. Then, slowly, he closed his eyes, swayed forward and caught the desk.

The nurse touched his arm. "Are you all right, Mr. Kevin?"

Kevin nodded.

"A woman," said the nurse, "answering to this description, was brought in this afternoon. There was no identification. You stay right here and I'll get the doctor for you."

When she returned, Kevin was standing exactly as she had left him, his hands grasping the desk, his round face immobile. A young interne, who had followed the nurse, stepped up to him.

"Mr. Kevin? Will you come with me, please?"

It was unreal, all of it. The cold whiteness of the hospital walls, like milky ice around him. The slick brown floor beneath him. The impersonal young doctor beside him. Kevin had never been able to cope well with unusual situations, and he felt particularly helpless with this one. One part of his mind, despite his overwhelming relief in finding Julia, insisted on harboring a kind of petty anger against her for worrying him so. He began to understand those

women who were inconsolable until they'd found their strayed children, and who promptly spanked those same children when they eventually got home.

The doctor was walking in a crablike way beside him, keeping his face in view while he spoke.

"Nothing serious. She was knocked down by a hit-and-run driver when she tried to cross Melrose in Hollywood. No one seems to have got the number of the car. Happened just at dusk, you know. She was banged up a little, of course, mostly about the hands and knees. And then, too, the shock of it all—"

They had stopped before the door to one of the rooms. Before opening it, the doctor added: "Shouldn't stay with her too long if I were you. Needs her sleep—"

Julia was lying in a bed opposite the window, behind a three-quarter length screen. At first Kevin was certain that he'd misunderstood the doctor. Despite all his assurances that the accident hadn't been serious, there was one panic-filled moment when Kevin felt sure that Julia was dead. Her face was deathly white, and her mouth had fallen open. Only the slow rise and fall of the bedclothes over her chest reassured him.

"I'd let her waken by herself," the doctor murmured. "And when she begins to tire, leave immediately."

Pulling out a chair, Kevin sat near the foot of the bed, folded his hands in his lap, and prepared to wait.

With the doctor gone, it seemed as though he and Julia were the only one left in all the world. That feeling had come to him many times before, but then it had always been comforting. Then he'd been able to see Julia's eyes, and to draw relaxation and serenity from the quiet contentment in them.

Their relationship had always been rare and beautiful to Kevin. Even though they were both mute—perhaps *because* they were both mute—they had grown to understand each other as well as they'd understood themselves. Alone, they had both been shy, uncertain introverts, desperately resentful, at times, of a world that could talk. Together, shyness and resentment had turned into an alien something that they hardly remembered any more. They found a solemn passion in each other, and a wry, delicate sense of humor that was apt to throw either of them into undignified paroxysms of laughter at the most unscheduled mo-

ments. There had been the time when they'd first gone to a baseball game, and Julia had got to laughing so badly that she'd had to go to the ladies' room to compose herself. Although the entire section around them knew that something must be funny, only Julia was aware of the outrageous and obscene insults which Kevin was "shouting" at the umpire.

It was a good life they had, a full life; and the loss of either would have been irreparable to the other.

On the bed, Julia stirred, tossed her head from one side to the other, and opened her eyes. Kevin had been sitting in the shadows; he moved into the dim light slowly, afraid that he might startle her if he appeared too suddenly.

But even so her reaction was one he had hardly expected. For an instant, every muscle in her body appeared to jerk with shock, to contract in immediate, spasmodic fear.

Confused, and vaguely hurt, Kevin leaned forward, patting her shoulder until she had recognized him. Shuddering with relief, Julia lay back on the pillow and began to cry.

More than anything else, the tears troubled Kevin. There was something so helpless about them, and something so unlike Julia. She had had shocks before, and she had cried over them, but never like this, never so deeply and completely.

Anxiously, he touched her again, and when she lifted her face toward him, he pressed his cheek against hers and brushed the tears away with his fingertips. With his free hand, he began to form letters for her, his blunt fingers moving slowly and caressingly. Even his hands were a joke between them. Because they were so short and stubby, Julia always told him he "mumbled" so.

"Don't cry. Everything is all right. Don't cry."

Julia pressed against him, so grateful for his presence that Kevin wanted to wrap her up then and there and carry her home.

He drew back finally as Julia tried to pull her arms from under the counterpane. Once more Kevin grew uneasy at the look on her face. The fright and the shock were gone, but they had been replaced by an urgency, a terrible need to tell him something. Reaching down, he pushed the counterpane back, and stopped at the sight of her hands.

Each of them was wrapped in bulky, clinging gauze. He remembered then what

the doctor had told him. She had not been seriously hurt. "Banged up a little about the hands and knees," he'd said. And yet, by treating her hands, they'd taken speech away from her as effectively as though they'd cut the tongue out of another person.

Julia was staring at her hands now in stunned disbelief. Incredulously, she looked from the gauze to the face of her husband, and then, whimpering, she dropped her hands back onto the bed again.

Frowning, Kevin bent forward. "What is it? Did you want to tell me something?"

Julia nodded, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Something about your accident?"

Quickly, Julia looked up from his fingers. Again there was a flicker in her eyes, as though her whole being were straining to make him understand something very important.

"Something about the man who ran into you?"

The reaction this time was unmistakable. Kevin clenched his hand and went on.

"Do you know who it was?"

Jubilantly, Julia nodded.

Confused, Kevin sat back. Knowing who had hit her would be invaluable later, of course, but what possible reason could she have for wanting to tell him now? It could wait. It would have to wait.

To comfort her, he patted her again on the shoulder. "We'll get him when you're well. Reckless driver—"

Appalled, Julia sat up in bed, shaking her head.

"But it was only an accident."

Again Julia shook her head, violently this time.

"Not an accident?"

Beads of perspiration glistened on Julia's forehead as she raised her two hands, placed the thumbs together, and bent her wrists downward, an unmistakable, though crude, "M." Next she cupped her hands together loosely, so that only the heels of her hands touched "U."

Kevin was suddenly cold. Slowly, he completed the word with his own fingers. "Murder?"

Julia closed her eyes, weak but triumphant, and nodded.

It seemed to Kevin that the entire room was tilted, off-balance. His first thought, and one that he discarded immediately, was that the accident had, somehow, unhinged Julia's mind. If it could truthfully be said that any person in the world was without enemies,

that person was Julia. And yet her fear, when she had thought she had seen someone besides himself bending over her in that dim light, had been genuine.

He tapped her again on the arm, and began questioning her as soon as she had opened her eyes.

"You believe that someone deliberately tried to kill you?"

She nodded.

"Do you know why?"

"Yes."

"Is it someone I know?"

"No."

"But a friend of yours?"

"Yes."

That narrowed the search considerably, anyway. A friend of Julia's whom he'd never met. His mind was a perfect blank at first, but when he forced himself to relax, he was able to understand whom she must mean. There had been a childhood friend whom Julia had lost sight of years before, but of whom she had spoken a great deal. A woman named Maggie Prince. And Maggie Prince lived, or used to live, on Melrose—

He sat forward, excited. "Does it have something to do with Maggie Prince?"

"Yes."

Kevin rubbed his fingers across his eyes. When Julia had gone into Hollywood this morning, it had been ostensibly to shop. But there had been something else. A memory, elusive and vague, darted through his mind.

The day before yesterday, Julia had been reading the paper. She had looked up. At the sight of her stricken face, he had asked what the matter was. And Julia had told him: "Maggie Prince's brother is dead. An accident. You didn't know him, but he used to be a wonderful violinist as a boy. Kept it up, too. Played in some studio orchestra. Maggie never liked him."

He had read articles then, and had shaken his head over the tragedy of the affair. It seemed that Andreas Prince, local musician, had been instantly killed when he had fallen down the stairs of his home. A piano, which he had apparently been trying to move when he slipped, had fallen after him, and had crushed his skull. His wife had been staying with friends at the time, and his body had not been found until the next day. It had been discovered by Miss Maggie Prince, the deceased's sister. Besides his wife and sister, the dead man left a sister-in-law, Mrs. Rudolph Prince, and one nephew, all of whom had made their home with him, and

all of whom had been away from the house at the time of the accident.

Julia, Kevin remembered, had been rather upset by the news, and had mentioned that she might try to see Maggie Prince the next time she was in Hollywood. He had agreed that that might be thoughtful.

But what on earth had any of this to do with the fact that Julia thought someone wanted to kill her?

He tried again.

"Does it have anything to do with Andreas Prince's death?"

An emphatic, excited "yes."

"But that was an accident, too."

No, no. Here Julia laboriously raised her hands again, formed her awkward "M."

"Murder? Andreas was murdered?"

For a moment Julia seemed confused. Then, almost reluctantly, she nodded.

Again the feeling of cold swept over Kevin. Hesitantly, he gave the next question. "And you know who murdered him. Is that why you were run over?"

Wearily, Julia dropped back on to the pillow, and nodded once more.

And so he had it. While Julia rested, he considered the enormity of the thing, humbled and frightened by it all. He was a simple man inside, with the simple man's awe of wickedness, and even the thought of such a thing as murder caused a revulsion in him. But this was something more than the violent death of a stranger. Julia was mixed up in it, full of a secret she couldn't possibly reveal to him. It might be days before her hands would be well enough to move, and in the meantime—

In the meantime, a murderer went unpunished and doubtless intended to stay that way. And to do that, he needed Julia's silence. He must have known he hadn't killed her. He must have known that he'd have to try again.

The problem was stunning in its simplicity.

Kevin rested his heels flat on the floor and pushed downward in an effort to stop the quivering in his legs. Although Julia's face was gray with fatigue, he touched her arm once more, forced her to look at him.

"Is there nothing else you can tell me?"

For a time Julia remained as she was, watching him pleadingly. Then, with an effort that left her trembling, she lifted her hands, thumbs together, wrists down. "M." The next letter was a shaky, obvious "A."

Kevin found himself straining forward, nodding encouragement at each of her attempts. He was so certain that the next letter would be a "G" and that she was try-

ing to reveal something about Maggie Prince, that he almost missed it. Stopping her, he made a "G" with his own fingers, and looked at her inquiringly.

Julia shook her head, tried again. This time he saw it. An "R."

The last letter was indecipherable, but when he went quickly through the alphabet, Julia stopped him at "K."

M-A-R-K.

Puzzled, Kevin waited. But Julia was through. She lay back on the bed dully, watching him.

"Mark what? What about mark?"

A movement, a shadow on the bed, caught Kevin's eye, and he turned. Behind him stood the doctor, staring very sternly at him.

Under his rebuking gaze, Kevin got to his feet.

"Your wife has had a very great shock," the doctor whispered. "I asked you not to tire her. Will you go now, please?"

Kevin hesitated.

"Please," the doctor repeated. He stood aside, waiting for Kevin to precede him.

It was impossible to explain. And what could he have explained even if he'd had the opportunity? That his wife could hang a murderer? Who would believe him? Julia certainly couldn't repeat the things she'd told him to the police.

From this point forward, he was on his own. Julia had done her best to help him by giving the most important clue she could think of. It was up to him to use it.

But it was such a flimsy clue.

He passed out of the room before the doctor, the word pounding impotently in his mind.

Mark, he thought. Mark what?

Outside it was still raining, very softly, crying like tears down the shop windows, and pocking the shallow black puddles on the sidewalks. He stood on the top step of the hospital stairs for a moment, his shoulders hunched deeply, while he tried to decide on a course of action. In the street, a cab cruised by, pulled into the curb, and finally parked at its stand opposite the hospital.

For a time Kevin looked at it, undecided; then, abruptly, he began to run toward it. Inside, he got out his pen and a piece of paper, wrote down the address of Andreas Prince's home, and gave it to the driver.

Whatever Julia had found out, she had certainly found out at Prince's house. Obviously, he must do as Julia had done.

He sat back in the seat, pleased that he had made a decision.

But it was a very long time before he could control his fingers well enough to put the cap back on his pen.

The ride was long and dull, and Kevin had nearly fallen asleep when the cab stopped in front of the great house on Melrose. Stiffly he got out, signaled for the driver to wait, and began to make his way across the sidewalk to the porch.

Despite the lateness of the hour, every light in the house seemed to be blazing. When he peered in the main window, however, Kevin could see only one person in the front room—a tiny, birdlike woman with untidy hair who was knitting.

He knocked on the door.

Inside, the woman visibly jumped. After staring myopically at the door for some length of time, she put down her knitting, adjusted her dress, and rose.

Drawing away from the window, Kevin composed himself and waited for her.

Presently the door opened. "Oh," said the woman with the untidy hair.

Kevin smiled graciously.

"Mr. Rosso?"

After a moment's hesitation, Kevin gave a little bow.

Holding the door back, the woman motioned for him to enter. "Your office called, of course," she said, "to tell us you were coming, but we thought, with all this rain, and when you didn't come earlier—" She closed the door behind Kevin, and jabbed ineffectually at her hair. "The fact is they're both gone, Mr. Rosso. They left me alone here to watch the house. It's a pity—" She smiled in a vapid, worried way. "That they've gone, I mean to say."

With his eyebrows, Kevin expressed a rather good brand of surprise.

"Oh, yes," the woman said. "Both gone. I'm Mrs. Rudolph Prince. You want to see Mrs. Andreas Prince. Miss Maggie Prince—that's dear Andrea's sister—she's with Mrs. Prince. Mrs. Prince leans a great deal on Maggie. She says Maggie's a perfect crutch in time of sorrow.

The woman with the untidy hair blinked several times. "I suppose," she said abruptly, "you have some papers for Mrs. Prince to sign."

Recovering neatly from his surprise, Kevin tapped his inside coat pocket in an important manner, and nodded.

"What's the matter with your voice?" the woman asked suspiciously.

Kevin indicated his throat, and opened his mouth in what he hoped was a good imitation of a man straining to talk.

It was evidently a very good imitation. The woman responded immediately. "Laryngitis?" she murmured sympathetically. "Why is it that doctors and insurance men always take the worst care of themselves? I recall—"

Kevin was growing impatient. Still smiling, however, he got out his pen and paper, wrote: "Where can I find Mrs. Andreas Prince?" and handed it to the woman.

"Oh," the woman said. "Yes. Let me see, now. She said she was going down to the undertaking parlor. They called, you know. Now let me see—that would be the Lester Wood Mortuary. On Venice Boulevard."

Again Kevin bowed a little, shook her hand, and prepared to go. The woman followed him to the door. "By the way, Mr. Rosso," she said, "if you should see my son down there, I do wish you'd talk to him. He was so close to his dear uncle. It was Andreas who taught him to play the violin. And now that he sees accidents will happen, he may be more prone to take insurance out on himself. He's my only support, you know."

She beamed as she started to close the door. "Do try, anyway. His name is Marcus Prince. Just ask for Mark."

And the door closed.

It was only when the rain had begun trickling down his neck that Kevin turned slowly away from the door.

"Just ask for Mark."

"Whirling, he ran down the steps and across the sidewalk to the cab. He wrote: "Lester Wood Mortuary, Venice Blvd." on his slip of paper, and looked at it. Then, quickly, he scribbled the word: "Hurry!" beneath it, and pushed it at the driver.

The Lester Wood Mortuary had been built with an eye toward making death comfortable. It was a low, Spanish-type building, mossy and dignified on the outside, cool and gray and friendly on the inside.

The solemn, thin-faced young man who entered the ante-room in answer to Kevin's ring seemed born to his job. His manner was quiet without being lugubrious, pleasant without being jovial. He bent respectfully over the piece of paper Kevin handed him, read it carefully.



"I am a friend of the Prince family. Would like to see Mrs. Prince, Miss Maggie Prince, of Mr. Marcus Prince, if they are here."

Folding the paper, the solemn young man handed it back.

"The family is with Mr. Wood, sir," he said, "going over the funeral arrangements. If you'd care to wait—"

Kevin let out his breath in relief. He hadn't the vaguest idea of what he would do with Marcus Prince when he saw him, nor of how Julia had spotted the younger man as the murderer, nor even of why he was the murderer. But at least he would be able to keep an eye on him. There would be no question of Marcus's following up on his attempted slaying of Julia.

Hesitantly, the young man was speaking again. "Since you're a friend of the family, sir, perhaps you'd like to see the body of the deceased? It's in the Green Room."

To see the body of the deceased was Kevin's last desire, but the solemn young man seemed, somehow, to expect it of him. Reluctantly, Kevin inclined his head, and followed the other down the hall.

The Green Room, though obviously meant for the less expensive funeral services, was furnished in excellent taste. Concealed lights threw a soft, subdued glow over the green draperies; a deep-green rug melted under Kevin's footsteps.

In the center of the room, banked with flowers, stood a coffin, and in the coffin lay the mortal remains of Andreas Prince.

Considering the manner in which he had been killed, Andreas Prince looked remarkably peaceful. His face, reconstructed from photographs from the lower lips upward, showed no sign at all of the frightful damage the weight of the piano must have done to it.

After rearranging a few of the flowers with deft, reverent hands, the solemn young man smiled and withdrew, leaving Kevin alone with the corpse. There was nothing to do now but wait.

Trying to control his nervousness, Kevin wandered about the room, noting the heavy curtains; examining the cards on the floral wreaths; mentally remarking over the pathetic cheapness of the coffin. Inevitably, he found himself drawn once more to the body, curious as to what the man inside had really been like.

Physically, Andreas Prince had been quite short, and inclined toward plumpness. He was dressed in a simple blue suit and

a white, soft-collared shirt. His throat was white, feminine, and, in contrast to what must have happened to his face, completely unblemished.

All in all, a fussy little man, probably, careful of his grooming and, somewhat, pompous.

With a sigh, Kevin turned away, and saw a youngster of twenty-one or two staring belligerently at him from the doorway.

After the first shock of surprise, Kevin recovered himself sufficiently to smile in a tentative way, and to nod. The young man did not smile back.

Crossing the floor, he glanced once into the coffin, and then looked again at Kevin. "They said you wanted to see me. I'm Marcus Prince."

Even if he had not been mute, it is doubtful that Kevin could have found any words at that moment. The picture he had formulated of Prince's murderer had been so completely at odds with the boy standing before him that he felt lost and a little silly.

Marcus Prince was self-conscious, sensitive, and uncomfortably collegiate. He didn't look the type to be able to kill a bottle, much less a man. For the second time that day Kevin wondered about the soundness of Julia's mind.

Impatiently, the boy was saying, "Perhaps it was my aunt you wanted to see. I know she was expecting an insurance man. She's leaving very soon, you know on a trip to South America. Wants to get everything cleared up before she goes."

Marcus paused uncomfortably, upset by Kevin's protracted silence. He flushed, and raised one hand to the left side of his throat, rubbing it as though from force of habit. "Look here, Mr. What-ever-your-name-is—"

But suddenly Kevin was paying no attention. His eyes had gone from Marcus's lips to the thin hand which was rubbing at his neck, and he felt older than he ever had, more lost and lonely than he'd believed it possible to feel.

On the young man's neck, beneath his chin, there was a mark . . . a mark—

By saying one sentence, and by making one motion, Marcus Prince had shown him the truth of a crime that sickened him beyond his every expectation.

Kevin closed his eyes for a moment, wondering if he might truly be sick. Julia had seen it all. Julia had told him the truth with her one awkward little clue as surely

as though she'd screamed it at him. And he hadn't had the sense to know what she was getting at.

And while he was zealously keeping an eye on an innocent man, what had the murderer been doing?

He wet his lips, fighting against the weakness that attacked his heart and his knees like a cancer. Turning, he glanced once more at the corpse in the coffin, and then he began to run, past the surprised boy, past the solemn young man who had come to see what the commotion was about. He splashed ludicrously through a puddle on the street outside the mortuary, and didn't even know he'd got wet. When he reached the cab, he wrote down the address of the Georgia Street Receiving Hospital and threw it at the driver, and even while the cab was snapping into motion, he was thinking: "We're too late. We're too late, too late, too late—"

The young nurse was still on duty at the desk when he ran into the hospital. But this time he didn't bother with politeness. He scribbled his message rapidly and handed it across the desk to her.

"Any visitors for my wife in the last hour?"

The nurse blinked. "Why, yes, Mr. Kevin. Oh, perhaps fifteen minutes ago. It was past visiting hours, of course—"

Kevin whirled, disregarding the startled face of the nurse, and sped down the corridor. Fifteen minutes ago— And Julia couldn't summon aid if anything had happened. She couldn't scream.

Julia's room was dark when he threw the door open, but the light from an outside street lamp revealed all he wished to see, light which entered by the window the murderer had opened in order to crawl in.

Julia was lying on the floor, between the bed and the wall, her feet still entangled in the disheveled sheets, her eyes glassy with fear. And standing over her was the person who had twice tried to kill her.

Without stopping, Kevin leaped for the dim form. Never in his life had he felt so dispassionate, so drained of emotion. It was as though he were standing idly by, watching himself clawing at the murderer's throat, crashing with the other to the floor. A fist slashed across his nose, and he felt nothing through his hatred. A primitive, forgotten instinct prompted him to tighten his hands around a slippery neck, and to press. But he couldn't hold on. From nowhere a knee

came up to smash into his stomach, and he loosened his hold long enough for the killer to scramble toward the window. Kevin threw out his hands blindly, caught an ankle. He pulled on it savagely, drew himself up, and began pounding, pounding on whatever presented itself.

He was vaguely aware, after a while, that the form beneath him had stopped resisting, but it made no difference. He stopped fighting only when the doctors whom the nurse had summoned came running into the room. And if they had not come, he would gladly have committed murder himself.

They pulled him off the other then, and snapped on the lights.

And on the floor, his face looking almost as though a piano actually had fallen on it this time, lay the man who had murdered himself, the real Andreas Prince.

It was not easy to explain, even when the police had come, and Julia was safe in bed again, sobbing in his arms. But Kevin was patient. While a disapproving doctor pressed cold cloths to his bleeding nose, Kevin wrote whatever answers the police needed on a pad in his lap.

A young police lieutenant, trying in vain to conceal his confusion, said, "But, damn it, I don't get it! You tell me Prince was never dead at all—"

Kevin sighed, and beckoned to the lieutenant. Then, carefully, he began to write.

"Prince needed money. He hadn't even enough at the end for his wife to afford a decent coffin. But he couldn't collect it at least not through his insurance company, unless he was dead. So he decided to kill himself. He found some poor devil who resembled him physically, which isn't hard to do, really, and he beat his face in, probably with a shovel. Then he planned his 'accident.' Mrs. Prince identified the body—incidentally, you'd better hold her as an accomplice; she was undoubtedly in on it—and no one looked any farther. The funeral people were able to reconstruct the face easily from photographs of Prince. Mrs. Prince was to collect the money after the funeral, and go to South America, where her husband would join her. But my wife stumbled onto the whole thing when she went with Maggie Prince to see the body. She went back to the house, and made it known to Mrs. Prince that she suspected something was wrong, so Prince tried to run over her when she left. It didn't work and Julia was able to tell me everything in one word—'Mark.'"

The police lieutenant slapped his forehead with the heel of his hand. "What was she able to tell you? Do you mean that the body in the coffin was marked in some way?"

Kevin wrote again. "I mean the body in the coffin had no mark. That was the mistake Prince and his wife made when they chose their victim."

Kevin looked up at once at the hopelessly puzzled face of the policeman, and then continued writing.

"Prince was a violinist. And every violinist who ever lived is marked as surely as though he'd been branded. Notice next time you see one. High on the left side of the neck, just below the chin there will be a dark bruise where the buttend of the violin rests. I noticed it on Marcus Prince when he scratched his throat. The body in the coffin had no such mark. Since the mark can't be disguised, and since it was only the victim's face that had been reconstructed, the body couldn't possibly have been that of Andreas Prince. That was what my wife tried to point out to me."

"Well—" The lieutenant shook his head. "It's crazy, it's insane, but it fits. We'll give Prince a different sort of vacation on the strength of it, thanks to you, Mr. Kevin. He nodded toward Julia. "And to you, Mrs. Kevin."

Julia flushed and nodded back.

With one hand Kevin brushed his wife's tears away. "Thanks to you, Mrs. Kevin." Tremulously, Julia smiled.

Kevin looked around, and then lifted his hand again. "I love you, Mrs. Kevin."

Julia glanced warningly at the others in the room, and reddened.

With a great deal of mysterious motions, Kevin got a pair of gloves out of his pocket, put them on. Julia looked at him questioningly.

Mr. Kevin's gloved hands moved softly through the air. "I'll whisper—"

They began laughing then, both of them giggling like fools, until the people in the room with them stared in baffled wonder at such happiness, and Julia was forced to let the nurse give her a sedative to quiet her while Kevin sat back and smiled.

THE END.

"DEAR JOAN THE WAD.—Since you sent me your lucky charm I've had several small wins on Football Pools, and last week I won £136, 8s. on Vernon's 3d. Points Pool. Please send me another 'Joan the Wad' for which I enclose P.O. Many thanks and good luck."—F. W. Doddridge, South Brent.—16.8.48.

"DEAR JOAN THE WAD.—Some time ago I received 'Joan the Wad' and 'Jack o' Lantern' and this morning I had a cheque for £57, 2s. 10d. which I had won with 'Spot the Ball Competition' and that is the best bit of luck I have had for years, so hoping I shall still be a lucky one."—Mrs. R. Gray, Horkstow, Lincs.—8.8.47.

"This is to tell you that on the day I received 'Joan the Wad' I was lucky enough to win £10, 2s. on the Football Pools."—O. M. Burgess, Westerham, Kent.—28.9.47.

"Please find enclosed Postal Order for one 'Joan the Wad' and one 'Jack o' Lantern.' P.S.—I had one 'Joan the Wad' which I lost, but must say no sooner had it arrived than I won £10, then several smaller prizes at intervals of two weeks, but since losing it have won nothing and had very poor health for considerable periods."—C. M. of Wales—17.9.47.

"Since I bought your 'Joan the Wad' about six weeks ago I have had three prizes in the Football Pools; £2, 2s. 10s., and £10, 16s. It has impressed my family so much that my brother and his wife are now sending for 'Joan the Wad.' My best wishes for bringing me a change in luck."—Mr. W. Langlands, Wallsend-on-Tyne.

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"Just a few lines to let you know that since I have received 'Joan the Wad' I have won £6 17s. on Vernon's Pools. I have great faith in these charms that I am enclosing Postal Order for 'Jack o' Lantern.' Hoping you will supply me 3 of the same by return post." F. H. Woodall, 148 Lupin Street, Ashted, Birmingham, 7.

"Have enclosed P.O. for which will you please send a 'Jack o' Lantern.' My 'Joan the Wad' is lonely! Have won £15 in football since I got 'Joan.' Thanking you."—A. M. Caupland, Nettleham, Lincs.

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



# Sign of the sunflower

By LUTHER A. WERT

*She was a cute blonde, with a gun.  
Just where she fitted into the murder  
picture, Lew wasn't sure, but he knew  
he was going to find out.*

I.

GRADUALLY, the green and red lights vanished. The roaring in his ears became a subdued murmur. Lew Starr pushed himself slowly from the floor and stopped on his knees. His stomach felt as though it were in his chest, and he reeled dizzily as nausea swept over him. Finally, he opened his eyes.

Robert Fuller was lying on his back several feet away, staring blankly at the ceiling. There was a neatly drilled hole in the center of his forehead. Dazedly, Lew crawled toward the man, his mind dully uncomprehending. He had been drugged before and realized that it had happened again. He wondered how, then stopped wondering. The silken haze which clouded his vision cleared suddenly and he saw the gun in his right hand.

One glance proved it to his own revolver, and that more than one shot had been fired. Even a man recovering from the effects of a stiff drug could recognize a plant when he saw one.

He didn't bother to convince himself that Fuller was dead. That hole in his head hadn't been painted there. He lifted a hand to wipe his forehead, then stopped in mid-air. Stuck to his fingers were several small black objects. They looked like tiny beads without holes, and were sticky with dried glue. He looked down at the spot where

his hand had been and saw a blotch of them pressed into the material of his own coat near the left pocket. In almost the same spot on Fuller's coat there was another cluster. Mechanically, Lew scraped some of them into a handkerchief and stuffed it into his pocket.

Only then did his practical mind start asking questions. His eyes swept the room and stopped at the large drawing board in the corner. He realized that he was in Robert Fuller's apartment and that this room was the architect's workshop. But what were the two of them doing here together? And who would want to knock off Fuller and make it look like a down-on-his-luck shamus had pulled the job?

He staggered to his feet, found his legs unwilling to bear his weight, then let his chunky frame sag wearily into the nearest chair. His head was clearing rapidly, but was throbbing from the effects of the drug. He glanced quickly at his watch and saw that it was two in the morning. That meant that he had been unconscious for the better part of two hours. It had been exactly midnight when he had taken that last drink.

He lit a cigarette with trembling fingers and tried to remember what had happened up to that point.

A few minutes before twelve, he had been sitting at Nick Barton's private table in a cozy little joint on the north side named for the same. He was getting free

drinks, so he couldn't complain about their negative quality. Besides, Nick's didn't specialize in that field. Barton was a smart cookie and he knew the psychology of amateur gamblers from the classier set. His back rooms were the best in town, featuring the more advanced techniques in rookery, and they had replaced Sammy Taylor's place—the Sunflower—on the south side. Anyone would have suspected that Sammy and Nick would have clashed about that, since Nick was drawing Sammy's best suckers away from the Sunflower. But there was just a sort of jovial enmity between them.

Lew had placed himself strategically at Sammy's right, because he was getting tired of having the latter's elbow continually pushing him in the face. Sammy was left-handed and invariable fed and watered his face with his left arm sprawled across half the table. Last night, Nick Barton had borne the brunt of Sammy's unconscious attack. On Lew's right had been Nick's younger brother, George, who was in the contracting business and had just beat a criminal rap for supervising the construction of a building which had collapsed, killing two tenants. The State had tried to prove that he had used cheap materials.

Lew Starr kept good company and he figured, now, that that could be one of the many reasons why Inspector Fogle was forever after him. Combine that with the fact that Lew had beaten the vile-tempered inspector to the punch in the Besato killing several months back and anyone could see that Fogle would be overjoyed to find Lew in the spot he was in now.

Sammy had been giving Nick the rib about his thriving business. Every time he made a crack, his fat frame would shake violently, predicting the booming laugh that was on the way. The huge imitation sunflower, which advertised his place, and which he invariably wore in his lapel, would almost lose its fake petals and black heart every time he went into one of these hearty convulsions. He had been in the midst of a solitary joke when Robert Fuller and his son, young Bob, strode up to the table.

Lew had known Fuller from the time he designed Nick's place and started to supervise the actual construction of it. He had always seemed like an all-right guy. But hardly had the foundation been laid than he and Barton had had an argument. No

one seemed to know the exact details. George Barton had taken over the job, and the building went up in record time. Fuller had just faded out of the picture.

"I'd like to have a word with you, Nick," Fuller had said.

"Sure thing," Barton said easily. He eyed the other carefully. "Have a chair, Bob." He noticed Fuller's hesitation and added amiably, "It's all right. These are my friends. You can talk freely."

Fuller sat down between Sammy and Nick, and young Bob squeezed his slight body, rather reluctantly, Lew had thought, between the squat detective and George Barton. Fuller hadn't wasted much time in putting his cards on the table.

"My son is a very foolish young man, Nick," he began. "I understand he's in your debt again."

"To about ten thousand dollars," Nick said matter-of-factly.

"That's a lot of money, Nick."

Barton shrugged. "I didn't invite your son here, Bob," he said, glancing at the fidgeting youth.

"My son hasn't got that much money," Fuller went on calmly.

Barton smiled nastily. "But you have," he said pointedly.

"I have a great deal more than that," Fuller countered. "But I'm not paying off."

Nick scowled darkly and started to get up. But he must have thought better of his first impulse and settled back easily. As far as collecting an illegal debt was concerned, he must have realized that he didn't have a chance. Naturally, he said what everyone at the table expected him to say.

"There are unpleasant methods a man in my position can employ, Bob," he said, frowning. "I hope that won't be necessary."

Fuller smiled confidently. "You won't do anything of the sort, Nick." He leaned forward to within inches of the other's face. "You know and I know that most of your tables are controlled. I think my son just picked the wrong table. He paused long enough to light a cigarette and blew a thin stream of smoke over Nick's head. "If that were the case," he continued calmly, "I wouldn't feel badly about resorting to a little blackmail of my own."

This had taken Nick Barton off guard. For a moment, dead silence had settled about the table.

"What's on your mind," Bob?" Nick had asked finally.

Fuller leaned back in his chair. "I can only guess that your tables are crooked, Nick," he said. "The police, too. But there are other things I know that you'd like to keep quiet." He glanced around the interior of the place briefly, then looked back at the glowering man before him. He patted his breast pocket significantly. "For instance," he continued casually, "I've got enough right here to close you up tighter than a drum if the police ever got hold of it."

Nick's lips were drawn tightly over his teeth as he admitted defeat. "O.K.," he said flatly. "You win. But I don't forget easily, Bob."

"Forget the ten thousand and I'll burn the facts," Fuller offered.

Nick took a healthy slug of the drink before him and contented himself by glaring belligerently at the other. Lew had never seen Barton give up so easily. Whatever it was Fuller had in his pocket must have been lined with dynamite.

"One more thing, Nick," Fuller said. "I'm cutting my son off from every penny I have until he gets a little common sense. Remember that, if he tries to get in here again."

Nick shifted his angry glare to young Fuller, who had turned white with rage at his father's last words. Nick seemed on the point of saying something, then changed his mind. He nodded a silent agreement toward the elder Fuller, backed away from the table and stamped unceremoniously into his office.

The dead, intense silence had fallen over the table again. Lew remembered that they had sat around in that embarrassed vacuum until Sammy Taylor broke it up. First, he had prevailed on the two Fullers to have a drink. Then, he had tried to attract the attention of a waiter, all of whom were rushing about like mad. He had finally succeeded in getting the drinks after nearly tackling a waiter in the middle of the floor. Lew remembered that it had been a strange waiter. He had taken a full pull from his glass to cover his own embarrassment.

Thirty seconds later, the green and red lights had started flashing and he had drifted painlessly off into space and a complete fade-out.

Lew Starr came out of his lethargy with a start. He got out of the chair and crossed to the man on the floor. He wanted to confirm his suspicion that whatever it was

in Fuller's pocket was no longer there. But he wasn't given a chance.

Sudden footsteps going through the other rooms in the apartment stopped him halfway across the floor. He moved swiftly to the door and twisted the key in the lock. And not a moment too soon. The knob jerked suddenly under his hand, then a fist pounded imperiously on the panels.

"Open up in there!" came a rasping, authoritative command.

Lew Starr winced at the voice. There was only one sound like that in the world and it happened every time Inspector Fogle opened his big yap. For the first time in many a day, Lew felt a kind of panic. He wouldn't stand a chance in exonerating himself if Fogle got through that door.

Even as he reached the window which led to the fire-escape, the first cracking of wood came to his ears as Fogle pressed his brawny shoulders to the door. Lew was clattering down the iron ladder when the splintering crash indicated that Fogle's weight had won out. Lew sprinted out of the alley and into the street. He was going so fast, he easily overtook a cruising cab.

The cabby protested hotly when he discovered the destination of his fare. "But Nick's place is a good hour's drive from here, mister. I can't make no dough on long hauls!"

"Stop crabbing!" Lew snapped irritably. "I'll make it worth your trouble." He winced as he fingered his last twenty bucks.

Nick's seemed to be the logical place to start. Barton, or somebody around the place, should be able to tell him who he left with last night. Maybe he could even find out who the waiter was who had given him the drugged whisky.

They made the trip in record time, with the cabby beefing all the way. Lew had him stop a block away from Nick's and told him to wait.

Outside the front door, he tapped insistently on the plate glass with his key ring. He knew someone would be around even if the place was dark inside. The back rooms were still a beehive of activity. A huge shape finally detached itself from the darkness and shuffled toward the door. Lew recognized him as Tony, Nick's ablest trouble-shooter.

"Yeah?" Tony asked, opening the door and blocking the entrance with his tremendous bulk. "What you want?"

Lew tried to push past him unsuccessfully. "Where's Nick?" he asked.

"The boss ain't seein' nobody. He's busy. Come back tomorra."

Lew saw that further argument was senseless. He lunged forward. His sudden move carried the unsuspecting giant backward. Tony growled like a hurt animal and plodded gorilla-like toward the detective. Lew planted his feet squarely and waited.

He let Tony get within striking distance, then gave it to him. His fist came up from the level of the floor, the full weight of his small, compact frame behind it. Tony spun backward and landed with a grunt on the floor.

Lew was scuttling toward Nick's office when he heard Tony swear hoarsely and start after him. He quickened his pace and reached the door several strides ahead of the lumbering brute. He caught the sounds of excited voices within the room, and he turned the knob quickly and stepped inside.

Nick Barton was standing over Sammy Taylor, his big fists tangled in the fat man's lapels, shaking him like so much jello. George Barton was trying to break it up without much luck. The struggle ceased abruptly as all three saw Lew. Sammy flopped, gasping, into the nearest chair and tried to rearrange his ruffled feathers. The huge sunflower was askew and had just about lost its black, spongy heart. George Barton glanced nervously from his brother to Lew and chewed vigorously on a stubby finger.

At that moment, Tony came plunging clumsily through the door. Nick Barton turned a beet-red face toward him and let him have the full force of his pent-up wrath.

"What the hell's the matter with you, Tony?" he yelled. "I told you I didn't want to be disturbed!"

"Sure, boss," Tony grumbled, rubbing his bruised chin and staring incredulously at the squat detective. "But this guy come tearin' in here an' let me have it with a brick!"

"This brick, Tony," Lew interrupted, raising his fist and hefting it tentatively. "It's a matter of leverage. Want another demonstration?"

He swung forward and Tony stepped back in surprise, but he recovered quickly and charged, his little pig eyes flaming.

"Cut it!" Nick shouted, bringing the giant to a dead stop. "Get the hell out of here, Tony! And try to remember what I'm paying you for!"

Tony glared angrily at his boss, muttered

something deep in his throat, and stamped through the door, slamming it violently behind him. Then Nick turned his piercing eyes on the detective.

"You recover fast from a load, Starr," he snapped.

"Does that surprise you, Nick?" Lew countered pointedly. "Somebody could have misjudged the size of the dose."

"Stop the riddles and get to the point," Nick said. "What's on your mind?"

Lew took his time, glancing at the three men before him. Sammy Taylor was the only one who had recovered his poise. He was very still, apparently enjoying Nick's obvious discomfort. George was feeling better, too. The taste of his fingers no longer fascinated him, and he had switched to the loose skin on his thin lips, watching Nick closely, making no secret of the fact that he was nervous about something.

Lew took a cigarette from a rumpled pack and slowly lit it, his quick eyes watching the three men warily. "Robert Fulton is dead," he said. "Murdered. The killer tried to make me the goat."

George Barton gasped audibly and dropped into a chair. His face had taken on the hue of a piece of new chalk. Nick leaned heavily on the desk, his hands trembling slightly as they rested on several papers there. Sammy kept his seat and eyed the detective curiously.

"Are you sure you're completely sober, Lew?" he asked mildly.

"I was never drunk," Lew countered. Swiftly, he recounted the story of how he had come to and found Fulton dead. "Obviously, the same person who drugged my drink must have tipped the cops. Fogle lost no time getting to Fulton's apartment." He switched his gaze to Nick Barton and held the latter's eyes for a moment. "Who took me out of here?" he asked.

A fierce flush ran the length of Nick's narrow face. "How the hell should I know?" he snapped. "I left the table before you passed out."

Lew glanced at the fidgeting George. Getting no response from that source, he turned to Sammy Taylor.

"Fulton and young Bob agreed to take you into town with them," the fat man said. "You were in bad shape. I went to the door with you, then came back to see if I could get the hang of Nick's tables. George can alibi himself, I suppose."

"I didn't hear anybody ask for alibis," Lew said, smiling.

"You're getting them anyway, snoop," George snapped. "When you dirtied up the joint I went in to help Nick with some accounts."

"That's right," Nick interposed quickly.

"That makes everything nice and cozy, doesn't it?" Lew said casually. He felt, rather than saw, the angry glares thrown at him from the three men. But he let it pass. He was thinking of young Bob Fulton. He remembered that the kid hadn't taken very kindly to the idea that he was about to be cut off from his old man's dough. It was easy to assume that his hand could have come into contact with the gun in the cramped quarters of Fulton's small coupé. And, seized with a sudden fit of anger, he could have put a slug in his father's head.

It stacked up, Lew thought. The kid could have carried Fulton up to the apartment, then come back for him. After that, it would have been easy to plant the gun in the hand of a down-on-his-luck detective, then beat it to his own apartment and call the police.

Nick Barton had come to life again. "If the police are trailing you, you'd better get out of here. I don't want to get mixed up in a killing."

"You're mixed up in it already, Nick," Lew told him. "Whatever it was Fulton had on you must have been hot. Nasty enough, maybe, to make you risk a murder rap to keep him quiet."

George Barton leaped from his chair and made for the detective, hate gleaming from his eyes. "Your lip is mighty loose tonight, Lew," he muttered hoarsely, stopping within arm's length of the other. "I'd be careful what I said."

"Take it easy, George," Nick broke in. "He hasn't got a thing on us." He had taken his hands from the desk top in an effort to motion George to a chair. The papers stuck to his palms and when he finally shook them loose, Lew noticed several black, bead-like specks that Nick brushed hurriedly onto his trousers.

Lew Starr pursed his lips thoughtfully and frowned. Then he took the deep plunge. "I knew enough to suspect that what Fulton had in his possession was evidence that cheap materials were used in building this joint. That's why he didn't want any part of the job and quit. Then George took over. If these facts were generally known, it would close you up, Nick."

The guess hit George right between the

eyes. "You'll have a helluva time proving that, now that Fulton's dead!" he shouted excitedly.

Lew smiled wryly. "Who's talking too much now, George?" he asked softly. "You couldn't stand another investigation so soon after the last brush with the courts, could you?"

That was enough for George. He came up out of the chair with arms flailing wildly. A hasty punch at Lew's head almost tore off the detective's ear. Thrown off balance, he was a cinch for Lew's lethal right, and one neatly-timed punch flattened him. He sat on the floor, propped up by the chair, rubbing his bruised jaw and glaring murder.

"You're fast to jump to conclusions, Georgie," Lew said pointedly.

"He doesn't have a priority on that, chum," Nick Barton muttered, coming around the corner of his desk, his fists tightly clenched.

Sammy Taylor got in between them. "Take it easy, boys," he said calmly. He turned to Lew, one arm blocking Nick's forward progress, the other resting easily on the detective's shoulder. "You're all upset, Lew. Why don't you give yourself up? The police will find the murderer."

Lew snorted. "Fogle wouldn't believe my story," he snapped. "If he gets me, he won't look any farther." He paused abruptly, his eyes surveying the faces of the men before him. "There wasn't a man at that table last night who didn't know that," he concluded flatly.

"There's no point in your throwing idle accusations around," Sammy said appeasingly. "It seems to be that young Bob Fuller would be in a better position to tell what happened after you left here."

Lew grunted, but said nothing. He didn't want to give Sammy the satisfaction of knowing he had a good point. The kid was the only person involved who had a concrete motive for the murder of Fuller. But Lew couldn't shake off the feeling that young Bob wouldn't have the nerve to pull such a stunt. Still, he thought, there was no accounting for what a guy would do if sufficiently enraged, and young Bob certainly hadn't taken his old man's financial plans for him very kindly.

Sammy walked with Lew toward the door, his arm still thrown reassuringly across his shoulders. But Lew hardly noticed him. He couldn't catch something that was



trying to beat its way into his brain, something he had seen which, if interpreted correctly, would crack this thing wide open.

"Come back here after you've talked with young Bob," Sammy was saying softly. He looked back toward the glowering men at the desk and guided Lew still farther away. "Maybe we can figure out something then," he continued. "I think you'll find that we're really on your side, Lew."

The detective reached for the doorknob. "Thanks," he said dryly. "I might be needing somebody on my side."

He pulled the door open quickly. Simultaneously, Tony fell on his face into the room. He got to his feet hurriedly and shot an agonized glance at Nick Barton.

"Hear anything interesting, Tony?" Lew cracked sharply.

Tony gave the detective a murderous look, then turned his attention back to Nick. "Honest, Nick," he said, "I was just makin' sure this monkey didn't try nothin' funny."

"Beat it, you idiot!" Nick screamed. "Get the hell outta here, both of you!"

Lew bowed mockingly and retreated through the door. Tony was right on his heels.

"Keep movin', chum," he growled.

Lew didn't bother to argue because, somewhere deep inside, he rather liked this hulking moron. Besides, he had a sudden hunch and he wanted to get to Bob Fuller fast. Once outside, he ran for the cab waiting around the corner.

Young Fuller lived in one of the more swanky apartment houses in town. The lobby was empty, save for the night elevator man who was comfortably asleep near his station, his chair tipped back precariously against the wall. Lew slipped past him silently and ran up the stairs.

He stopped on the third floor landing and swiftly moved down the hall, looking for the number he had seen in the foyer downstairs. He stopped at 316. This was it. He reached for the bell, then stopped. The door was slightly ajar and he groaned inwardly. He had a sudden premonition that he was already too late.

He groped in the darkness for the light switch. Finding it, he flipped his wrist and the room was suddenly bathed in soft yellow light. Bob Fuller was sprawled in a heap in the middle of the floor. He was doubled up, as though he had been dumped like a wet sack of flour. His face was distorted

and his neck bruised a deep purple; the strength of his assailant's fingers had been so great his eyes nearly bulged from their sockets.

Bending down, Low recognized the dark stain near the left pocket. It was a cluster of dark, beadlike objects. The same stuff he had picked off himself earlier, then the elder Fuller, and then, finally, the stuff he had seen Nick Barton brushing off his trousers!

Lew straightened up, and at that precise moment, the realization hit him like a blinding flash of light. He knew now who had killed Robert Fuller and his son. He kicked himself mentally for not having seen through the whole rotten business earlier. It was so obvious!

He stiffened at a slight sound behind him. Without turning to look, he knew who was there. It was all part of a neatly-laid trap he had walked into. With every bit of energy he possessed, he dove for a convenient armchair and crouched behind it. At the same instant, he brought his revolver out of his pocket and leveled it at the man framed in the doorway.

"Stand still, Fogle!" he yelled hoarsely. "Move and I'll shoot, so help me!"

"You're pretty damn quick, Starr," Inspector Fogle snapped. "I thought I'd find you here. Two anonymous calls, and two killings. Nice night's work, pal!"

"Stop making with the lip, stupid!" Lew snarled. "If you were anything but a low-grade moron, you'd have traced those calls. But, no, you were too anxious to settle an old score with me. Throw your gun on the floor as well as you throw your weight around!"

Inspector Fogle complied reluctantly and kicked the gun toward the detective. Lew pocketed it and stepped out from behind the chair. He walked slowly toward the irate cop. "Turn around, Fogle," he snapped harshly.

"If you sap me I'll have you arrested on sight," Fogle said.

"Don't tempt me, chum," Lew returned.

He held the gun firmly in the inspector's ribs and probed beneath the man's coat toward the hip pocket. The handcuffs were right where they should have been. Quickly, he snapped one bracelet on Fogle's wrist, then prodded him into a bedroom. Here, he fastened the other bracelet to the bedpost. Then he moved swiftly toward the window and the fire escape.

"You can't get away with it, Starr," Fogle growled. "I'll set up a howl as soon as you're out of sight. The whole force will be down on you!"

Lew managed a grin. "I'll take my chances," he said, and ducked through a window.

Fogle was good to his word. Too good. Lew was clambering recklessly down the iron ladder when the first hoarse shout rent the air like a gust of hot, penetrating wind.

Lew hit the alley fast and noticed that there was only one way out, toward the front of the building. To make matters worse, that exit was already covered by a burly cop who, hearing the hoarse shouts from above and catching sight of the darting figure in the alley, added two and two and got four. He plunged into the darkness of the narrow place, tugging at his holster. Lew cursed the day the state decided to hire cops who knew arithmetic.

Then he spotted the immense pile of garbage and trash opposite where he stood. He dove for this shelter, thinking that the day before had been a wonderful day for the local sanitation boys to stage their walk-out. The lumbering cop, intense in his hot pursuit, didn't see the stealthy leg which snaked out of the blackness and fell flat, his gun skidding metallicly down the alley. Grunting, he staggered to his feet, only to be met with the butt of Lew's hand as the detective paralyzed him momentarily with a rabbit-punch.

He had to move fast. He realized that the cop on the pavement wouldn't be out long, and he could hear the swiftly approaching shouts of the other's pals coming around the corner of the building. He glanced up and caught sight of the dangling end of the fire escape running up the adjoining building. It was a chance. His only one, and he had to take it. His life might easily depend on his getting to Nick Barton's joint ahead of the police.

He leaped, catching a finger-hold on the bottom rung, and pulled himself up. He was scrambling up the third flight, when practically the whole police force pounded into the alley below. It was no time to dally. Peering skywards, he caught sight of white lace curtains blowing out an open window. He moved stealthily toward it and, peering quickly inside, slipped into a darkened bedroom.

Almost immediately, a small, mercifully dim bedlamp was switched on, and Lew

found himself looking into the barrel of a wavering .45. The girl behind it was terribly frightened. Lew could almost hear the bed-springs creak as the tremors of fear coursed through her trim little body.

"W-what do you want?" she quavered.

"Out!" Lew returned succinctly. He caught himself grinning. "Look, sister, I'm not a criminal, so don't be upset. I'm in a jam and I'll explain later, I hope. Where's the front door?"

The girl seemed suddenly to realize that she had forgotten her modesty in her efforts to keep the gun trained on the detective. The filmy nightgown she wore accentuated the loveliness of her figure. She dropped the gun like a hot potato and snatched the covers up about her shoulders. Then, with one long, well-rounded arm, she indicated the general direction of the front door, and watched breathlessly as the man made his way toward it.

Outside, Lew made a mental note of the number on the door, wondering about the beautiful girl who slept with a .45 under her pillow, and sped down the flight of steps at the end of the hall. He stopped on the first floor landing and peered cautiously into the lobby. A man and woman, in evening dress, were standing before the elevator. The man was pushing the bell impatiently. Through the glass of the door leading to the street, Lew could see a cab, the one, apparently, which had just discharged the two in the lobby. He crossed his fingers, hoping the driver wasn't in too much of a hurry.

The elevator reached the first floor, and the man and woman stepped inside. There was no one left in the lobby. Lew waited until he saw the dial indicator circling around and stopping at the fifth floor, then darted across the room and out the door. He was on the point of continuing down the steps to the cab, when he pulled himself up short.

The pavement in front of the apartment house, not thirty feet away, was swarming with policemen. Lew mustered what reserve he had left and, trying to act as natural as possible under the circumstances, strolled leisurely to the cab. He heaved a sigh of relief as, lolling back in the shadows of the back seat, he realized that his coming out of the house hadn't been thought suspicious.

But the cab driver wasn't too anxious to have a fare. "I'm going in, mister," he said innocently. "I've made my last haul for tonight."

Lew didn't relish the thought of arguing and exposing himself to any undue notice from the police. He pulled the revolver from his pocket. "Move, son," he said gently. "Slow at first."

The driver took a fast look at the weapon and ground the cab into gear. "Guns," he muttered. "Everybody carrying guns." He clucked his tongue and wagged his head sorrowfully and picked up speed as he rounded the corner.

## II.

WHEN Tony opened the door of Nick's place this time, Lew didn't stop for explanations. He charged past the startled brute without so much as a word. The bellow of rage which followed should have been enough to arouse the entire neighborhood. It did arouse the curiosity of Nick Barton. The door to his office was flung open and Nick stood farmed in the doorway.

Lew panted up to within inches of the other's face. "Call off your hound, Nick," he rasped ominously.

Barton stood indecisively for a moment, looking at the detective, then at Tony. Suddenly, he waved an arm toward his trouble-shooter, cautioning him to stay away, and stepped back into his office. Lew followed quickly, closing the door in Tony's scowling face.

As he expected, Sammy and George were still there. All three men looked drawn and haggard, and not because it was six o'clock in the morning either. They appeared like men who had been bargaining for many hours, and Lew was fairly certain that he knew what was at stake.

Sammy was the first to recover. "Did you get anything out of Fulton?" he wanted to know.

"Not much in the way of words," Lew replied softly. "He wasn't in a talkative mood. Apparently, someone . . . someone in this room decided it might be better that way."

George got to his feet unsteadily. "You mean he's dead, too?"

"Strangled," Lew snapped. "Want to know who did it?"

"Who?" Sammy Taylor asked.

Lew looked at George's scared, yet defiant, face; then at Nick, who had started to pace the floor nervously, avoiding Lew's

piercing eyes. Finally, the detective's gaze found its way back to Sammy.

"You did," he said tonelessly.

At first, Sammy looked surprised, then hurt. "Preposterous," he scoffed. "If this is your idea of a corny gag, I fail to see the point."

"You will," Lew said. "Cut the act. I've got you dead to rights."

Sammy shrugged and sat down. A smirk had come to his face which hadn't been there before. "I could use a good laugh. Start talking."

"It won't be so funny," Nick Barton cut in suddenly. You came here tonight with the idea of running me out of business on the basis of the papers you have in your pocket, or claim to have."

"He's got them, all right," Lew said. "Your tables have more appeal than his, Nick. You were slowly runing him. He saw his chance to fix that last night. He added things up when Fulton threatened you and you backed down, suspecting that you had built this place cheaply because George, here, had contracted for inferior building materials."

"That's right," George admitted grudgingly. He looked over at Sammy and scowled. "You killed Fulton to get those papers."

Sammy laughed uneasily. "Prove it," he said.

"That won't be difficult," Lew offered. "Particularly when the police check on these." He pulled out his handkerchief and, unfolding it carefully, displayed its contents to the man in front of him. "Under a microscope, these little beads will look very much like the black stuff that makes up the heart of that sunflower you're wearing, Sammy."

The room was filled with a dead silence. Three pairs of eyes were riveted firmly on the fidgeting man in the chair. Unconsciously, he was trying to smooth the petals of the imitation flower in his lapel.

"In case you're still interested, I'll go on," Lew said deliberately. "You left with the Fultons when they offered to take me in tow. You thought very fast after you'd made up your mind, I'll give you that much. You'd already picked a fall guy for what you figured had to be done. You had already put a new waiter in this place for the purpose of spying on Nick, and it was easy to get him to spike my drink. It was a simple matter to get my gun once we

were all in the car. You shot Fulton, then turned the gun on young Bob. But he must have been too fast for you and in the scramble, you dropped the gun. You overpowered and strangled him. You carried Fulton and me to his apartment, then dropped young Bob off the same way. You slung us over your *left* shoulder, Sammy, just like a *left-handed* person would. And near their *left* pockets, you left a calling card."

Lew became so engrossed in proving his point, he didn't notice that Sammy had given up. The murderer suddenly lunged out of his chair and raced for the door. When he turned around, he held a revolver in his left hand.

"Thanks, bright boy;" he said waspishly. "I just wanted to make sure how much you suspected. Enjoy it while you can. None of you will ever live to spread it around!"

Lew cursed himself for being caught flat-footed. He watched helplessly as Sammy opened the door and started to back out, the gun pointed straight at the detective's heart. Lew could almost feel that pressure of Sammy's fat finger on the trigger.

It was then that a huge arm snaked up out of the blackness beyond the door and twined around Sammy's neck. The gun was jerked suddenly backward, exploding with a deafening roar in the small room. Lew went down on one knee as the hot slug tore through the fleshy part of his shoulder.

In his first surprise, he didn't feel the pain so much. He glimpsed Tony's ugly face peering over the already purpling countenance of Sammy Taylor. He watched, fascinated, as the latter's struggles quietly subsided.

"Shall I finish him, boss?" he heard Tony say to Nick.

Nick shook his head violently and got on the phone. Tony released his sagging burden reluctantly, but Sammy wasn't quite finished. He whirled in a last desperate effort to make good his escape and the room echoed with a sickening thud as Tony's huge fist buried itself in Sammy's mid-section. The man folded without a murmur.

"Now we're even, Tony," Lew grunted, wincing as the first pain made itself felt.

Tony grinned and planted his tremendous weight on the fallen man's chest. "T'ink nuthin' of it, pal," he said.

Nick Barton replaced the phone and walked over to Lew. "Fogle'll be here in a little while," he said. "You all right?"

Lew nodded and braced himself against the wall. "Yeah, but you're on a spot, Nick. You'll have to close up after Sammy gets through talking."

Nick said nothing. He walked over to Sammy and, bending down, quickly extracted a fat envelope from the man's pocket. For a moment Lew felt disappointment gnawing at his stomach.

"Nobody will have to see this outside of us three," he said, smiling painfully. "We'll start tearing down the joint tomorrow, right, George?"

George nodded a silent agreement.

"And if materials, good ones, aren't too expensive," Nick continued, "maybe we can find a few bucks left over to take care of you, pal."

Lew smiled. A couple of hundred or so wouldn't be bad, he thought. That babe with the .45 looked like she might be expensive company.

THE END.

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JULY 1950

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# Destroying angel

By MARGARET MANNERS

WHEN Dr. Howard Rand stopped by and offered to run her husband into the village that hot summer morning, Beth Graham knew that he was asking Roger because he really wanted to ask her. She knew the physician didn't like the man she had married, and she knew he was leaning over backward to be fair because he was still in love with her. His nature was so straightforward that he concealed his devotion badly, and while he spoke to Roger his eyes never left her face.

"I'll have to make a few calls on the way in," he said warningly, "but if you don't mind a short wait, I'd be glad of your company."

To Beth's surprise, Roger accepted eagerly. Lately, he'd been less than civil about Howard's visits.

For an instant, she wanted to call them back. There was something unpleasantly prophetic about the two men in the car together, one the disappointed lover who wanted so much to marry her, the other the disappointed husband who found fault with everything she did. But she let them go, shading her eyes from the glaring sunlight to watch the old car vanish over the ridge.

Several hours later when Roger came limping home alone, his bruised face white and shocked, his clothes torn, she stared at him, speechless with fear. He was alive and well, but it was as if she could see behind him a bright shining figure with a naked sword. The angel of death!

He answered the question in her eyes. "Howard's dead. The car. Coming down the twin-angled bend."

Her hands trembled, her sight blurred. She wanted to say, "Why are you here if Howard was killed?" But her lips trembled and no sound came.

He seemed to read her unspoken thought. "You know how he is when he's on a case. He thought the Wister kid would die if he didn't get there in eight minutes. Nobody could do it in that time and live. I told him so. He was driving as if the devil himself sat at the wheel. I had a premonition; don't ask me how. I just knew he'd never make that curve. At the top I opened the door. He laughed at me, cursed me for a coward, but he slowed down an instant and I jumped. Must have passed out from the fall. It was the screech of his brakes that pulled me out of it. I heard the car go crashing down the ravine. He was dead when I got there. Don't look at me like that, Beth. I couldn't have stopped him!"

Beth hadn't realized she was looking at him in any particular way. She groped blindly for the support of the wall. Sorrow for the dead man twisted her. "I had a premonition, too," she said.

She supposed that it was always so when a woman heard of the death of a man who had been her friend. Numbness, regret, and then, sharp, stabbing pain! There was fear too, an enveloping, unidentified fear. "Why couldn't I have loved Howard?" she asked herself. "He was my best friend, he would have made me happy. Why did I have to marry a man I can never trust?" She couldn't answer the question. There was no answer.

While she was bathing her husband's

ankle, which was scratched and bruised but not particularly swollen, she thought that even if the injury had been very bad he would have to be content with her in-expert ministrations. Dr. Howard Rand was dead.

"Roger!" she said. "Good heavens, the West Ridge is without a doctor now! How terrible! The trip to the old hospital is so long and difficult. And what about emergency cases?"

"For God's sake!" His tone was brutal. "Do you wish it had been me instead of him?"

She looked up into the white, bitter face with its dissatisfied mouth. "Of course not. But, from the point of view of the community, he was the valuable person."

He pushed her away from the injured foot and grabbed the iodine bottle. "Valuable!" he sneered. "You wish you'd married him, don't you? You think he would have made a better husband."

"That wouldn't be difficult," she said wearily. "And as for that, Roger, I suppose all women have moments when they think the other man would make them happier. Howard loved me since I was a girl. We used to go fishing, berry picking, gathering mushrooms. He would have been good to me, but I didn't love him. You knew that."

"I didn't know it. I don't know it now. It you weren't in love with him, why did you return to this wasteland you were born in? Why did you let him hang around so much?"

"We came because you said you couldn't work in the city. You said the atmosphere was bad. Too many people. The telephone ringing."

"I thought you'd travel. I thought you'd take me somewhere interesting. I had no idea you'd dream up this god-forsaken home of your ancestors, inhabited by stammering yokels. It didn't occur to me that you'd come back and do charitable work among your own. I didn't know then that you wanted to be near your sterling doctor!"

She explained automatically, knowing it was useless. "Howard came so often because he liked seeing me. Since he lived in the house across the rise from us, it would have been peculiar if he stayed away. He's always taken care of me. He wanted to see that I was all right. He thought—" She stopped and bit her lip.

"Well, go on, say it. He thought what you thought, that I'd married you for your money!"

"Yes" She was too weary to conceal it.

"And I suppose he would have married you for the color of your eyes?"

"Not for my money," she protested passionately. "Whatever the reason, not for my money! He worked hard all his life. A country doctor! He would have gone on working just as hard. My money would have made no difference."

"And what about the hospital you were going to give him up here on the ridge?"

She turned white. "How did you know?"

"Do you think I'm a fool? I've known what was in your mind. You've talked enough about the lack of facilities for your damned hillbillies."

"Yes, but it would have been for them, not for him. He didn't even know I was going to give it to him."

He laughed. "He knew all right. Coming to you day and night with harrowing tales about conditions here."

"Oh!" She was disgusted. "Let's not talk about it."

"And what about me?" he shouted. "What about me, while you were going around giving away hospitals?"

She looked him full in the face and slowly said what she had longed to say for weeks, "You're a musician. You have your studio. You compose music that no one ever plays. Even I have never heard a note of your music."

His eyes shifted, veered away. "If this damned materialistic civilization doesn't want good music, can I help it?"

She rose from her position beside him. Taking a handful of small prepared bandages out of the medicine chest, she thrust them into his hand. "Here." Her voice was distant, she was no longer in the room with his hate. "I think you can finish. This has upset me and I have a headache. I'll go and lie down."

Upstairs in her bedroom, she closed the wooden shutters so that the room was dark and cool, then she lay down on the bed. In the stillness she could hear the thud of the blood in her temple and she shifted her head to avoid the disquieting rhythm. Howard was gone. Carelessly, recklessly, he had speeded to his death because a sick child needed him, and Roger had jumped out of the car because he had a premonition. Why didn't she believe that? "Oh, dear God!" she thought, "I wish we had a telephone! I could call up now. I could ask—" But what could she ask? Howard had been the only doctor. He had also been

the coroner. Wycherly would take over as county attorney. But a woman cannot ask questions that imply that she does not trust her husband. "We'll have to leave the ridge," she thought, "soon!"

She sat erect on the bed, staring into the gloom. A little pale light slid through the slats of the shutters and patterned the hooked rug on the wide-boarded pine floor. Howard drove fast, but he was no fool. How often had he returned from treating an accident case murmuring his anger at careless drivers. She kept seeing a picture. The two men in the car. A stop made on some excuse, a swift blow, and then the car careening madly down the twisting slope and hurtling into the ravine! Roger waiting safe at the top, hitting, bruising, scratching himself! Not any of it enough to hurt.

"Murder!" The word blazed in her head like a roman candle. But hatred, jealousy, envy, are these reasons to kill a man? Fear for the money she was giving for the hospital? No, she couldn't believe that Roger would deprive the ridge of its only doctor, and kill her friend and protector for such a— Protector? Now she had the villainous thought! There was a motive.

Her teeth chattered. If she were to die her husband would inherit everything. And there was no friend to come over the rise now and watch over her. A creaking board, a footstep in the house terrified her. Yes, remove Howard and there she was, exposed, defenceless as a wild animal in the glare of car headlights, under the wheels of death. Roger could sell the hated land and leave the ridge.

When? How? A hunting accident? A fall when climbing beside the rapids? The balcony? The staircase? A falling rock. All the familiar habits and surroundings became instruments of death. If she could guess she might prevent it, but not again, and again, and again.

She got up and went to the window and stood peering down into the quiet garden that she had pulled with aching back and earth-stained fingers from the encroaching wilderness. What had she been thinking? All this was the result of a lonely life and an overactive imagination. Next winter in the city she would laugh at the fancies of this morbid summer. "The truth is," she told herself angrily, "that you have never trusted Roger, and Howard's death has made you absolutely unjust! It was foolish to attempt to stay here in this isolated spot."

Through the cracks in the shutter she saw, but did not hear, the stealthy closing of the screen door below. Roger came out and after glancing up at her window began to walk nervously up and down the path. He smoked a cigarette and again stared at her window. She couldn't fathom the speculative look on his face, but she knew he was coming upstairs.

With rapidly beating heart, she lay down on the bed and forced herself to take deep, regular breaths. When the door opened, she looked like a woman deep in sleep. She did not answer the faint call.

The door closed softly. She opened her eyes and followed his footsteps through the house. Something slid like a slippery fish under the surface of her mind, but she could not catch it. Roger was in the kitchen. She heard the sound of running water in the sink.

Again she went to the window, and soon he came out, his coat dragging at one side as if there was something heavy in his pocket. He went down to the garage. She watched until he came back into the house.

Then she lay down again, breathing regularly as before. But she had snared the elusive idea. She could not push it from here. Roger walked with easy assurance. His limp was gone! No matter how slight his injury, could Roger recover so quickly? He had been limping badly when he returned from the accident.

About an hour later a car came over the ridge and entered the drive. From the window she saw that it was Wycherly, the county attorney. Her husband received him. She heard the murmur of their voices and then the studio door closing.

Like a thief in her own house, she crept down the stairs and went swiftly to the garage. It had been a barn once and the station wagon took only one corner of the huge structure. She wondered what she should look for. There was nothing odd or unusual that she could see even when she poked into all the dust-filled corners. Puzzled, she stood and waited for instinct to guide her. Her roving eyes searched, and then paused. She was staring at a pile of tools with a wrench lying on top, its ugly metal head catching the light. She had missed it that morning after Roger had left with Howard. She knew because she had tried to find it to change a washer in the kitchen. Roger had just put it back.

A shudder passed through her body. He

had washed something in the kitchen before he came out here. Without caring whether or not she was seen, she went back to the house. Her husband met her at the door, suspicion sharpened his face, made it wolfish.

"I thought you were asleep. Wycherly wants to see you. The damn fool's come asking questions about the accident. It seems to me that the whole blasted neighborhood would have been happier if I'd stayed in the car and accompanied Howard to his eternal rest."

She stumbled, almost screamed, when his arms reached out to steady her. So they were suspicious! Wycherly would help her. He could ask the questions she was afraid to ask.

Her husband followed her into the studio. Frantically, she searched her mind, but there was nothing really she could say about the accident, just the time her husband had come back with the news, what he said, and the time in the morning when Howard had offered to take him along.

Wycherly produced collaborative information that the proprietor of the village store had heard the doctor get the call there about the Wister child, had seen him leave in a powerful hurry. Roger had been with him in the car.

Wycherly was a sandy-haired, freckle-faced man about thirty. His sharp eyes had a way of veiling themselves when he wanted to conceal something, but the change occurred so abruptly from piercing to side-long glance that the maneuver defeated its purpose. One could always tell when he was on to something. Now he seemed only puzzled.

Roger didn't bother to hide his bitterness. "Wycherly has come out to tell us that the only thing wrong with the accident is that I'm still alive. It seems when I obeyed the instincts of a man who doesn't want to risk his neck needlessly, I did the wrong thing. I should have stayed and been killed, too."

Wycherly flushed darkly. He didn't like Roger, but then few people in the region did. "Your husband put things awkwardly, Mrs. Graham. There are all sorts of freak things which can happen in an accident, we know that, but a lot of people hereabouts feel that if your husband jumped at the rate Howard was going he would have been seriously injured."

Beth couldn't keep her eyes from traveling to her husband's foot. He had been limping

ever since he had met her at the door. Her mouth stiffened so that she could hardly speak. "Roger told me that when he opened the door. Howard saw him do it and slowed down. It's the sort of thing he would do if he thought that Roger meant to jump. He probably didn't realize how fast he was going; when he had a patient seriously ill he could drive like mad." But she hadn't said what she wanted to, so she added, "Perhaps something went wrong with the car, Howard was a careful driver."

"I guess that's the way it had to be." Wycherly sounded reluctant. "The car was so badly smashed there's not much to judge by. Howard's face was badly cut, but the thing that killed him was a caved-in skull. Horrible mess." He reached for his hat. "Hope you folks don't mind. Just routine. The county's kind of miserable. Dr. Rand was quite a figure around here."

Beth wanted to cry out that he must not leave, that he did not understand the evidence. But there was nothing to say. Her throat constricted violently. The room lurched and danced around her. She heard Wycherly shout, "Look out!" And then from a great distance the voice of her husband, "You shouldn't have said so much about his head. He was an old friend of Beth's."

She knew she was dreaming because of the veil clouding her vision. She knew because there were two Beths, one watching from the outside the actions of the other. She could stop the whole thing by saying it was a dream, and that it must go away. But she didn't want to for Howard was with her and she was talking to him. It was a summer day and they were going into the woods to gather mushrooms. He had worried about her habit of eating wild ones until she took him to the field where the safe growths sprouted. She convinced him that she really knew.

His words echoed hollowly as if her dream had the narrow dimensions of a grave. "There's not much danger here," he agreed, "but if you ever do get a wrong one—strange spores sometimes pollute a safe bed of them—you can tell by the symptoms, nausea and vomiting at first. The treatment is atropine. You'll find it in the cabinet with the other poisons. I have the dose marked on the office pad. We sometimes get cases here. Rarely, but there's one fungus, a deadly beauty, the country people



call 'Destroying Angel.' If you ever get hold of one and I'm not around take the atropine. Otherwise, don't dose yourself, it's dangerous stuff."

"I know," she heard the other Beth say. "They use it in eye drops, don't they?"

The scene dissolved in ribbons of swirling light. She was on a turntable swinging away and out of the rushing darkness a car came over the bend and teetered at the top of the twin curve. The sheer drop fell away. It made her dizzy to look. Her throat froze and she could not call out the warning words. She saw the wrench falling, watched the car start again and Roger jump out.

And now there was the smell of burning, something strong and choking. Rubber? Her eyes opened in startled horror on a spiral of smoke curling under her nose. "Ugh," she said. "What a smell!"

Amanda's satisfied chuckle answered her. "Burnt feathers, honey. You goin' to be all right now. Mr. Roger didn't like to have me do it, but I never seen it fail. Lie quiet."

"Mr. Wycherly?" Beth remembered everything. She thought that she might babble something about being afraid, or ask him to stay for supper and choose a moment to give him an envelope marked: "To Be Opened In The Event Of My Death."

"He's gone, honey. You rest. I got to get back to my work. Mr. Roger'll stay with you."

Roger's hand fastened on hers. She dared not shake it off. "He was a damned fool to talk so much, Beth. I'm sorry, too, that I spoke as I did. Poor Howard's gone, no use being critical. Feel all right?"

She smiled as confidently as she could. She wanted to say, "When will you kill me, Roger? How? Will it hurt? I'd much rather know." But she only said, "You shouldn't let her try these old wives' tricks. The house smells horribly of burned feathers! I wish we didn't have such a servant problem on the ridge."

"Well, you would come here." He was gently reproving. "But I don't mind, besides it's more private this way with her going home after dinner."

His words weighed on her heart. Why did Roger want privacy?

"Tomorrow," she said, "is Amanda's day off again. More cooking!"

"You don't feel well. I'll do it. No trouble." He wouldn't let her refuse his offer. "Look, let's be friends, Beth. I'm

really sorry about Howard. You seemed more concerned about him than about me. It made me jealous."

So he was going to cook tomorrow. Well, give him the weapon then. Be a gentle victim. Tell him how to kill her and then at least she'd know. But if she proffered it now he might suspect. Better wait.

She waited through the heavy supper, and all through the sleepless night. She was gentle and soft, and only mildly sad as befitted a woman who had lost a good friend.

At breakfast she smiled and invited him to murder her.

"I'm sick and tired of the monotonous food we've been having." She made her voice petulant. "Day after day the same things. When I lived here in my girlhood the place was alive with the most delicious mushrooms. Would you like to help me gather some? We could have them for lunch. Anyway, if I don't get out and do something I'll go mad."

But he didn't respond until she impressed upon him the need to be careful of poisonous growths. "Almost always fatal," she said, "unless the treatment is swift and one has atropine or one of the other antidotes." She found herself mentioning the drug several times, talking about Howard's keeping it in his well-stocked office. "He had to be his own pharmacist up here. But there's no danger with the mushrooms if you know what to look for. Howard said I was an expert."

She watched him rise to the bait. He became so elephantinely playful that she felt sick. "Well, we might at that. I've never been mushrooming. All right, one one condition! That you let me fix them. I think you ought not to do too much today."

She found the place quite easily, and it was alive with good, healthy growths. After a laborious and painstaking trip of scrutiny, she pointed out one corner of the field near a tree. "Don't pick those! Poisonous; Out there they're all perfect. I'll start across the hedge."

"Ah!" His laugh was as false as the kiss of Judas. "I never should have been able to tell. They look exactly alike!"

"That's the danger. But if one knows, the difference is quite marked."

They picked in silence for half an hour. She kept her back to him and did not once turn to look. On the way back to the house she let him go ahead so that she could stop

and look under the tree. The mushrooms that she had warned him against had been gathered, every one!

"Dear God!" she prayed. "Let it be all right. There is no other way for me now."

At the kitchen door, she faltered, almost pleaded. "Won't you let me help?"

"Nonsense. This won't take long. I'll call you."

He took her basket and shooed her away. Still she lingered. "Thanks. But couldn't we have them upstairs on the terrace then? On the card table?"

"That's an idea!" His enthusiasm echoed back through the closing screen door.

She had only to go in, look through the baskets, tell him there had been a mistake, and the moment would pass! But she could not let it pass, for there would be other days and no woman can live with death indefinitely.

When he called her, she went out on the upstairs terrace and looked at the card table with its steaming dishes. He had set it prettily with a gray porcelain bowl of purple petunias in the center. She sat at the place he indicated.

Anxiously, she scanned the tiered serving stand that he had carried everything up on. Had he forgotten nothing? "Let's have Amanda's fresh baked bread," she suggested, "and red wine. That will be just right. Would you like me to get it?"

She held her breath, but he was eager to please her and went off. She sat in her place never moving, and when he returned she ate with wooden lips the portion he had prepared for her.

When he had eaten more than half his plate she said, "Men cook better than women, that is, when they cook at all. That was delicious, perfect! Except that you set the table with the wobbly leg on my side. But that was all right. I just picked it up and turned it around. It was so light, and I didn't spill a thing. I hope you don't mind, it always drives me wild. Besides the floor doesn't slope on your side. It's much steadier this way."

The silence pressed against her ear drums. She kept the vacuous smile carefully in place.

"What?" he said. "What?"

"The table. Do you mind? I was too lazy to get something to put under the leg."

She chattered on. Pallor crept along the edges of his lips. His face turned putty-gray. "Either you or I," she thought. "How

else can I know? How else can I protect myself?"

She watched him battle to regain his self-control. His face was branded by fear, his eyes were distended with it.

Unsteadily, he poured a glass of wine and drank it. "What was the name of that stuff?" he asked carelessly. His hand trembled and a few drops of wine fell on the white cloth. "That mushroom antidote? Seems to me I've heard of it before."

"You have," she said. "It's used in eye drops. Atropine. Howard always kept some in the poison cabinet in his office. Told me to take it, a lot of it, if I ever had trouble with the wrong kind of mushrooms."

He suppressed a tell-tale clutching movement toward his stomach. His hand, thwarted, returned to the wine glass. "Feeling ill," he murmured, looking away. "Probably delayed shock. Think I'll get a breath of air."

She watched from the terrace as he took a short cut over the rise. It would take a while to get to Howard's, and then he'd have to break in.

This was the moment when she must be strong, but her nervousness increased. She tried to think of other things, but Howard's face, bloodstained and horrible, kept rising before her. In horror, she discovered that she had absent-mindedly helped herself to a mushroom from Roger's plate. She looked at it, shrugged and ate it. "And yet," she thought, "I'm not callous. I gave him every chance."

He came back slowly, using the path, avoiding effort like a man who nurses himself through a crisis. Smiling weakly, he greeted her on the terrace. He looked ill but less frightened. Loathing rose in her throat, choking her.

"Did you find it?" she asked deliberately.

"Find it?" His mouth hung open stupidly.

"Yes. How much did you take?"

He stared at her.

"Atropine," she said. "How much?"

"Why . . . I . . . I—"

"I hope it was a large dose," she said politely.

"Yes." Even now he was blind enough and selfish enough to think she would care what happened to him. "Yes, Beth, quite large. Ought I to lie down?"

For an instant she glimpsed the magnificent dimensions of his egocentric universe. "But shouldn't I take some, Roger? They were all cooked together, weren't they?" She found it ludicrously unbelievable that

he should still think it was chance that had defeated him. "Yes, Roger, I think you should lie down. I think you should lie down and pray!"

But still he did not fully understand. "Forgive me," he whined. "I was mad!"

"Was it madness that made you murder Howard?"

"It was jealousy. I couldn't stand it. I love you so much."

"Liar!" She despised him too much for pity. "You knew that you could never kill me and get away with it while Howard was alive. And you had to get rid of me to have your freedom and my money."

Counting the passing minutes, she let him talk and plead and explain. Then she cut it short. "I'm glad you're sorry, but it can't make any difference now. You're dying."

"Dying! But the atropine? I took it immediately!"

"I didn't touch the table, Roger. It was steady enough. Atropine is a deadly poison. It's killing you."

He was breathing heavily and his face was unnaturally flushed, he had trouble with his speech. "But then you"—he still didn't understand—"you ate them—"

"Of course, I ate them, one of yours, too. They were *all* perfectly good mushrooms. I've never seen a bad one in that field."

His voice rose to a scream. "Beth, Beth, I can't see you. It's dark, Beth. Get a doctor, please!"

"Have you forgotten? You killed Howard. There is no doctor I can get now. Not in time. I can't be merciful."

She was glad when the deep sleep overcame him. It was beyond horror, the whole thing. But it was just. He had paid for Howard's murder. If he hadn't planned to kill her, he would never have been driven to kill himself. In a little while she would get out of the station wagon and go for Wychery. He already suspected Roger. She would tell him that Roger had confessed to her, that he had run out of the house in an agony of fear and regret, to return dying. They would trace the poison, of course. They would find that he had broken into Howard's office. There would be fingerprints.

Slowly, she went down to the garage, slowly got the car out. "Howard is gone," she thought, "and I shall never marry again. But the ridge shall have its hospital! And we'll get another doctor."

# PSORIASIS

Psoriasis may be hereditary, may occur with puberty, may follow upon injury, exposure, shock, worry, faulty nutrition, or faulty elimination. Any one or more of these factors may complicate the trouble. The utmost skill is required to prepare treatment for the various causes and symptoms, and effectively meet the needs of the sufferer.

Psoriasis skin trouble is too serious for methods which are trifling and hazardous. To gain your desire—a lovely clear skin and a healthy scalp—you must have treatment that is specially prepared for you. There is no other way.

Under the Tremol system, your own treatment is specially prepared for you, to suit your individual needs. You apply the treatment in the privacy of your own home, without any interference with your work or your pleasure. Sufferers in all walks of life have applied Tremol Treatment in this way with gratifying success. Why not you?

Think what a healthy skin means to you! No unsightly scale, no distressing patches of redness, no irritation and no more embarrassing anxiety when you are at work or with your friends. With a healthy skin you can work with pleasure; you can join freely in sports, recreations, dances, and social activities with your friends; you can dress with pride; you can share the freedom and happiness of holidays, a new life is opened out to you.

No matter how long you have suffered, no matter how many attacks you have had, no matter how many eruptions you may have, no matter how extensive the eruptions may be, no matter what remedies have failed you, here is a splendid opportunity.

Write to the National College of Health. Your letter will have prompt attention and you will receive full particulars as to how you may obtain the Tremol Treatment, and have it specially prepared for your own needs, and for home application. This information is vital to you for the health of the skin. Send for full particulars of this splendid treatment to-day. Enclose 6d. as required by Government order and address your letter to:—

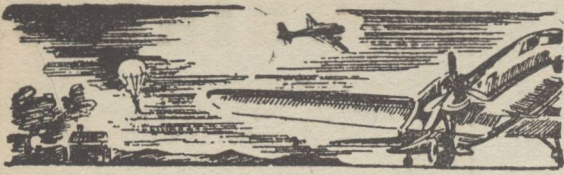
**THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF HEALTH**

CONSULTING DEPARTMENT 5.M.

GREAT CLOWES STREET

BROUGHTON, MANCHESTER, 7

# Murder



## in the Air

By **GRAHAM BERRY**

*A wet theatrical sign, a pea-soup fog, a burned parachute ring . . . and a dead woman. Homicide knew it had a job on its hands.*

"MURDER!" Kent Morgan barked the grim word into the mouthpiece.

"Please hurry, Kent!" an anxious feminine voice pleaded. "I . . . I think they're going to arrest him right away."

He cradled the phone, grabbed his hat and ran out of his law office so fast that his secretary jumped and muttered, "A man with that speed could make a fortune serving subpoenas."

The young attorney's car skidded to a stop near the control tower of the Monterey airport. Hurrying toward him was a small strikingly beautiful brunette, wearing tan slacks and a leather jacket over a sports blouse.

"I never was so glad to see anyone," she said, taking his hand.

"Ruth, what happened?" he demanded, as they walked swiftly toward a knot of people clustered around a sleek, twin-engined, eight-passenger Beechcraft, parked on the runway apron.

"It's the most fantastic thing," she said breathlessly. "Don flew Sandra Forsythe up from Santa Barbara in her plane. And when they landed here a few minutes ago, she was dead, a bullet hole in her forehead."

"Did Don do it?"

"This is no time for jokes," she said accusingly. "And what makes it bad is that she and Don were the only ones in the plane." There was a little spite in her voice

as she added, "Sandra always saw to it that there were no chaperones when they flew together."

"Maybe she was shot by somebody just before they took off."

"The medical examiner said she hasn't been dead more than an hour. And Don admits they were in the air two hours. I saw her about fifty minutes ago and she was alive then."

Kent squinted at her. "You saw her?"

The girl nodded. "I was flying some stuff up from L.A. for the Carmel Little Theater. I knew Don was coming up here. We rendezvoused about fifty miles south. I flew beside him for a while and talked to him over the radio. Sandra was sitting in the rear of her plane. When she saw me, she went up to Don, and put her arms around him and kissed him. Then she looked at me, waved and returned to her seat.

"Oh, Kent, I knew something awful would happen if he kept on piloting for that woman. The only reason she paid him him fifteen hundred a month was so she could try to steal him from me."

"But she didn't," Kent said soothingly. "And don't forget, the only reason Don worked for her was to get enough money to marry you and buy that C-47 cargo plane. He didn't know what she was like until after she'd tied him up with that contract." Kent stopped suddenly. "Say,

maybe you two can go into the air cargo business after all. I remember hearing that Sandra added a codicil to her will, leaving something to Don."

Ruth and Kent reached the plane. Standing with the tall, keen-eyed Don Downs were three policemen, Homicide Captain Bill Noble and Harold Schank. Kent recalled that Harold and his brother, Boyd, were Sandra's cousins and only relatives.

Harold was talking excitedly. In his light-gray flannels and leather jacket, he looked the part he played so well, that of the playboy flier. Kent remembered something else about him. Poor Ruth continually had to tell him she wasn't interested in him. But Harold wouldn't believe it.

"Captain Noble," Harold was saying, "no one else possibly could have done it. If the authorities haven't the gumption to sign a complaint, I'll do it myself."

Kent nodded a greeting and interrupted. "Mr. Schank, you and your brother, Boyd, being Sandra Forsythe's sole surviving relatives, stand to inherit a fortune by her death, don't you?"

Harold Schank glowered at Kent. "I don't think this is quite the time or place to discuss finances. And who are you?"

"Don Downs' attorney," Kent replied, adding, "I was wondering where you've been the last couple of hours."

"Just so you won't get any funny ideas," Harold retorted, "I've been here at the airport, waiting for Sandra. I drove from Carmel."

"And your brother, Boyd?"

"He's due any minute. He's flying in from the south."

Kent turned to the homicide captain. "Is the body still in the plane?"

Bill Noble nodded. "Sandra Forsythe is sitting for her last picture. Help yourself, Kent."

The lawyer climbed into the luxurious private plane. Two men were busy with measuring tapes. Speed Graphics and flashguns. Seated in an easy chair beside one of the portholelike windows was Sandra Forsythe. On first glance, she appeared alive, although slumped slightly in her seat. And even in death, her long, red fingernails had a clawlike, possessive quality. In life, she had clawed at men, won them, and then tossed them aside. Her unblinking eyes stared toward the ceiling. In her forehead near the hairline was a black hole, about the size a .25 caliber bullet would make.

The two men from the homicide bureau mumbled, "hello's," and continued with their work. There were footsteps and Kent turned to see Noble behind him.

"You've considered suicide, of course?" Kent asked.

"Sure," Noble said, offering him a cigarette. He lighted it and his own. "But suicide would have meant powder burns on her face. There aren't any, as you can see. Besides, there's no gun."

Kent peered closely at the dead face. And much as he disliked to, he touched one of her hands. It was still warm and limp.

"I hate to think a swell guy like Don would do it," Noble said, half apologetically. "But, doggone it, he's the only one who could have. She was shot when the plane was in flight. No one else could possibly have been in here. The windows are all closed."

"It doesn't make sense," Kent declared. "If Don were capable of this murder, which, of course, he isn't, do you suppose he'd calmly set the plane down here and call the police to view the body?"

"He could have shot her, thrown the gun away, and then by boldly landing here and claiming innocence, he might have hoped to get away with it," Noble argued. "And he had a motive. He hated the dame, and I understand she had him tied up in a contract that would have cost him a lot of dough to break. Also, don't forget Don was recently made a beneficiary in her will."

"You don't think he'd murder for money!"

"It's been done. But I figure his reason more likely was self-defense."

"What!" Kent exclaimed.

"He had some of her lipstick on his face. Maybe she tried to make love to him, he refused, and she threatened to wreck the plane, killing them both, if he didn't play along. Perhaps he figured he had to shoot her to keep from crashing. Although you'd think he could have just knocked her cold."

A man stepped into the cabin and rushed toward the body.

Noble grabbed him. "Easy," he said.

It was Boyd Schank, Harold's brother. He stared from one to the other of them. In contrast to his brother, Boyd was heavy and flabby, and his protruding lower lip had a habit of trembling a little.

"I know who did this!" His voice nearly broke, and his piglike eyes blazed. "I de-

mand that Don Downs be arrested for the murder of my cousin. She was in love with him, and I kept warning her against him. Poor girl! She always used her heart instead of her head."

"Where have you been the last couple of hours?" Kent demanded.

The pig-eyes turned toward him. "None of your damned business."

"You mean you refuse to say?" Kent asked politely.

"Refuse? Of course not. I was flying up from Santa Barbara, in my own plane. I just landed."

"Did you see Sandra's plane en route?"

There was a flicker of fear in the little eyes. "I did not. There were patches of fog on the way. And I was busy taking pictures along the ocean."

"Sorry, Kent," Noble broke in. "Afraid I'll have to take your client down to the station."

Kent glanced at the windows. While the one by the body was closed, it was not locked. The others were clamped shut by metal arms.

"Look," he pointed out. "I want you to notice that window, it's unlocked."

Noble squinted at it, then turned to one of his men. "Dust that lock. We'll see whose prints are on it."

"That reopens our suicide theory," Kent pursued quickly. "Sandra Forsythe could have held the gun at arm's length, just outside the window. She could have shot herself. The gun would have dropped to the earth below. Her arm would have slid down on her lap the way it is and the plane's slipstream would have forced the window closed."

"I tell you we investigated the suicide angle thoroughly," Noble said a little heatedly. "If what you say were true, there would be powder burns on her left sleeve. There are none. And Don would have heard a shot. He says he didn't."

Kent nodded and stepped outside the plane to where Don and Ruth stood, talking to the officers. The attorney drew the tall pilot aside and asked, "You made no stops coming up here?"

"No, why?"

"Ruth said you'd been in the air two hours. That's a long time for the trip in this fast plane."

"We had to circle Monterey for a while, waiting for the fog to lift."

"Did you see any other plane en route except Ruth's?"

"Yes, Boyd Schank flew alongside us for a bit just after we'd left Ruth."

"That's interesting," Kent said. "Boyd denies it."

Don frowned. "Hell, he came up on our starboard side and waved to us. He stayed with us until we started hitting fog patches."

"Sure you didn't see him on the port side?"

"No."

"The reason I ask is because it's a window on that side that's unlocked. Of course, Boyd could have flown over on that side in the fog."

"I suppose that's possible," Don agreed. "But no guy flying in fog could shoot that straight."

"Did Sandra usually have a window open during a trip?"

"If the weather was good. She claimed the slipstream was exhilarating."

"She must have been dead more than a half hour before you landed. How did it happen you didn't notice it until you reached the airport?"

"I was sore at the way she'd acted," Don explained. "I told her I was quitting, no matter what it cost to break the contract. I figured she was mad, too. She was silent and moody when she was peeved."

A heavy-set man stepped up to them, a cigar clenched between his teeth. He was District Attorney Virgil McCoy. "Hello, Kent," he said. He nodded at Don. "I have some information I think will be of great interest in this case." There was an ominous tone to his voice.

Don and Kent glanced at each other and followed McCoy into the plane. Ruth came with them. The fingerprint man was speaking to Bill Noble. "All the prints on this window and lock are Sandra Forsythe's," he was saying. "One set is smeared, as though she dragged her hand down."

"Gentlemen," McCoy said, clearing his throat, "I've just come from the airport control tower. The dispatches overheard a radio conversation between Don Downs and Ruth Breen."

Don nodded. "Yeah, we kidded each other via radio while she was flying beside me."

The D.A. looked around pompously. He obviously was a man who liked the spotlight.

"The control tower quotes Ruth Breen as saying, quote, 'That hussy Sandra is going to get killed some day doing such things.' And Don Downs is quoted as answering, 'That's no lie. She'll kill herself

and the pilot for monkeying with the man at the controls.' And then," McCoy paused dramatically. "Miss Breen answered, quote. 'I don't mean she'll get killed in an airplane accident.'"

"Obviously we were merely joshing," Don said lamely.

McCoy sputtered. "You call a murder threat, followed by a murder, joshing?"

Bill Noble asked Ruth. "On which side of the Forsythe plane were you flying?"

"On the port side," she answered.

The D.A. and homicide chief exchanged significant glances.

"We'd better have a look at Miss Breen's plane," Bill Noble said.

Inside the cargo plane, which was parked nearby, McCoy spotted a holster and automatic in back of the pilot's seat. "What's this?" he demanded.

"We carry a gun," Ruth explained. "We might need it in case of a forced landing."

Bill Noble lifted the holster and shook the gun out, careful not to touch it. He stuck a pencil in the barrel and picked it up with the pencil. He sniffed it and put it to McCoy's bulbous nose.

"Have you fired this gun lately, Miss Breen?" McCoy demanded.

"I've never used it," she replied, paling.

"Somebody has," the D.A. said ominously. And very recently.

Kent sniffed at the barrel, which gave off a sweet odor of burned gunpowder. It had been used, and within the past few hours. Noble handed it to an officer. "Check it for prints," he ordered. "And have ballistics compare it with the bullet." He turned to Ruth. "Miss Breen, it would speed matters if we had your fingerprints now."

"Of course," she said.

Homicide Captain Noble stroked his chin. "Nice little automatic. I'd say the murder bullet was the same caliber."

"We can wait for the ballistics report before we draw any conclusion," Kent snapped. "Let's have a look at the cargo." He started toward the tail end of the aircraft.

Noble stepped along beside him. "Looks bad for your clients," he said. "I can see now the girl had more of a motive than Don. Of course, they could have cooked it up together. But more likely she planned it herself and shot Sandra while they were cruising along side by side."

"Your reasoning astounds me," Kent said. "How could a girl, alone in a plane, fire so accurately and at the same time keep control of the ship?"

Noble grinned. "Don't tell me you didn't notice that this plane has an automatic pilot. She could have set the controls, opened a window and shot Sandra Forsythe very easily. She's an excellent shot. I understand Ruth won the Southern California trapshoot title for women last year."

"You think Ruth would do a thing like that?"

"You can't tell what a woman would do when she's jealous. And when there's dough involved for her fiancé and herself—well, those two reasons combine to make a pretty strong motive."

"Those Schank brothers had motives, too."

"Sure," Noble agreed. "But they lacked the opportunity. Harold—I believe he's the one who likes Ruth—arrived here by auto at least ten minutes before Don landed. Airport employees saw him here then. And Boyd, who landed forty minutes after Don, claims he didn't see the Forsythe plane. Don says he saw Boyd, but says he was flying on the starboard side. He couldn't have shot her from that side."

Kent examined the cargo. It consisted of some crates of pineapples and citrus fruit and several boxes of costumes for the Carmel Little Theater. Back of these boxes, next to the freight loading door, were several dozen signs about five by three feet in size, advertising a play at the little theater.

Noble pointed to the big red lettering which spelled out the play's title: "The Guilty Party." "Kind of ironical," he commented, "that Ruth would be carrying these."

The sign also carried the cast of characters, and Kent replied, "It's ironical, too, that the man starring as the villain is Boyd Schank." Then he added, "Say, the ink's not quite dry on these signs. See where this front one's smeared a little."

As they returned to the nose of the plane and stepped outside, Kent said, "Since you suspect the owners of this plane, I presume you will allow nothing to be touched in it until you complete your investigation."

"Certainly," Noble agreed.

The D.A. and Ruth were standing by a wing and he was talking rapidly to her. "It's either you or Don," he was saying. "And I can make it easy for you. Second or third degree. You saw the embrace, became enraged, and on the spur of the moment—"

Kent interrupted. "Don't let him bully you, Ruth." He turned to McCoy. "Since my client had nothing to do with this crime

she naturally denies all guilt. And I can make it embarrassing for you, McCoy, if you continue such crude tactics."

"Don't forget," the D.A. snapped. "I could arrest both your clients now for murder."

"And make yourself the laughing-stock of Monterey County," Kent retorted. "A false arrest in a prominent case like this would look bad for you at the next election."

The young attorney took Ruth's arm and led her away. "Had to throw a little scare into him so you and Don would be free to take a drive. Hey, Don."

He led the couple to his car. No one stopped them. "I think," Kent chuckled as they got in, "that McCoy figures I'm going to try to hide you out. Then he might have an excuse to arrest me, which would give him real pleasure."

He took a large map from the glove compartment. "Now, all we have to do is find a needle in a haystack. It won't be as tough as it sounds if we use a powerful enough magnet. You two must design it on this map. The design is your flight pattern after you entered the fog."

Don penciled in a line. "We came into fog and clouds over these hills. Then we flew in a clockwise circle to the right of the field. I was at thirty-five hundred feet and Ruth was at two thousand." He drew a circle on the map.

Kent studied the circle. It crossed part of the town, the nearby town of Carmel, the ocean front, wooded areas inland and a stretch of open country. Finally, the lawyer nodded and started the car.

They had driven only a few minutes when Don glanced behind and said, "I think that's a patrol car trailing us."

Kent only grinned and headed through wooded sections back of Monterey. They reached a large open area that had been cleared of trees. It was covered with brown grass and here and there were abandoned gray farm buildings in varying stages of collapse.

The attorney stepped from the car and looked around the first building, which had been a barn. He glanced inside and then returned to the car.

He had just finished inspecting the fifth structure when a police car drew alongside. An officer stepped quickly to them.

"What do you want?" Kent asked.

"Ruth Breen," the officer said. "A warrant's been issued for her, charging her with the murder of Sandra Forsythe."

"On what basis did Noble and McCoy arrive at that wild deduction?" Kent demanded.

"Not deduction," the officer retorted. "Just science. A little matter of ballistics. Noble radioed us that the bullet in the victim's head came from Miss Breen's gun."

Ruth gasped. "But how could it?"

Kent frowned. "I hadn't counted on 'em working so fast, Don. You'd better go back with her."

"We'll need you," Don insisted. "You've got to arrange bail and all that."

"The charge is murder," Kent explained. "You can't bail her out. Besides, I must find that needle, plus proof that neither of you committed the crime."

"You're supposed to be a lawyer, not a detective," Don snapped, getting into the police car with Ruth. "Needle in a haystack, be damned!"

The patrol car drove off and Kent resumed his methodical search. Three barns and two chicken houses later he spotted a little pile of ashes which looked the remains of a tramp's cookstove. Rummaging through the ashes, Kent fished out a twisted, U-shaped piece of metal.

He jumped in the car and sped back toward town. A siren wailed and a motorcycle officer finally drew alongside, motioning him to the side of the highway.

Slowing down to sixty, Kent yelled he was going to the airport on a matter of life and death. The officer nodded, pulled ahead and led the way with full siren.

They stopped at the airport. Kent and the traffic officer hurried toward Ruth's cargo plane.

"We must get a sign out of that plane," Kent explained. "It's evidence in a murder case."

"What you gonna do with it?" the officer demanded.

"Take it to the D.A.'s office."

"O.K., but if this isn't as good as you say it is, you'll spend the next ten years in jail for the traffic violations I'll write against you."

A policeman stood guard beside the aircraft.

"It's O.K., Pat," the motorcycle officer said. "He wants to take something to McCoy. I'm sticking right with him."

They entered the plane. And with the officers as witnesses, Kent took the first of the signs advertising the play. Then the traffic officer led the way to the district attorney's office.



A secretary looked up, surprised, as the two men rushed into the office.

"Where's McCoy?" Kent demanded.

"He's busy. You'll have to wait," the girl said.

"Thanks," Kent shot back, barging past her into an inner office.

McCoy was standing behind his desk and turned, frowning at the interruption. A white-faced Ruth sat in a chair in front of him, Don beside her. Boyd and Harold Schank sat nearby with Bill Noble. It was obvious McCoy had been grilling her.

"Just the crowd I wanted to see," Kent gasped, dropping his hat on McCoy's desk.

"If you've come here to represent this woman as her attorney, please sit down and keep quiet," McCoy snapped, irritatedly. "Otherwise, please leave immediately."

Kent grinned. "I come here representing Miss Breen and also justice."

He held up the sign so all could see. "This ad was in Miss Breen's plane," he said. "It is one of several dozen such signs, only this one was in front of the bunch. The officer here is a witness to that. You see it advertises 'The Guilty Party.'"

"What kind of tomfoolery is this?" McCoy thundered.

"You believe in scientific detection, Mr. District Attorney," Kent went on, unruffled. "This is part of your evidence. It reveals the guilty man."

Boyd Schank jumped ponderously to his feet. "Are you insinuating that just because my name appears there as a member of the cast that I murdered Sandra?"

"This sign means," Kent explained, "that in the play you are the guilty party. But in real life the rôle belongs to your brother."

Harold's lean face twisted with anger. "The man's crazy!" he said.

"Kent Morgan," McCoy thundered, "if your story isn't pretty good, you're going to jail along with your clients."

"That's what I told him," the traffic officer said, opening his ticket pad.

Kent reached into his pocket and dropped the twisted piece of metal on McCoy's desk. "Harold Schank, have you ever seen this before?" he asked.

Harold's face turned gray. "How should I know?" he asked huskily. "What is it?"

"It's the needle in the haystack, the handle of a parachute ripcord," Kent replied. "It's from the same 'chute you used when you jumped from Ruth Breen's plane after you had used her gun to kill your cousin."

"But that parachute was destr—" Harold stopped in panic.

"Keep right on talking," Kent said, smiling.

"You have no proof. No proof at all!" the lean man sputtered.

Kent walked to him, grabbed him and flipped up the back of his jacket, forcing him to bend over.

"If I'm not mistaken," Kent said, "you're carrying the proof on the seat of your pants."

On the hindside of Harold's light-gray trousers were red letters in reverse. They were blurred, but plainly discernible, and spelled, backward, of course, the word "guilty."

Kent turned him loose. "Mr. McCoy, you will find bits of thread from Harold's pants on the sign I brought in here. Harold leaned against this sign while awaiting an opportunity to open a window in Ruth Breen's plane and commit the murder. Miss Breen wouldn't hear the shot because Schank had his arm out the window when he fired. The motors would drown any noise."

"But," McCoy asked weakly, "how could he have done it and been waiting at the airport?"

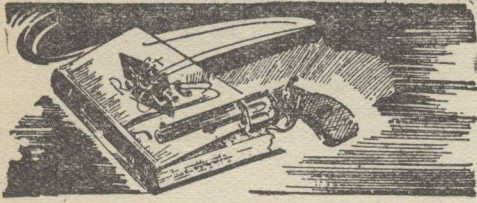
Kent took his time lighting a cigarette. "He knew Miss Breen's habit of flying alongside Don and chatting with him. He also knew Sandra Forsythe usually flew with her window open. And he knew the route they would take. He also figured there would be fog and he knew the circular flight pattern of planes waiting for the fog to lift. There was only one place on the pattern where a man could parachute safely and with the certainty of being undetected. That was over the abandoned farmlands.

"It was easy for him, after sneaking aboard the plane in Los Angeles and after shooting Sandra, to don his 'chute and slip out of the cargo door when they entered the fog. The slipstream closed the door. Harold dropped near where he had hidden a car, burned the 'chute and drove fast to the airport. He arrived considerably ahead of the planes, which were still fogbound. Conditions were just right all along the line today for Harold to commit his crime. If they hadn't been, no doubt he would have waited. He had one big advantage over most murderers. He could wait until conditions were just right."

Kent paused for breath and then went

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# Love,



## honor and homicide

By TOM BETTS

It was a dreary evening, late March, with a heavy and unseasonable snow falling silently to pile a sodden, white blanket over the countryside.

Inside his large, square brick house, which, with that of his brother's, sat well back from the highway near the village of Arthurdale, Ben Latah idly scanned the pages of a book. He was a thickset, powerful man of forty, with quick dark eyes and a roving fancy for women. He did not actually dislike his slender blonde wife who sat opposite him. He was merely bored with her, and had been for quite some while. Even during the years of his war service, as a major, Ben Latah's moments with his wife had been far more fleeting than his furloughs. He was and always had been a man whose restlessness in love was exceeded only by his boredom with conquest. Tonight he made no attempt to hide this boredom. And she appeared indifferent to it.

And the sudden chime of the front door's gong interrupted a silence which if not peaceful was at least profound.

Ben tossed his book aside, and walked heavily into the hall.

From the hall, Ben's throaty voice rose in an angry oath, choked off as though in amazement, and was followed by the violent roar of a heavy calibered weapon.

Something heavy crashed to the floor. The door slammed. Violet Latah's slim hand crept up to her delicate throat. Slowly, very slowly, she walked to the hall, and

stared down at her husband's sprawled, bloody body. But his dark eyes which now at last did not wander from her were glazed and unseeing. She swayed and would have fallen had not an arm caught her about the waist, helped her back to the living room, and lowered her trembling body to a chair.

She shook her shiny blonde head dazedly as her eyes focused on Peirce Latah, her husband's brother.

"Peirce! Where did you—"

He showed no emotion. "I was at the back door when the shot was fired, Violet. Who did it?"

"I don't know!" She shuddered. "Ben . . . Ben's dead, isn't he?"

He nodded. "I'll call the sheriff." His eyes softened. "And Dr. Morgan . . . for you, Violet."

Joel McDaniels, at thirty, was fairly young for the high office of sheriff to which the voters of Marsden County had recently elected him. He, with a stocky, tow-headed deputy, Peter Van Cort, arrived at Ben Latah's silent house at precisely nine o'clock.

Peirce Latah admitted the officers. Peirce was a year younger than Ben, small and not so heavy. His hair was black and thick, as were his brows, with one slight streak of gray in front. A widower, and childless, he had served throughout the war, and returned to re-enter an insurance business left by his father.

Ben's body lay untouched, a sprawled, grotesque heap.

"So!" muttered Van Cort. "A .45 did it, from the looks of that hole."

"Maybe," agreed Joel. He stepped across the body and faced Peirce Latah. "How'd it happen, Mr. Latah?"

Peirce shrugged. "Ben answered the front door chimes, and whoever was there killed him."

"You didn't see the killer?"

"No."

"Who was in the house?"

"Ben's wife. I was at the back door when the shot was fired, on my way in to visit for the evening." Peirce paused. "I always use the back door; it's closer." He added, "There is no servant. Violet, that's Ben's wife, does her own work."

Van Cort, who was kneeling on a step, part way to the second floor, let out a cry. "Here's where the bullet struck, after it went through his head!" He produced a knife and dug into the wood, then returned, carrying a misshapen pellet.

Joel McDaniels stared at it. "A .45 all right! Not a nice thing to use. Not a woman's weapon, Van."

"Not unless it'd be the only thing she could find."

"Uh-huh. Maybe a service pistol." He looked at Peirce Latah. "Your brother was in the war. Did he bring back his service pistol?"

"Oh, possibly. I wouldn't know."

Joel said, "I have mine. Maybe you have one, too, Mr. Latah."

"I think I have one somewhere around the house. I'll make it a point to look it up for you."

Joel nodded. "We'll have to check on the whole neighborhood, I guess." He turned toward the door. "I want to look outside before the snow covers everything up. Then I'll see Mrs. Latah."

Faint tracks in the snow, in addition to those made by Joel and Van Cort, led to the highway. Joel rubbed his lean, reddish face with a wet hand and frowned.

"Looks like the guy slipped and fell," said Van Cort.

Joel nodded. The snow had been scuffed aside in one spot, and beyond this, ahead of Joel's parked car, were dim ruts in the snow. "There was a car here, all right."

A quarter of a mile distant, the lights of a gas station were yellow in the falling snow. "Let's check there," suggested Van Cort.

The station's attendant nodded at their inquiry. "Yep, there was a car parked in

front of Ben Latah's house, maybe a half hour or more ago. Wasn't there long, but I noticed it as it pulled away and went by here. Couldn't see the driver, what with the snow on its windows, but I've had my eye out for a good used car, and it was just the kind I want."

"What kind was it?"

"A '42 Plymouth. Black sedan. Motor sounded good."

Returning to Latah's house, Joel phoned in his report on the car. The county coroner had arrived and was examining Ben Latah's body. He squinted upward through his rimless glasses when Joel hung up the phone in the hallway.

"The person who did this surely meant business, Joel. It was instant death, of course." He paused. "Dr. Morgan's here, with Mrs. Latah." He nodded toward the upper floor.

Joel said, "We want to talk a moment with her. Come on, Van."

Peirce Latah and the physician were standing as they entered her room. Violet Latah was seated in a green armchair, which suited her blonde hair and the delicate coloring of her smooth cheeks. She looked up, and Peirce introduced the officers.

Dr. Morgan, trim and calm, a professional-appearing man in his middle forties, said, "I know you understand how Mrs. Latah feels, Joel." He took her hand and smiled sympathetically. "I'll stop in tomorrow, Violet. Chin up." With a nod, he left the room.

Joel faced the window. "Have you any idea at all as to who did it, Mrs. Latah?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Did anything happen today, or at any time, that you might now connect up with . . . with the murder?"

"No, sheriff."

"What was your husband doing before he answered the door?"

"He was reading a biography of Robert E. Lee."

"Where?"

"Why, in the living room." She gave a brief account of what had occurred. "He was sitting in his big winged-back chair, when the door chimes sounded."

"Was that chair near a window?"

"Yes, about four or five feet from our front windows."

"Was the chair's back toward those windows?"

She nodded. "Yes, that's right."

"Then if the murderer was on the front porch, watching the room, he could not have seen Mr. Latah clearly . . . I mean, clearly enough to have risked a shot through the window?"

"No-o, I suppose not. He could have seen Ben's hands, his book, his legs from the knees down—"

Enough of him to know it was your husband, but not enough of him to draw a sure aim," said Joel. "That's probably why he rang your doorbell. Otherwise, shooting through the window would have seemed safer." He paused. "Does Mr. Latah have an army pistol around?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure. He has a whole trunk full of his army clothing stored in the attic, and his hunting gear is up there, too."

In the lower hallway, the telephone rang, and its ringing was interrupted as someone answered.

The coroner, short of breath, appeared in the doorway. "It was for you, Joel. The state police've found a '42 Plymouth sedan, abandoned in a snow-drifted ditch on Route 10 at the edge of Kirkland. And the sergeant says he'll send a couple of men over here to help you, if you want 'em."

"Tell him I want them," replied Joel. He turned to Van. "I'll drive to Kirkland and take a look at that car. You can look over the grounds and the house. The state troopers'll help you. Maybe you'll be able to locate Mr. Latah's service pistol." He paused fractionally, then added, "Mr. Ben Latah's."

It was not quite ten when Joel reached the outskirts of Kirkland, a dozen miles away. It had stopped snowing, and he located the stalled Plymouth. Red lanterns were up, and a trooper stood guard.

The trooper said, "Nothing special in the Plymouth to interest you, sheriff, but we've found out who owns it. Fellow who lives here in town, named Arthur Jones."

"Jones? I know him," said Joel. "He's a real estate agent. Has anyone talked to him since you found this car?"

"Not yet. We were waiting for you."

Jones and his family lived in a pleasant bungalow not far from where his car had been abandoned. Joel McDaniels found both Jones and his wife at home.

"Gosh, Joel!" he exploded, when he had been told that his car was found some blocks distant. "Why, I never knew it was

gone. I had it parked back there in the alley." He nodded toward the rear of his house. "Keys, and all, I guess," he added ruefully. "Say, I sure appreciate the fact that you fellows found it, even before I noticed it was gone. Is it O.K.?"

Joel said, "Yes, the car's O.K." Then he came to the point. "You know Ben Latah, Art?"

Jones' eyes widened. "Ben Latah? Yeah, sure, I've heard of him. Why?"

Mrs. Jones' lips compressed. "Art's heard of Mrs. Ben Latah, too."

Arthur Jones' good humor fell away. He glared at his wife, but said nothing.

"That's interesting," murmured Joel. "You folks been home all evening?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Jones.

"Been stuck right in this chair since dinner," said Jones. "Why? What's up? You're not just concerned about my car, Joel. I mean, after all, it's been found—"

Joel McDaniels watched him steadily. "Your car was used tonight," he replied, "by someone who murdered Ben Latah."

Arthur Jones came to his feet. His wife's color drained away.

"Murder's serious," went on Joel quietly. "You folks better tell me whatever you know."

Jones wet his lips. "I . . . I—" He glanced toward his wife. "I haven't so much as seen Violet Latah since she worked for Adams."

"Adams?"

"The Adams Casting Co." Jones jerked a thumb mechanically. "Old J.B. lives right back of us."

"She worked in the casting company? When?"

Jones shrugged. "Well, Violet didn't need the money, of course. It was during the war. Her husband was in service and she wanted to do something. I never saw her except at the office, and a couple of times at lunch. That was all."

"You worked there during the war, too?"

"That's right, until I was drafted in '44."

Mrs. Jones spoke up with vigor. "Now, you see, Art! I told you!" She turned to Joel. "Art hasn't been with that woman since he got out of the army, Joel. It's a good thing, too! I mean, he might be in an awful mess now, if he hadn't listened to me, mightn't he?"

"I shouldn't wonder," murmured Joel. He stared at Jones. "By the way, when you got discharged, did you bring home a service pistol?"

"Gosh, no! Sweet chance for a dogface like me to get hold of one!"

Joel McDaniels went to state police headquarters, following his talk with Arthur Jones, and put in a call for Van Cort at the Latah home.

"Find anything?" he asked his deputy.

"Yeah," said Van Cort dryly. "Ben Latah didn't have one army .45, he has two, plus half an arsenal he must've brought back from Germany."

"I'll leave the bullet here for an examination," replied Joel. "It looks like a .45, all right, but it might be from some other heavy caliber gun. Have any of Ben's been used recently?"

"Not so far as I can tell." Van Cort paused. "Mrs. Latah's gone to bed."

"I'll see her in the morning," said Joel.

Much of the preceding night's snow had melted, and lay as heavy slush on the highway, when Joel McDaniels parked in front of the Latah house at nine the following morning.

There was faint color in Violet Latah's cheeks, when she met him.

Joel said, "I hope you'll excuse a few questions, Mrs. Latah. You know Art Jones of Kirkland?"

"Art Jones! Yes! At least—Well, why?"

"His car was used by the person who killed your husband."

Violet Latah stared. "You . . . I can't believe that!"

"It was his car, all right."

She drew a deep breath. "Why . . . why, it's incredible. I mean, well, there was never a thing between Art and myself. Never a thing! It's ridiculous." She colored slightly. "And I'm perfectly sure Ben never . . . never gave any thought to it."

"Do you know Art Jones well, Mrs. Latah?"

"Oh, we both worked for the Adams Casting Co. during the war. I lunched with Art a few times, just as I often did with Mr. Adams himself. I never thought anyone would think a thing of it."

"But someone did?"

She smiled ruefully. "Art's wife. Someone sent her letters, ignorant letters about us. After that, I was never near Art."

"Have you any idea who wrote those letters?"

She shook her blonde head. "No. Perhaps a girl who disliked me or one who liked Art. Mr. Adams was going to put a detective on the case, but about that time, Art got put in 1-A and was drafted, any-

how, and the whole thing was dropped. It was just silly."

"His war job didn't keep him out, eh?"

"It didn't. Art had three children, and he was past thirty-five, but he was called up, anyhow."

Joel rose from his chair. As he turned toward the hall, he pointed toward a high-backed wing chair. "Is this where your husband sat last night, Mrs. Latah?"

She nodded. "Yes. And there's the book he was reading, right where he dropped it on the table."

"Robert E. Lee," said Joel. "It's a good book. All officers should read it."

He joined Van Cort in the hallway, as Peirce Latah entered the house.

Peirce said, "I saw your car out front, Joel. Is there any new development?"

"Well," said Joel, "we know whose car was used." He told him about Arthur Jones.

"Jones?" Peirce frowned. "I can't place the man. Is there any reason why he might want . . . might want Ben out of the way?"

"Not that we can figure," Joel told him. As he drove toward Kirkland with Van Cort, he said, "I'm wondering if there's any reason why Peirce might want Ben out of the way. Money? Business?"

"Maybe Ben's wife," Van Cort suggested.

"Yes, there are a lot of angles," agreed Joel. "And I want to check on that one now. I want to see old J. B. Adams. We'll probably catch him at his home. I understand he hasn't been well lately."

That, as it developed, was putting it mildly. They were ushered into the lower hallway at Adams' stately home by the Japanese butler, and were there informed by a nurse that Mr. Adams had suffered a severe heart attack the night before. "You'll have to see Dr. Morgan," she said. "He'll be here very shortly."

"I hate to say this," observed Van Cort as they waited, "but that butler, could he have a grudge against Ben Latah? He's the only Nip in this section, and maybe Ben stepped on the toes of some of his ancestors during the war, and this is a vengeance murder."

His words were obviously spoken in fun, and Joel grinned. "This particular butler served a couple of years with our forces in Italy. He was wounded twice. I guess you could call him a darned good American, Van."

Dr. Morgan arrived a few minutes later. He listened gravely to Joel's request.

"I'd like to help you, Joel," he said. "But

I'm afraid old J. B. can't tell you much. Frankly, he's in a bad way. Very bad. I was called here last night after I left Mrs. Latah."

"I didn't know—" began Joel.

"Oh, J. B.'s been sick a long time. A good deal of strain during the war, but even before that, he— Well, you remember he was a colonel in the National Guard before the war, and bad as we needed old line officers in '41, he was rejected for even desk work, because of his heart. So he fussed around here, getting worse all the time. Last night, he went to bed about seven, in fair condition, according to his nurse. But he had an attack shortly afterward. That's when I was called." Dr. Morgan paused. "We've sent for his relatives. He won't last very long, I'm afraid."

Joel seized on this. "Then, if he's got no chance anyhow, would it really hurt to ask him a few questions? It may point the way to Ben Latah's murderer."

Dr. Morgan frowned. "You put me on a spot, Joel." He hesitated. "Well, just a few words then. Nothing to arouse him, you understand. And no mention of this murder!"

Joel and Van Cort accompanied the physician up the broad, polished stairway. J. B. Adams was in a large, old-fashioned bedroom, furnished with a thick rug and a heavy, solid mahogany suite. A low fire crackled in a black marble fireplace. Normally large of frame, J. B. Adams now looked gaunt and sunken, half hidden under the bed covers. His ageing cheeks were the color of parchment, and he stared blankly into space as they entered.

The doctor nodded, and Joel stepped forward.

"Mr. Adams, will you answer a few questions for me?"

The sick man took no notice of Joel McDaniels. His eyes stared straight ahead. "I'd like to know about Arthur Jones, when he worked for you," went on Joel. "And his relationship with Mrs. Ben Latah—"

The old man stiffened. Slowly, he turned his head. His dry lips moved in a hoarse whisper. "Fine girl, Violet. Fine girl. But Ben's no good! A lot of help Freeman is to him!"

"Who?" asked Joel.

J. B. Adams lay still.

Joel glanced up at the doctor, then leaned closer. "Do you mean Douglas Freeman?"

The sick man's breathing was harsh. He made no reply.

Joel tried again. "Mr. Adams, was there any trouble between Arthur Jones and Ben Latah?" He paused. "Jones worked for you, Mr. Adams. At your plant. Was there an affair between Violet Latah and him?"

Adams struggled to raise his head. "No affair! Violet saw . . . saw nothing in him." He sank back.

The doctor raised a hand in warning. The interview was at an end.

Back at state police headquarters, there was word for Joel. "That bullet," began the sergeant, "it was shot from a regulation Colt .45, all right. There's no question about it."

"Everyone in town seems to own one," said Van Cort. "Why, even Doc Morgan was a medical officer in the war. He might have one." He winked at Joel. "And didn't you say that Nip butler was in service, too?"

"I've got other things to check on right now," Joel told him. "For one thing, those letters Mrs. Jones received. I want to see her again, and then I want to see what I can find out about them at the Adams Casting Co. You go back and search around Latah's house for the gun. I'll call you sometime this afternoon."

"O.K.," replied Van Cort. "But tell me something. Do you expect to find a guy named Freeman there?"

"I hope not," said Joel. "But you never can tell."

He spent a few busy hours, following which he called up Dr. Morgan, and then phoned his deputy.

"Van," he said, "have you found that pistol?"

Not yet."

"O.K., listen. I want you to meet me as soon as you can at Adams' house. Bring Ben's wife, and his brother with you. I want them there—and that's an order!"

It was nearly three when Joel McDaniels reached the house in which J. B. Adams lay dying. Arthur Jones, smoking nervously, accompanied him. They were met on the lower floor by Dr. Morgan.

"I don't like this, Joel," he said. "I don't like it at all. But after what you've said, you give me no choice in the matter." He paused. "Do you want to go up now, or wait for the others?"

"We'll wait," replied Joel.

Outside, a light wind had sprung up. It was spring. Branches, now bleak and bare, would soon be budding. But upstairs, death was blowing its chill breath toward the large room in which J. B. Adams lay.

Van Cort arrived ten minutes later. Peirce and Violet Latah, both looking tense, were with him.

The entire group went quietly upstairs to the bedroom. Joel stood aside, and entered last. He crossed the thick rug, and stood by the bed, from which came the heavy sound of breathing.

"Mr. Adams," he said softly.

The old man stared ahead wordlessly.

"Mr. Adams," repeated Joel, "I've got the person who murdered Ben Latah. I've brought Violet here."

The sick man stiffened. He turned slowly.

"Yes, here's Violet." Joel motioned with his hand. She moved forward. "Here's Violet Latah, Mr. Adams. Did you know Ben's brother is in love with her?"

Peirce Latah gave an angry exclamation.

"They're in love," went on Joel. "That's why they plotted to kill Violet's husband—"

Violet Latah screamed. "No! No, that's a lie!"

J. B. Adams struggled to raise himself. His breathing had become explosive. His hands clawed at the bed clothing. "She . . . she didn't . . . couldn't murder anyone!"

"Oh, it wasn't so hard," went on Joel earnestly. "They had motive, opportunity. And we've got proof—"

"No!" J. B. Adams cried.

"Well, you yourself know what sort of a woman Violet Latah is. Jones' wife got those letters. She still has them. I checked the writing on them with samples at your plant, and I can prove they were written by a very reliable person."

"No!"

Joel shook his head. "I'm sure sorry, Mr. Adams, but we think Mrs. Latah's guilty as hell. And so will any jury. Why those letters show what kind of woman she is, and—"

"You . . . you—"

"Don't try to protect her, Mr. Adams. You may not live to see it, but I can tell you now that Violet Latah will be convicted of the murder of her husband—"

"Stop!" The sick man's voice rose in a shriek. "Stop!" His covers were askew. His bony fingers trembled. "Stop, I tell you!" He gulped for breath. Then his voice quieted a little. "I killed Ben Latah." He spoke slowly. "I knew what that devil was doing to Violet. I knew I was dying, anyhow. I couldn't . . . couldn't stand the thought of leaving . . . leaving her to his mercy. I killed him."

In the hush which followed, Adam fell back on the pillows.

Dr. Morgan stepped forward quickly, and bent over him.

Joel said softly, "I'm sorry it had to be this way. I felt sure he had murdered Ben Latah, but I couldn't prove it."

"It's fantastic," muttered Peirce.

Joel shrugged. "Well, he was crazy about your brother's wife, from away back, I guess. He was jealous of Jones, when Jones worked with her. He sent Mrs. Jones those letters himself. The handwriting was disguised, but I checked it pretty close with some samples of his I found at his office. I guess that's why he made no attempt to keep Jones out of I-A in the draft, although he probably could have done so. And it may also be why he borrowed Jones' car last night, though in that case, it may have been just a matter of convenience. He could see the car parked in the alley here, from his bedroom window. He was not sick then but what he could get to the car and drive it."

"What about the pistol?" asked Peirce. "You said it was a service .45."

"That's right. And I think we'll find that Adams owned one. He's a former National Guard officer."

"But what made you suspect a man like J. B. Adams?" cried Peirce. "I still don't understand."

Joel shrugged. "It was the book your brother was reading last night. Robert E. Lee. That's a Pulitzer prize biography by Douglas Southall Freeman."

"Yes? Well?"

"Adams was scornful of your brother's having read the book. He mentioned Freeman as not being much help to Ben. I couldn't think for a moment what he meant. Then I remembered that it was Freeman's well-known biography which Ben had been reading, and he was close enough to the front porch windows for Adams to have noticed the book in his hands. No doubt it was a favorite of J. B.'s as it is with many older officers." He paused. "After that break of Adams', the rest was routine."

"Routine?" Peirce Latah smiled faintly. "Well, maybe. But you've rather scared me, Joel. It happens that you guessed pretty accurately my feelings toward Violet. For a moment, I could almost see the jury filing back to their box, and staring at me." He shuddered. "I'll take love and honor, not homicide, any day."

# Helen Walker, M.D.

By CHARLES B. DICKSON

THINGS were not going at all well for young Dr. Helen Walker. She had returned to her home town of Merryvale with such high hopes. Her family was prominent there. She was attractive, personable, popular with all who knew her. Which included virtually everyone in town. She had attended one of the nation's best medical schools and had been graduated with honors. She was a good doctor.

But Merryvale wasn't having any. At least, not very much. It was an old-fashioned town and believed the profession of doctoring should be reserved for older and more level—in other words, masculine—heads.

The young doctor was returning from a long drive over almost non-existent roads to a sharecropper's cabin. A maternity case. If she ever collected a penny for the visit, it would be something more than a miracle. But, as she always told herself, somebody had to go.

She rounded a sharp curve in the narrow, sandy road. A lofty fringe of bushes had hidden the green sedan parked crosswise of the road just beyond the bend. She barely had time to stop before crashing into the stalled vehicle.

A man stood at the roadside. A man with a thin, gray face and a curving, predatory beak of a nose. He reached her car with one long-legged stride and shoved a revolver through the window. He ordered, "Get out!"

She obeyed. Her heart was doing strange flipflops that should, according to her medical training, have been impossible. The man waved his weapon at the green sedan. He directed curtly, "Get in and get her out of the road."

She noticed that his left arm hung limply at his side. She could see where the bullet had penetrated his coat, just above the elbow.

He crouched watchfully in the back seat, his revolver nuzzling her back, while she straightened the green sedan, parked it on the right side of the road. He ordered her brusquely back to her own car.

"I'll tell you where to drive," he gritted through tight, pale lips. "And don't forget

—one tricky move, and you'll be in the same boat with another guy that got smart with me a while ago."

There was no doubt which boat he meant, the ferry across the river Styx.

The man ordered, "Straight down this road to the Anderson highway, then take the left."

His brown felt hat now lay in his lap, and the revolver had vanished beneath it, but she knew his fingers were on the trigger.

Muted music had been coming from the car's radio. The program changed. An announcer's silky voice began:

"And now we bring you fifteen minutes of the latest news. Our first item is a local flash, which was just received in our studios."

"The manager of the Merryvale Farmer's Market was slain and \$1,500 in cash was stolen in a daring late-afternoon holdup by three armed bandits. One of the hold-up men was killed in a fierce exchange of shots with A. A. Simms, the manager, who also died while being speeded to the hospital with wounds in his chest and abdomen.

"The other two bandits escaped. One made his getaway in a green sedan. The other, cut off from his companion, fled on foot. All roads in this and neighboring counties are being closely watched by county and state police."

Dr. Helen turned her blonde head and stared at her captor; her hazel eyes were wide behind their long lashes. The beak-nosed man nodded bleakly. "So now you know. You also know I got a nervous trigger finger."

The girl turned down the Anderson highway. Her hands were cool and steady on the wheel, but her mind was seething. Was there no plan, no stratagem by which she could deliver herself from this ruthless killer?"

Suddenly, her heart gave a somersault that would have done credit to an acrobat. She thought she recognized the black sedan parked on the right of the road ahead of them, just this side of the intersection with the four-lane highway. Yes, she was



right! She knew well the black, wide-brimmed Stetson of Vince Leary, the deputy sheriff. With him were Hank Carlton and Spud Ferguson, county policemen. They must be part of the dragnet flung out to intercept the killers.

Her companion also saw the black car, and recognized it for what it was. He warned thinly, "They don't know me, and they won't suspect nothin' unless you try to tip 'em. Just remember, if shootin' starts, you'll be the first to get it."

They drew abreast of the officers. Good-natured Vince Leary grinned, tipped his Stetson, and waved. Dr. Helen's heart went down so fast she could feel it bouncing in her shoes.

They were approaching the super highway now. She took a hurried glance both ways. All four lanes were clear of oncoming traffic. She went sailing through the stop sign at the intersection without a pause.

She peeked into the rear-view mirror, and her heart began to knock like an excited fist in the cage of her ribs. The officers' sleek, black car was pulling out into the road. It shot after them. The killer detected her covert glance into the mirror. He looked back. It dawned on him what she had done.

He snarled, "That was a smart play, sugar, running through that stop sign. But the worst they'll give you is a ticket, maybe only a warning. And they still don't know me. So don't make any slips. For your own sake, baby, don't make any slips!"

Vince Leary was sitting in the front seat with Hank Carlton, who was driving. Vince leaned out the window and waved them to a stop. He displayed the gold in his molars and tipped his hat again.

"This is not a pinch," he assured the girl. "Just a warning. You better be more careful about noticing these stop signs, especially when you get back to town. There've been so many traffic fatalities lately, the heat is really on. The Merryvale police were given instructions today to bring in anybody who violates any traffic ordinance whatever. They really mean business. So it'll pay to watch your step."

The gold gleamed again, and he waved them on. She could feel the tense eyes of the bandit boring into her head. She knew his finger was tight upon the trigger.

She smiled, as brightly as possible, and called, "Thanks, Vince. I'll remember." She threw the car into gear. In the mirror,

she saw the officers' sedan turning around, dwindling in the opposite direction. Her chance was gone.

"You're smart, baby," her captor approved. "Anyhow, you're alive."

They rode on in silence. Finally, the gunman nodded at a wagon track winding off to the left of the highway. "Take that."

It led to a large, weatherbeaten house perched on a knoll some distance from the road. The house looked deserted. "This is it," the killer informed her. "Pull up here and blow your horn."

A hulking, stubble-faced man in overalls came out of the house. He lowered his shaggy head and shot a surly stare through the growing shadows of night. Then he recognized the gunman.

"Josh!" he exploded. "What the hell happened? Where are the others?"

The thin-faced killer answered sharply, "Sam's dead. Don't know about Rod. We got cornered and he lammed on foot. I'm shot. Listen Buck, we got to move fast. We're hot. You better take this hack and go back to town and see if you can find Rod. You know the places he's liable to be. He's got the money, and we'll need it for our getaway."

The giant Buck looked doubtful. "Is it safe fer me to go in town?"

Josh nodded emphatically. "For you, yes. You weren't with us, so nobody'll recognize you. But first, I want you to do something for my arm. It's hurting like hell."

Dr. Helen thought she saw an opening for herself. "I'll make a trade with you," she offered. "I'm a doctor. If you promise to let me go unharmed when you leave here, I'll attend to your wound."

Josh glowered at her. "A doctor?"

"Look at my bag," the girl suggested. "It's behind the seat there."

The hook-nosed gunman grinned wolfishly. "This is a break. It's a deal, doc. Let's get a move on."

The young physician reached back for her bag, and the three of them entered the house. An oil lamp was burning in a back room meagerly furnished with a rickety bed, a couple of chairs and a wooden table.

Dr. Helen examined her patient's arm. He had suffered a painful flesh wound in the biceps, but the bone was untouched. She delved into her bag, laid out scissors,

antiseptic, adhesive tape, placed them on the table. She searched her bag again.

"I haven't got enough gauze," she announced, "but there's plenty in the rear compartment of my car. I'll have to get it." She looked at Buck. "I suppose you'll want to come along. Bring a flashlight."

Dusk had thickened into night when they emerged from the house. The girl got the keys from the ignition switch. As they rounded the back of the car, she suddenly lurched, exclaimed, "Darn! I turned my ankle!" and clutched at the fender for support. She righted herself and limped on around to find the gauze she was seeking. That done, she relocked the compartment.

"Gosh," she complained, "that ankle really throbs." She stooped to massage her shapely limb, leaning heavily against the car did as she did so.

"Forgit it," Buck growled. "Let's go."

She hobbled into the house and finished dressing Josh's wound.

After Buck had departed for town, the wounded killer tilted his chair back against the door and leered at her. "Been doin' some thinkin', baby. I hate to welsh on a deal, but it wouldn't be right sensible to turn loose the only person who could possibly identify me. Now, would it?"

"But you promised," she said.

"Promises are cheap." The gunman grinned crookedly. "Main thing that bothers me is, I hate to knock off a good-lookin' dish like you."

The girl sank down on the bed and buried her face in her hands.

The dragging minutes added up into a couple of hours. At last, a furtive hand tried the door from the hall side. The killer Josh was instantly alert. "Who is it?" he hissed, whirling, his gun covering the door.

"It's me. Buck."

Josh relaxed. "Hell, come on in then. His gun hand dropped:

The door swung open. Buck strode in, with Vince Leary and a swarm of other officers right behind him. They had Josh covered before he could draw one astonished breath.

Vince Leary looked at Dr. Helen, and the gold in his teeth really glittered. He chuckled, "I reckon that was your work, those strips of adhesive over both taillights, eh?"

The young doctor nodded. She got up and walked toward the officers. Her limp

had miraculously vanished. "I managed to palm a couple of strips of adhesive," she explained, "and then went out to get some gauze I didn't really need. While I was out there, I faked a sprained ankle and covered the taillights while I was leaning on the car."

"Well, it worked," the deputy said. "Like I told you, they're really on the watch in town for traffic violations. He was picked up almost the minute he got there, for having no taillights. They carried him down to make a case against him, and somebody saw the adhesive. That made 'em suspicious. Then they saw the 'M.D.' on your tag and recognized your car. They went to work on him, and he cracked wide open. Afraid he might get a murder rap pinned on him."

He looked at her admiringly. "Yes, sir, you've got a smart head on your shoulders, as well as a pretty one. Wouldn't be a bit surprised if a lot of folks hereabouts changed their minds about women doctors after this bit of news gets around."

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## MURDER IN THE AIR

(Continued from page 55)

on, "I imagine he hoped to pin the murder on Don Downs. He didn't figure on Ruth becoming a suspect. He imagined Don was his chief rival for the affections of Ruth. With Don out of the way and with Sandra Forsythe's fortune—well, he must have thought Ruth couldn't resist him.

"Harold probably carried a gun. But he saw a chance to use Ruth's and did so. It's always safer to use someone's else's weapon in committing a murder."

"That's right!" Harold snarled, pointing a heavy automatic at them and moving toward the door. "I do carry a gun. Stay where you are, all of you, unless you want another exhibition of good marksmanship!"

The gun leveled at Kent and Harold grinned wickedly. There was a flash of light, a roar and a groan.

Harold's gun dropped from his bleeding hand, and the traffic officer holstered a smoking .38.

Kent walked to the officer and shook his hand. "Thanks," he said. "If I ever need a bodyguard again—"

"And if I ever need a lawyer," the officer interrupted with a grin. "Or somebody to needle a haystack."

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