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THE GRAVE**

ABSORBING CRIME
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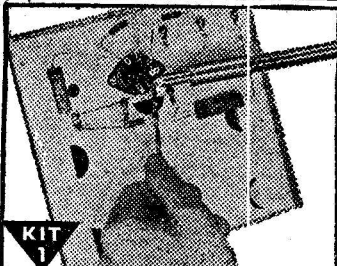
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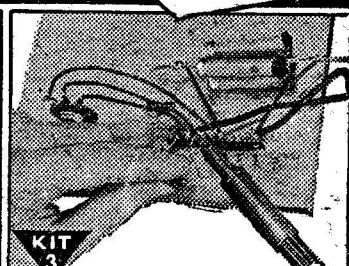
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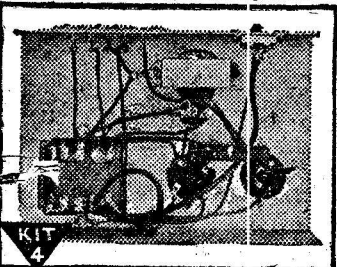
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I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



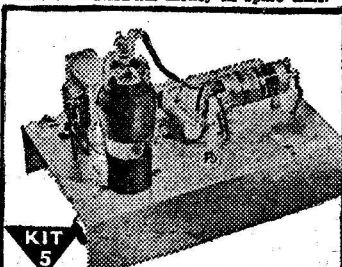
KIT 2
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



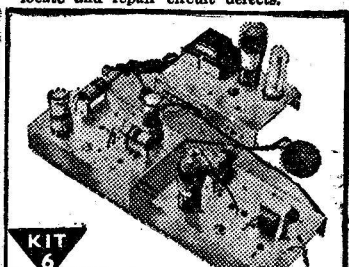
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VOL. THIRTY-TWO

JANUARY, 1946

NUMBER TWO

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—was the jam Tom Doyle found himself in when, at the receiving end of a gun, he promised to resurrect the “dead” wife of a hunted killer.

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—his own—threatened to be Joe's last present to Sally, the small light of his life!

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4. **FINISH FIGHT**.....*Hal Sheridan* 24
—when Donny, the punch-drunk lug, fought his last match with Death—and came out Champ!

5. **BLOOD ON HIS HANDS**.....*Talmage Powell* 30
—couldn't stop Bill from keeping his date with a killer!

6. **TOO MANY CROOKS**.....*Damon Knight* 37
—spoiled Al Tigert's well-seasoned murder-stew!

7. **THEY GAVE HIM A BADGE!**.....*John Corbett* 60
—but all it was good for was a front-row seat at his own murder!

8. **MURDER FOR THE MISSUS**.....*Max Tyson* 67
—was the thanks Howie got for listening to a hen-pecked husband's woes!

9. **AFTER YOU, DEATH!**.....*George William Rae* 74
—gallantly offered both the cop and the crook....

—AND—

10. **THE CRIME CLINIC**.....*A Department* 6
Those “Three Queens of the Mayhem” preferred .44's to knitting needles!

11. **QUEEN OF HELL**.....*Stuart Fleming* 8
To succumb to Albertina's flaming beauty was to kiss your life good-bye!

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The dread weed, marihuana, turned students into sinister slayers.

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The man sitting next to you at the movies may be a wanted killer!

February Issue Published December 26th

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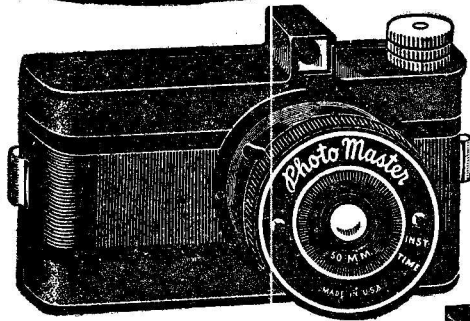


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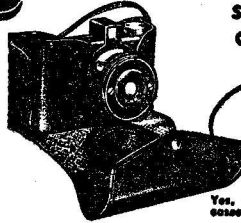
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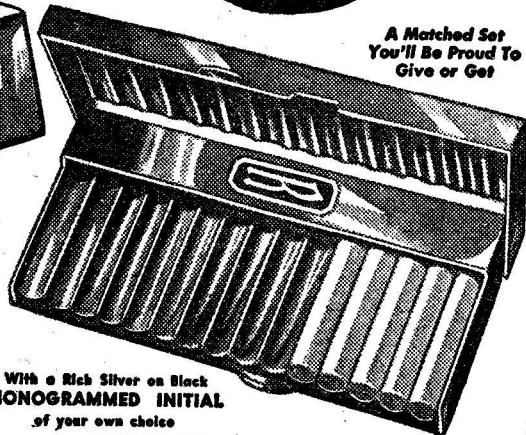
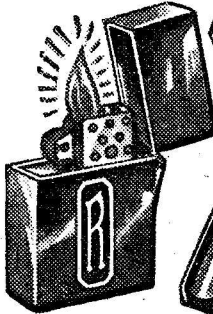
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MAYBE, if you wear whiskers and carry a cane, you would have known more about how to entertain the three refugees from a dusty copy of the Police Gazette than Tom Doyle did. But the day was scorching, he was getting nowhere fast with the Bonelli case, and to top it all he'd fought bitterly that morning with his extraordinarily sweet-tempered wife. So when, in no mood to be tampered with, he stalked into his unswept office and saw those three sweet-faced but wizened Gibson-girls, their broad-brimmed sailors perched precariously atop their white hair—that tore it!

"I admit," he expoded, "I told the employment agency to dig me up a girl. But I didn't expect to be taken *literally!*"

"Sir!" they snapped in unison. "We are the Beverly sisters—Dolly, Molly and Folly—your clients!"

Surrendering the last vestiges of his sanity, Doyle passed a hand for a moment over his sweat-lined face, pulled himself together, and said with all the gallantry he could muster, "Won't you step into my parlor, ladies?" and fumbled for his bourbon in the bottom drawer of the desk, while he listened to their strange story.

Around the turn of the century, Folly found her French gambler husband, DuBois, with a sociable blonde, whipped a .44 out of her reticule and uncurled both ends of DuBois' handlebar mustache, leaving him speechless—and quite dead.

"So help me, Mr. Doyle," she cried, "they damn near hung me!"

Folly had got off by pleading insanity. And her two sisters had joined her as paying guests in the sanitarium to which she had been committed. What they wanted from Doyle now was to find Folly's child, since adopted by an old couple named Mason—from whom she'd run away ten years ago, at eighteen. They wanted to establish her as their legal heir, under her lawful name of Francine DuBois.

But when Doyle got to Mason, after two brushes with death, he knew that all hope of

getting help there was lost. For Mason would never talk to anyone again, after the strangler had left him purple-faced and so still. And the Beverly sisters had paid him a "social" call that morning—a few minutes before they'd seen Doyle!

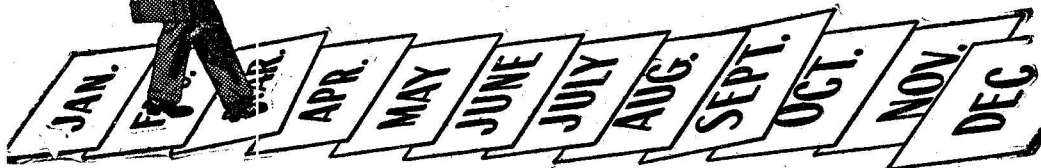
An active, trigger-happy crew they were, dragging Tom Doyle further into their tangled murder-net with every clue. And there was more to come. For when Tom's partner, Max, got a line on how the three Beverlys tied in with their client, Bonelli, waiting in the death-house to burn for a murder he'd never committed—and was cooled in blood for his trouble—who was State's Attorney Beamer's favorite suspect? You guessed it—Tom Doyle, by now publicly branded as a kill-crazy veteran, a criminal killer—hiding behind three rustling bustles!

Be with us on the next turn around the murder maypole, when Day Keene unfolds the most fascinating case to date in Tom Doyle's thrill-studded career as a private dick, in his new feature novel, "Three Queens of the Mayhem," plus Dumb Dan Trout in a photo-finish race with a kitchen killer, in a chill-packed novelette by William R. Cox, and many exciting, dramatic short stories by more of your favorite authors.

All will be waiting for you in the February *Detective Tales* at your newsstand December 26th.

—The Editor

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By **STUART FLEMING**

RED hair, green eyes, and the devil in her heart—that was how her townsmen described Albertina Roche of County Kerry. She would come to no good end, the Kerymen agreed, and it was a wise one who had nothing to do with her, at all. But then, the men of Kerry did not suit Albertina, either, and so, she ran away from County Kerry when she was eighteen.

Her mother died soon after, and a fearsome tale began to circulate in the neighborhood. Albertina's mother, it was said, had risen up on her death-bed and pronounced a curse against the girl. "Any man that my daughter loves, whoever he may be, shall die by violence!"

Whether by coincidence or no, that prophecy fulfilled itself in Albertina's life with grim swiftness.

In London, at a cabaret near Piccadilly Circle, Albertina met Rene Tacagni, the leader of a Marseille waterfront gang, who was in England on a vacation. Both were fascinated by each other: Tacagni, by the girl's startling red-haired beauty; Albertina, by the gang leader's dark good looks and fine manners. They came again the next night to the cabaret, and the next.

At last, Albertina thought, she had found what she wanted. To be admired, loved by such a man as Rene—what Kerry maid could boast as much?

"And do you really love me, now?" she asked, not for the first time.

"I would do anything for you, *ma chérie*. You have only to ask."

But Albertina did not ask for anything. Her attention, oddly enough, was wandering. Tacagni followed her gaze, and his body stiffened. A brown-haired young man, known to Tacagni, was smiling at her—and she was smiling warmly back.

Tacagni gave no sign that he had noticed. A

few minutes later he left the room. When he returned, his eyes went to the dance floor. Yes, as he had suspected, Albertina and the brown-haired man were dancing. Tacagni sighed.

The young man escorted her back to Tacagni's table when the dance was over. "Rene," said Albertina brightly, "this is Armand Fleurus. He comes from Toulon."

The two men were staring fixedly at each other. "I know Monsieur Fleurus," said Tacagni. "We are—competitors."

"I did not recognize you, Tacagni," said Fleurus, moistening his lips. "Otherwise I would not have presumed—"

Tacagni laughed suddenly. "Don't be absurd!" he said. "Did you think I was angry? Come, sit down and join us in a glass of wine. We are all friends together, are we not? Sit down, sit down!"

Fleurus sat, uneasily. Tacagni, still smiling broadly, looked past him to where a group of hard-eyed men were standing against the wall. He made an almost imperceptible sign with his hand, and one of the men nodded slowly.

"*Chérie*," said Tacagni, "did I ever tell you how Monsieur Fleurus once stole a boatload of silk out from under my very nose? It was most clever, the way he eluded both my men and *les flics*—the police—at the same time. But," he hastened to add, "I have done as much to him, you understand. I bear no grudge. It is all in the line of business, yes? And there was another time—"

They stayed until the cabaret closed, and even then Armand Fleurus seemed reluctant to leave. But there was nothing else to do. He left the other two at the door, walked into the foggy night—and died. He was found on Regent Street, shortly after dawn, with a bullet in his heart.

The new leader of Fleurus' gang felt that

(Continued on page 97)

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AS DEEP AS THE GRAVE

They said Tom Doyle had turned rat. What else could they think when the honest private eye accepted hot cash from Red Faber, wanted murderer, to find Faber's wife. Doyle figured that she preferred being dead to living on as Mrs. F.—a nice theory, but one that Red rejected—with bullets!

CHAPTER ONE

Dying Enemy No. 1

OKAY. So I should have known better. In every man's life some rain must fall—he must walk into some spider's parlor. And I not only walked into Red Faber's parlor, brother, I got drenched!

The day had been run-of-the-mill. I had spent most of it at H.Q. trying to get a line on an elderly "alleged" Army colonel who had married a blowsy blonde from Wisconsin via the lonely-heart-club-route, only to leave her stranded in Chicago with little but a hotel bill and two nights of flaming memories in lieu of her life savings.

Fast-paced Novelette of Menace

Feeling it an unfair exchange, she had come to me. But I hadn't been able to find any previous record on the man. I had called it a day and was locking my desk when the phone rang. The woman's voice was pleasant and well-modulated. But either she was trying to disguise it or she was laboring under a strain. "I am speaking to Tom Doyle?" she demanded.

I said she was. Her next line was a lulu. "How much," she wanted to know, "would you charge to kill a man?"

I told her I thought she must have the wrong Doyle since, after all, as a private investigator with a license issued by the State I was, in a sense, an officer of the law.

She said, "I know who you are and what you are. I also know that since opening your own agency you have killed a number of men. In fact, State's Attorney Beamer refers to you openly as a 'kill-crazy veteran.'"

I told her not to take Beamer seriously as he was a little man in a big job and had to make a lot of noise to cover up his own inability.

She seemed on the verge of hysteria as she told me she knew that, but she was desperate. "I can assure you," she pleaded, "you would only be anticipating justice."

A man loomed out of the darkness, his coat collar turned up . . .



By
DAY KEENE

I was beginning to enjoy the conversation. "I could say that about a lot of men," I told her. "By the way, to whom am I speaking, please?"

She said that was none of my business and wanted to know, "If you were given proof that this man deserved to die, would you kill him for ten thousand dollars?"

"Not for ten times that," I told her. She wanted to know why.

I told her, "Because the last time I looked at the State statutes the penalty for murder in the first degree was still burning until death—or a reasonable facsimile thereof—ensues."

She said something that sounded like, "Oh, dear God, what am I going to do," but she was sobbing so hard by then I couldn't hear her clearly. I asked her to speak up but she hung up instead.

I debated trying to trace the call, and didn't bother. The whole thing had left a bad taste in my mouth. One thing was obvious. Beamer's eternal yapping about my being a kill-crazy veteran wasn't doing my reputation any good when a total stranger would call my office to inquire my fee for killing a man. True, since opening my agency, I had killed quite a few men. Their deaths had been forced on me. That was justifiable homicide, an entirely different matter from premeditated murder.

There was the usual five-o'clock-crowd in the bar downstairs. I ordered a double rye and was staring in the back bar mirror trying to decide whether I looked like a killer when I felt the hard barrel of a gun bore into the small of my back. The voice was meant for my ears only.

"Drink your drink as though nothing was happening. When you've finished, walk out to the tan sedan parked in front."

I looked over my shoulder at the lad and felt my spine begin to tingle. It was Gimpy Saulk, one of Red Faber's boys. He was so hot it was a wonder that his mere walking in hadn't set the bar on fire. The last I had heard of him was that noon when Captain Gleason of the bank detail told me gleefully that a sheriff's posse had Red and Gimpy and Cal Shields holed up in a swamp near Benton Harbor, Michigan.

"We bust through the posse and came back," Gimpy read my mind. "Drink your drink and let's go."

He had his gun in the left-hand pocket of his topcoat and was leaning his right elbow on the bar. To any casual observer we were merely two friends talking. But his throwing a gun on me didn't make sense. There was a four-state alarm out on Faber, but I had never tangled with him. Sure you got the right guy?" I asked him.

"Unless you're Dick Tracy in disguise," he told me. "Get going, Doyle."

THERE were two more hoods in the sedan. The driver was a young punk I didn't know. The other was Cal Shields. He was so nervous, a fine film of perspiration beaded his cheeks and forehead, but he grinned, "Hello, Tom. Long time no see."

I balked. "Look. I never tangled with you guys. What—?"

Shields opened the door. "Get in." Saulk dug his gun into my spine. "You heard what Cal said." He was as nervous as Shields and talking between clenched teeth. "Get in or I'll blow your spine in two."

He meant it. I got into the car and the punk at the wheel let out his clutch so fast the big sedan jumped like a jack rabbit.

"Watch your driving, you fool," Saulk warned him. "If just one cop spots us, it's curtains."

I was in a bad spot. I knew it. But for the life of me, I couldn't figure why. As we crossed State there was a prowler car waiting for the light. "And just what would happen," I asked, "if I were to stick my head out and yell cop?"

Shields looked at me thoughtfully. "I think you have more sense." He slipped an automatic from a shoulder holster. "But just in case—"

I saw the blow start but couldn't duck it. It caught me flush on the left temple. There was a blinding flash of light. Then he hit me again to make sure and nothing mattered.

The car was stopped when I came to again. I hadn't the least idea where we were. Shields and the driver were gone, but Saulk still had a gun in my ribs and we were parked in front of a run-down looking office building.

"Nice nap?" Saulk inquired.

"Fine," I assured him.

I bent down and looked up at the office building, trying to orient myself. Only one office, a dentist's, was lighted. As I looked up, someone pulled the shade.

"That's us," Saulk told me. "Out of the car, across the walk, and up the stairs."

I didn't like the set-up. I said, "To hell with that heifer dust!", grabbed his gun wrist with one hand, forced it back so his gun would blast into the cushion and streaked my free hand for my own gun. The holster was there but the gun wasn't. I felt like a damn fool.

Shields opened the door of the car. "You should have known better than to think we'd let you keep a gun," he chuckled. He motioned me out of the car with his gun barrel. "You're a kill-crazy veteran. The State's Attorney says so."

I told him where he could put the State's Attorney and walked up the stairs of the of-

face building, both of them hard on my heels.

A tall man, thin to the point of emaciation, Faber was waiting in the dentist's office. His once flaming red hair was a pale carrot color. His skin had an unhealthy look. His hands were blotched and spotted. As I walked in he was coughing and there was blood on his handkerchief.

"Hello, Doyle," he greeted me cordially. "Long time no see. In fact I think the last time we met you were investigating a high-jacking for Inter-Ocean way back in the good old prohibition days."

I ignored his hand. "And to hell with you, too," I told him. "So you're hot as a fire-cracker. What's the idea of having your boys put the arm on me? I'm not working on the case."

"That's why I sent for you," he told me.

I told him he wasn't making sense.

He took a pint of Scotch from his pocket, took a drink and offered me one. When I refused, he continued, "You know what I think of policemen, Doyle, private or otherwise. But you've always been a right John. That's why I had the boys put the arm on you. I'm in a spot where I have to have a private shamus I can trust."

I said that all the private agency men in the United States couldn't get him out of the jam he was in. He said he knew that. The commission he had in mind, he admitted had nothing to do with his being wanted by the law.

"It's an entirely personal matter," he told me. "You know how hot I am. Maybe the cops get me an hour from now. Maybe I stay clear for a few more weeks. But when they get me. I burn." He coughed into his handkerchief again. "Not that it matters a hell of a lot, catch?"

He took another drink. "And once they get me, the only guy they'll let me talk to is some sharp-shooting mouthpiece. It just so happens there's a little personal matter I'd like to attend to before I'm picked up."

I didn't say a thing. It was his party.

Faber added, "And you don't need to worry about losing your license for not reporting that you've seen me. Five minutes after I walk out of here, you can tell Harry Nobby and Beamer and the whole damn Force if you was quite a story. He told it well. . . ."

I couldn't get what he was driving at, but said it looked fair enough on the surface. It was quite a story. He told it well. . . .

eye. She was swept off her feet by Faber, and they were married in Eagle River.

On his return to town, he was picked up in the Murell case and sent up for five years. His wife was a sweet, country kid. She didn't even know he was a hood. Rather than have her find out, he merely stopped writing to her. She continued to write for several years. She even came to Chicago to look for him—sent him a picture of her and the baby taken while they were in Chicago.

Faber had trouble lighting a cigarette. "But I never answer, see? She's a sweet, simple kid. I'm a hood. I know it will break her heart if she finds out I'm in pokey. I send her a couple of grand through Joe and tell her to forget me."

He took a picture from his wallet and handed it to me. It was the picture of a young girl and a baby so blurred with handling I couldn't distinguish the features. I thought I had the set-up then. The girl had been the one decent thing in his life. Now that the noose was closing, it was natural for him to think of her. "What do you want me to do about it, Red?" I asked.

"I want you to find Mable and her kid," he told me. He laid ten hundred-dollar bills on top of the picture. "I've got a little property the law can't touch, worth maybe fifty grand. And I want the kid to have it."

I asked him why he didn't have his lawyer handle the deal. He smiled wryly. "You know how a lawyer would handle it. He'd put an ad in the paper: 'If the heirs of Red Faber, Public Enemy No. 1, will contact this office, blah, blah—' Then what happens? Some smart reporter spots the ad and smears the whole thing in headlines."

"Maybe Mable and the kid don't want it known they ever even knew me, see? I don't want to play 'em no dirty trick. I just want the kid to get the property. And you could handle it on the hush. What do you say, Doyle? One grand now and I'll give you another grand if you can find Mable and the kid."

I turned the whole thing over in my mind. Red Faber was a killer and a rat. But as far as I could see, it was a perfectly legitimate commission. Even rats had paternal instincts. It was a natural gesture from a man with only a few months to live. And I was in no position to argue. "Okay. I'll take it," I told him.

CHAPTER TWO

First Blood

BOTH Nobby and the federal boys were fine. They took my word and let it go at that. But sad-sack Beamer went as far as he dared.

SOME twenty years before, only a punk himself, he had gone up to Eagle River as the body-guard of Big Joe Wolinski to wait out a period of heat occasioned by a slight difference of opinion with the Capone mob. During the six weeks he was there, a local girl by the name of Mable Sloan caught his

"Are you going to talk or not?" he demanded.

I told him I had said all I intended to.

He shook his fist in my face. "Then you'll not only lose your license, I'll see that you do at least five years as an accessory after the fact."

"After what fact?" I asked him. "The fact that I was kidnapped by a hood—at the point of a gun?"

He wanted to know if I could prove I had been kidnapped. I was forced to admit I could not.

The little man frothed, "They were here. Right here in this office—Faber, Shields and Saulk. And you let them go."

For the fifth time I told him that they had taken my gun during the ride from the bar to the building and that just as soon after their departure as I could, I had called his office, H.Q., and the F.B.I.

"But you won't tell us what Faber commissioned you to do?"

I said I would not. I knew what was eating on the little man. He was up for re-election. Despite all the bobbles he had made during his four years in office, the capture of the Faber mob would have set him solid with the voting public.

"Don't let Beamer get you, Tom," Harry Gold of the local F.B.I. office told me. "You're perfectly clean with us. Under the circumstances, I don't see how you could have done anything else but what you did."

Beamer sneered. "You're not so tough, are you, Doyle, when you're up against a real killer? You kill-crazy veterans are all alike. There's a yellow streak a yard wide up—"

I put my palm in his face and pushed. He went down screaming that he'd get my license. I went looking for Lieutenant Nobby. I had some phone calls to make. But I couldn't make them from there. The building, in fact the whole neighborhood, was swarming with federal men and cops.

Charlie Harris of the Morning Record tagged me in the hall outside the office and wanted to know if it was true that Red Faber had paid me a fee to do something for him. I told him that was correct. Then he wanted to know what it was. I told him to go ask Beamer.

I found Nobby talking to Hanson of the tech squad. Nobby had taken my word that the commission I had accepted from Faber had nothing to do with Red being wanted by the law. But he wasn't over-friendly about it. He wanted Red Faber too badly.

"You want to go where?" he asked me when I asked if it was all right for me to leave.

I told him, "Home."

He said that was okay with him. But from

the way he said it, I knew that I'd have a tail. And that was all right with me. Now I'd had time to think it over, I wished I had told Red Faber where he could put his thousand-dollars. But having taken the case, I meant to see it through.

The building was on the near south side in the heart of the old levee. The tan sedan had obviously turned off the Outer Drive onto 22nd Street right after Shields had sapped me with his gun barrel. I flagged a cab and rode on down to the office to make my calls and pick up a spare gun before I went on home.

In the office I put through a long distance call to Eagle River, then called Sue while I was waiting. She said it was a fine time for me to be calling, the pork loin had dried up, the mashed potatoes were soggy, the twins were screaming their heads off, and who did I think I was. She added that some woman had called me three times, wanting to know if I had located Colonel Cramer and saying it was vitally important that she see me at once.

That would be the blowsy blonde from Wisconsin. I told Sue if she called again to tell her that I could stop in at her hotel on my way home.

"And that will be when?" Sue sniffed.

I told her I didn't know as I had been kidnapped into a case.

"Hmm. A likely story," she threw at me, and hung up.

The sheriff at Eagle River turned out to be a friendly old duffer named Swanson of no help at all, as far as I was concerned. He said he knew the Sloan family well. Rather he *had* known them well. Both the elder Sloans were dead and to the best of his recollection, their only daughter, Mable, had left town some twenty years before, after an unfortunate marriage. As far as he knew she had never returned, not even for a visit. There were no near relatives living. That was all he could tell me. I thanked him and hung up.

It began to look as if I were on the well-known spot. I had a thousand dollars of Red Faber's money. With nothing but a faded picture of a girl and a child, I was supposed to find her after twenty years. Red expected me to make good. And if I didn't, he hadn't a thing to lose by adding me to his daisy-chain of murder.

I studied the back of the picture under the light. The photographer's name was as worn as the features but I could decipher the three words "Clark Street" and "Chicago." It wasn't much to go on. But it was a start. I could begin there in the morning.

Pat Grogan of Nobby's squad was holding up a post in the foyer when I came down again. I pretended I didn't see him, got into my own car that the garage attendant had left

around the corner on Dearborn and drove to the Osbourne Hotel.

THE "Colonel's" wife was waiting in her room. She looked even more blowsy than she had in the office, and her breath was heavy with gin. I broke the sad news to her as gently as I could. As far as I had been able to ascertain, both the Colonel and her life savings were gone. I told her the best thing she could do was to swear out a warrant for his arrest, in the hope that when he was picked up, he might still have some of her money on his person.

She said she couldn't do that because the story would reach her home-town paper and I knew how small towns were. Tears rolling down her cheeks, she told me, "I guess the best thing I can do is to go back home to Eagle River and try to forget what a fool I've been."

It was the first time she had mentioned her home-town. All ears, I asked her if she had known the Sloan family.

"Very well," she told me. "The old folks died some years ago, but the last I heard of Mable Sloan, she was living right here in Chicago."

It was a break I hadn't expected. I made the most of it by asking if she happened to

know her address or knew anyone who might know it.

The aging blonde thought a moment, brushed an untidy wisp of hair out of her eyes and told me, "No. I don't know where she lives." She brightened. "But Cora Hart might know. They were like that when they were girls." She added, "Her name isn't Hart now, though; it's Wren."

"Not Mrs. Michael Wren by any chance?"

"That's just who she is," the blonde beamed. "I tell you that Cora is a girl that Eagle River is proud of."

It had reason to be. Mike Wren was running for Governor and a cinch to be elected. I knew him well. A brilliant, outspoken lawyer with an envious legal, civil and military record behind him, he had the coming election in the bag and the bag in his back pants pocket. We had worked on several cases together when I had been with Inter-Ocean, but I had never met Mrs. Wren. Since she was now society with a capital S, I doubted if she had kept up the girlhood friendship. But it was worth a try.

I didn't need to look up the address. Wren, when he was in town, lived in a swank apartment hotel on the Gold Coast, a half-mile closer to the Loop and five-hundred a month closer to the sky than I did. I gave my card

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to a butler in an entrance hall the size of my living room and asked to see either Mr. or Mrs. Wren.

While I was waiting a boy and girl in evening clothes came in. Both nodded pleasantly and said, "Good evening."

I decided the girl was Mike's daughter. I knew the boy by sight. He was the youngest Potter boy, heir to God knew how many millions, and recently a much-decorated lieutenant of infantry. As soon as I saw them, it came back. Several nights before Sue had seen the announcement of their engagement in the society column, and had remarked what a fine-looking pair they were.

THE butler returned to tow me through ankle-deep beige broadloom into a beamed living-room, saying that Mr. Wren would be right out. Mike's daughter had shed her fur coat and was curled up in a chair. The Potter boy, a rolled newspaper in his hand, was speaking earnestly to a slim brunette in a low-cut black evening gown. I decided that she was Mrs. Wren although she and her daughter could have passed for sisters.

The brunette stared at me as though I were something that had crawled out from under a stone. "You are Mr. Doyle." It was an accusation not a statement.

I pleaded guilty. There was something familiar about her, but I couldn't place it.

She said, "Oh, I see," and we looked at each other.

I felt like a damn fool. I had a feeling that we were fencing but I didn't know what about. To the best of my sober knowledge, I had never annoyed her before by intruding my seemingly obnoxious presence.

Young Potter said he guessed he'd run along and the girl in the chair said, "Oh, damn your Aunt Sofia. I don't see why you couldn't have remembered it was her birthday before we made our date."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I'll be back in an hour, puss."

He left and the girl complained to her mother that they had no sooner reached the street when he had remembered that it was his Aunt's birthday and he'd have to postpone their dinner to a supper date. And that meant she would have to change again because she simply couldn't wear such a stodgy dinner gown to a night-club.

I stood listening in, feeling more like a fool than ever and trying to get up nerve enough to ask the swank Mrs. Wren if she knew the present address of her former friend, Mable Sloan. Then Mike came into the room.

A big man physically, with a booming voice voice to match, he shook hands cordially. "Glad to see you, Tom. And sorry to keep you waiting."

I said I was sorry I had disturbed him.

He said, "Not at all," and introduced his wife and daughter.

The girl smiled, "Good evening," for the second time. His wife merely looked coldly at me.

Then Wren offered me a drink and wanted to know what he could do for me. I refused the drink but told him I was looking for a Mable Sloan, whom I believed Mrs. Wren had known in Eagle River, and I would appreciate it very much if she could give me her present address.

"Mable Sloan," Wren rolled the name on his tongue as if it were distasteful.

"Mable is dead," Mrs. Wren told me coldly.

I said I was sorry to hear it. "Now I wonder if you could tell me this," I persisted. "Is her child still living?"

"Her child died also," Mrs. Wren informed me in the same icy voice. And that seemed to be that.

"Mable Sloan. I place the name now," Wren said. He turned to his wife. "That's the girl, isn't it, Cora, who you told me was so unfortunate as to become involved with the notorious Red Faber?"

She nodded, thin-lipped, and Wren swung back to me. "Sorry we aren't able to be of more help to you, Tom. You working on the Faber case?"

Mrs. Wren handed him the rolled newspaper that young Potter had tossed on the sofa. "It would seem," she said.

Wren unrolled the paper and chuckled at the headline. It was a so-called Extra and Charlie Harris hadn't wasted any time rushing into print. My picture was plastered next to a rogue's-gallery "mug" of Faber's and over them was the streamer:

TOM DOYLE SUSPECTED AS CONTACT MAN FOR KILLER

"That's Beamer's fine hand," I told Wren. "I merely agreed to try and find Faber's wife and daughter for a fee of two-thousand dollars."

He repeated that he was sorry they weren't able to help me, then charged the subject to ask what I thought his chances were in the coming election.

I told him he looked like a cinch from where I stood. Then Mrs. Wren reminded him he was due at his club at nine and looked pointedly at me. I picked my hat from the table, went through the usual mumbo-jumbo about being pleased to meet her and hoping we would meet again.

Her nod was hardly enthusiastic. Mike walked with me to the door. He was a good politician and shook hands cordially in parting, telling me not to be a stranger but to

drop in any time and to bring Mrs. Doyle with me.

Out in the hall I turned back to look at the door. There was something screwy in the apartment but I was damned if I could place it. Mrs. Wren had been too quick in telling me that both Mable Sloan and Faber's child were dead. It was far more likely that she was covering for her friend—that Mable had made a good marriage and didn't want to be "found." That was all right, except that it left me on the well-known spot marked X.

The only thing left to do was to try to trace the picture in the morning. But before I did, I meant to check the death records. If Mable Sloan was dead, both a doctor and an undertaker would have had to sign her death certificate.

A cold, wet wind was blowing off the lake. If Grogan was still tailing me, he was in out of the cold somewhere. I walked up the street toward my car, started across the parkway and stopped as a man loomed out of the darkness. His hat was pulled over his eyes. His coat collar was turned up.

"Oh-oh," I thought. "A stick-up."

And that was the last thinking I did for awhile. Before my hand was halfway to my gun, he had knocked me off my feet and he belted me twice more before I hit the ground. The last thing I heard was him saying:

"I'm sorry. Believe me. I wish I didn't to do this."

The joker was, he sounded like he meant it.

CHAPTER. THREE

And Sudden Death!

I HAD no way of knowing how long I had been out, or where I was. All I knew was that the room was dark, I was lying on a cot of some kind, and my head was a sore boil.

I tried to raise my hand to my jaw and couldn't. I was lying on my side, my hands tied behind my back. The same rope extended to form a loop around my ankles. The lad who had slugged me knew his business. But he didn't fit into the picture. He wasn't a hood. Hoods didn't apologize for slugging you.

I tried to straighten up and almost choked. It was a three way hook-up, ankles to wrists to throat. The harder I struggled, the tighter I drew the noose. I lay still, cursing Red Faber for getting me into this mess. It had to be tied in with him. A lot of guys don't like me. But there was no one I could think of who would slug me. The hoods I had cuffed around in the line of business were more apt to use machine guns.

Mike's wife's coolness could be the tip-off. It could be that Mable Sloan was very much alive, but didn't want to be found. That was

okay with me. I had taken the commission under duress. And I had had all I wanted of the results of the youthful love-life of Public Enemy No. I.

With an effort I turned on my other side without choking. On the far side of the room, a door was outlined in light. A radio was playing softly but above it I could catch a faint murmur of voices.

The men who had slugged me was saying, "A filthy shame it had to come up at this time. Otherwise, it wouldn't matter so much."

The woman's voice was vaguely familiar but I couldn't catch the words. He laughed bitterly at whatever it was she said.

"Now you are being utterly ridiculous. Doyle isn't an unknown. We can't hold him here trussed up like a fowl forever." He was matter of fact about it. "Why don't you let me kill him?"

I could feel the cold sweat start. It didn't make sense. But there it was. The woman's voice rose sharply in protest. But she wasn't thinking of me.

"No, you can't," she cried shrilly. "I won't allow you to ruin your life."

One thing was clear. I knew the voice. She was the woman who had phoned me a ten-thousand dollar offer to kill an unnamed man. Then the wheels in my brain began to turn. I knew two more things. She was also Mable Sloan and the man whom she had wanted me to kill was Faber. I had been a fool not to spot it in the first place.

Faber didn't want to leave his former wife any money. With all of the heat he already had on him, he was working a blackmail angle and I was merely additional pressure. Small wonder that Mrs. Wren had been so cool! She thought I was hounding her friend.

I eased my feet down until the rope was taut around my neck. The rope refused to give but I had found out what I wanted to know. It was a simple turn not a slip noose around my throat. By being careful, I could put pressure on the rope without tightening it to the point where it could strangle me.

I lowered my feet to the floor and stood up gingerly, my body bent in a bow. Half shuffling, half hopping, I got to the window without falling. The window was open and un-screened. What was more important—it was on the first floor. Beyond it was a line of trees, and I could see water shimmering in the moonlight. As closely as I could figure, the place was a summer cottage on one of the hundreds of lakes within a few hours drive of Chicago.

I lowered myself to the floor, braced my toes against the baseboard and bent backwards in an arc until the top and bottom section of the rope hung free and my fingers were touching the knot in the rope around my

ankles. After that it was fairly easy. My ankles free, I stood, slipped the rope from around my neck and went to work on my hands. My wrists were raw flesh when I finished, but my hands were free.

I slipped out of the window, swore as Faber's tan sedan rolled up the drive, its headlights barely missing spotlighting me against the clapboard.

Red got out, followed by Shields and Saulk and another man whose face I couldn't see. Three of them walked toward the front door. Saulk walked toward the rear of the cottage, passing so close to where I huddled back of a snowball bush that I could have reached out and touched him.

Red rapped sharply on the door and as he did a shaft of moonlight struck the face of the man beside him. It was Phil Carver, the criminal lawyer who boasted that he had never lost a client to the chair. I tried to figure his angle and couldn't.

THERE were two things I could do. I could scream while the scrambling was good or I could get myself a gun and stick around. My name being Doyle, I inched along the wall toward the rear of the cottage.

Gimpy was watching the rear door, his right hand in his topcoat pocket and his back to me. I tiptoed across the flower bed, cupped a palm over his mouth, braced my other forearm against his neck—and pulled.

There was a sharp, cracking sound. I took the gun out of his pocket and walked back to the front of the cottage. The door was wide open. Red Faber, his face twisted in a snarl, was ordering young Potter away from a door he was blocking with his shoulders.

"Don't make me hurt you, kid. I don't want to. But I will if I have to."

Phil Carver lighted a cigarette. "You're being very foolish, Potter. All we want to do is talk to Mable." He shrugged. "And after all, this is really none of your affair."

"I'm making it my affair," Potter said grimly. "She's told me the whole story. And you can't prove a thing."

"No?" Carver chuckled. "Wake up and learn the facts of life, son. We have one of the best private agency men in the city, a hard-boiled Irishman by the name of Doyle, backtrailing on Mable now. And if Mable makes us shoot the works, we will, with Tom Doyle as our witness."

Potter shot a quick glance at the door of the room I had been in. I walked in holding Saulk's gun on my hip. "Doyle doesn't live there anymore, Potter," I told him. "And as for you, Red, I'd stand very still. Mable offered me ten-thousand dollars this afternoon to kill you. And who am I to turn down good, clean money?"

I didn't expect Shield's next move. He turned, cursing and shooting at the same time. His slug plowed a furrow across my ribs. Mine caught him in the wishbone. He hiccupped solemnly, took two quick steps toward me, caught at Carver for support, then slid down him to the floor.

"Well, you saved him from the chair," I told Carver. "How about it, Phil? You want more of the same? Or would you rather take your hand out of your pocket?" He raised his palms shoulder high.

"And you?" I asked Red. He hesitated and I flipped a slug into the floor a half-inch from his foot. He dropped his gun and whined, "You have me all wrong, Doyle."

I took the bills he had given me from my pocket wadded them into a ball and threw it in his face. "I don't want any part of you," I told him. "I don't like guys who lie to me."

Young Potter started to say something and changed his mind. I said, "You took a pretty big chance in slugging me, didn't you, son, just to help out the girl friend of your fiancée's mother?"

Faber began, "Now, look here, Doyle—"

"You stay shut," I told him. "When I want you to talk, I'll say so. But right now I'm up to here with you. In fact, I'm practically trigger-happy."

"I'm afraid," young Potter said, grimly, "that you still don't understand the situation, Doyle."

I was plenty sore at him, too. "No, I don't know your part in this," I admitted. "But I do know that I heard you ask Mable why she didn't let you kill me."

He grinned, "Don't be dumb. I wasn't talking about you. I wanted to shoot Faber." He scowled at the hood. "I still think it's a swell idea."

I checked back mentally. He could be leveling. I nodded at the door behind him. "If Mable Sloan, Red Faber's former wife is in there, son trot her out."

He hesitated briefly, shrugged, "Why not. Just give me a few minutes, Doyle, to convince her that it will be best for all concerned for everyone to come out in the open with this."

As the door closed behind him, Carver cleared his throat uneasily. "Just what do you intend to do, Doyle?"

I admitted, "I don't know, shyster. But my natural inclination is to shoot you both and drop your bodies—" I stopped short as someone ground the starter of the car standing in the drive.

"Mable and the punk slipped out a window," Faber swore. "They're taking a powder."

I swung toward the door shouting, "No. Hold it!" But the tan sedan, Potter driving,

was already half-way to the highway. And turning my back on Faber was a bad mistake.

He snatched up the gun he had dropped and brought the barrel down in a hard, raking, blow that almost tore off one of my ears. Blind with pain, I swung back, pegged a shot at the spot where he had been, then dove out the door into the blackness of the night.

Lead whistled through my hair. Then a slug knocked me flat on my face. Still crawling, I heard Carver call: "I think I got him that time."

"In a pig's britches," I grunted. Then I was on my feet again and zig-zagging for the screen of trees, hot blood spurting down my side. There were still plenty of angles that I didn't know. I'd had the whole case in my hand and blown it—and only myself to blame. Six months before, I wouldn't have let young Potter leave the room and I wouldn't have turned my back on Faber. But things had been going too well. I was too cocky. Fat fees had softened me up. I was living by my name instead of my brains.

I reached the screen of trees and raced on. Behind me Carver was screaming: "Find him! Kill him! If Doyle gets back to town you're a cooked goose, Red."

It didn't make sense at the time. But it did—soon.

CHAPTER FOUR

Frame for Murder

THE druggist was small and bald and wore thick-lensed glasses that made his eyes look like a pair of frightened blueberries.

"Look, Mister," he protested. "Believe me. I'm not an M.D. I'm only a pharmacist. You want I should lose my license for treating a wounded man?"

I was in no mood to argue. I showed him Gimpy's gun. "Now shut up and produce. For all you know, I might be Red Faber."

He gulped and went to work with the sulfa powder and the gauze. The blow on my head hurt more than the hole in my shoulder did. But it had cleaned away some of the cowwebs. I knew why young Potter had slugged me. I knew why he wanted to kill Faber. The whole thing had been as obvious as Betty Grable's gams right from the start. But I couldn't see what the hell I could do about it. I had no proof of anything. Potter would deny having been at the cottage. So would Mable Sloan. So would Phil Carver for that matter. I couldn't even prove that I had killed Saulk and Shields. And if I even mentioned having seen Red Faber again, the State's Attorney's distorted little mind would undoubtedly accuse me of collusion.

The bald little druggist did a good job, then

told me shyly, "You aren't Red Faber." He ran a finger across a red scar on my belly. "Your name I wouldn't know. But speaking as a former medical corpsman, only a piece of mortar shell can leave a scar like that."

I grinned and showed him my shield to lift him off his mental hot spot. Leave it to a medic to know. They should. They were out in front of the lines enough.

When he had finished strapping me up, I used his phone. "This is Tom Doyle," I told the feminine voice that answered. "Are you still willing to pay ten-thousand dollars to have me kill a certain man?"

There was a gasp at the other end. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I bet you don't," I told her, and hung up.

There was a restaurant next to the drug store. Since it was some time after midnight, I had the place to myself with the exception of a cabbie who was eating breakfast and telling the Greek counterman between bites—

"It all just goes to show you, Nick. You can't trust none of them private dicks. Just like in the movies, they're all the time hand-in-glove with the crooks."

I ordered coffee and wheat cakes and re-folded a morning paper lying on the counter from the sporting to the front page. My picture was still on the front page. But either as a favor to me or in fear of a libel suit, the city desk had cut Charlie's lurid account of me as Red Faber's contact man down to a stick of type. It played down the fact that I had admitted accepting a thousand dollars to execute a commission for Faber, and played up the fact that he had emerged from hiding briefly, only to disappear again, evading capture. But the intimation that my fingers were sticky was still there. A lot of potential clients would reason that where there was smoke there was fire. And as far as I could see at the moment the only way to convince them differently would be to deliver Red Faber's corpse to H.Q. and tell Beamer where he could put it.

On a hunch I asked the Greek if he had a magnifying glass. He said he had, and I used it to study the Clark Street address on the back of the picture that Faber had given me. It was either 305 or 505 N. Clark.

"I use it to spot counterfeits," the Greek explained.

"This seems to be real," I told him. Then I spent a nickle for a slug, dialed the Osbourne Hotel and asked for the "Colonel's" wife, Mrs. Cramer, I expected to be told she had checked out. But she hadn't. She picked up her phone too fast.

"Yes—?" she demanded.

"This is Tom Doyle again, Mrs. Cramer," I told her. "And while I hate to bother you so late at night, I wonder if you would do me a favor?"

There was a moment's pause, then she wanted to know what it was.

I said, "As I told you earlier this evening, I'm trying to locate a Mable Sloan. Mrs. Wren wasn't able to give me her address. In fact, she seems to be under the impression that she's dead."

I waited for her to say something. When she didn't, I continued, "But I have reason to think differently. And I think I know how I can find her."

I explained about the picture, saying it wasn't very clear but the photographer's address was on the back and I was on my way to see if he had another print in his files or could make one from the negative. I concluded, "And if I can get a fresh print I wonder if you would be so kind as to look at it and tell me if the girl is the Mable Sloan you knew?"

She said she would be pleased to and wanted to know where in the city I was calling from.

"A long way from the photographer's," I told her. "It may take me almost an hour to get there."

She was still talking when I hung up. I paid for my cakes and coffee, walked out of the joint, and flagged a cab. "Just drive for an hour," I told the hacker.

I still had two more phone calls to make. But if I was right, I had baited a trap. Faber had tried to play me for a sucker. I had been. But my eyes were wide open now. And everything depended on just how dumb he and Phil Carver thought I was.

THE hour-hand was pushing two when I paid off the cab on N. Clark and Chicago, but the cabarets and honky-tonks were still going full blast.

I walked south slowly. 505 wasn't the place. 305 was. The name on the sign was Tonelli and the window was filled with dusty pictures of brides and grooms, service men and children. An old Italian with a scraggly moustache was standing in the doorway.

"Take your picture for a dollar, Mister?" he asked hopefully.

I told him that I wasn't that proud of my looks and handed him the picture. "You're Tonelli? You took that picture?"

He turned it over and looked at the back. "Could be," he admitted. "That's my name." He stared at me shrewdly through bushy white eyebrows. "Why you give me this? What you want from Tonelli, Mister?"

I told him the picture was too worn for me to distinguish the features and I wondered if he could check his records and negatives for the year 1920 and sell me a reprint.

He grumbled that it was late, he had been about to close up, that finding the negative

would involve a lot of work, and that it would be better if I came back in the morning.

"For twenty dollars?" I said.

He shrugged his thin shoulders. "For twenty dollars, how can I turn you down?" He closed and locked the door behind us, saying that it might take him some time and that I had better come back in the studio to wait.

He switched out the front lights and shuffled through a pair of green baize curtains. I followed him with my hand on the gun in my pocket. I hadn't missed.

Phil Carver was sitting on a filthy day bed, a twisted smile on his lips. The blowsy blonde was sitting beside him. Red Faber was standing to her left, a sub-machine gun in his hand. As I came in he said, "Surprise!"

It wasn't. But I pretended it was.

"Your trouble, Doyle," Carver said, "is that you're only half-smart. After what happened at the cottage, you might have known that Bessie, here, was phony. She called me as soon as you called her."

"I was good though, wasn't I?" the blonde asked. She blew the same untidy wisp out of her eyes. "All my friends always told me I should have been an actress."

I asked Faber, "Supposing I told you I knew that your blonde girlfriend was a phony but calling her was the only way I knew to get in touch with you?"

He swore softly under his breath. Carver sat up straighter. "I will be damned. So you're crooked as hell after all, Doyle. You've got the whole set-up figured out, but instead of burping it to the law you're coming whining around for a hand-out."

Faber snarled, "You lousy copper." He lifted the submachine gun and I pointed my pocket at him.

"Sure. You can take me, Red," I told him. "But I'll have time for at least one shot. That's all I need."

"Want to play along?" he hesitated.

"You couldn't give me a dime," I told him.

Sudden suspicion punching his eyes, Carver got up from the day bed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Wrecking a man's career and a kid's life," I told him. "It was a clever idea, shyster. But you've played your string too thin."

He repeated, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"A blind dame named Justice," I said. "You're going up the river, Phil. And unless sudden death catches up with him first, you've lost your first client to the chair."

Faber's voice wasn't as strong as his words. "You're crazy. They won't dare burn me!"

The blonde was the first to get the set-up. She staggered to the back of the studio, looked out of the window and screamed, "Kill

him! He burped to the law after all. The alley is lousy with cops!"

Then everything happened at once. Red triggered a burst at me as I threw myself to one side. Glass crashed in the front and back of the studio. An axe began to whittle at the door. From somewhere in front, Nobby called, "Don't try it, Red. We have the building surrounded!"

Frothing like a cornered rat, Faber shot a burst through the green baize curtains, then swung the gun back on me. "Damn you to hell, Doyle!" he screamed. "At least I'll take you with me."

I said, "Boasting again," and nailed a pink rosebud on his forehead that blossomed into a bloody veil. But all of his slugs didn't miss me. I took two through the thigh before the sub-machine gun flew out of his hands to thud at Carver's feet.

"See what I mean, Phil?" I needled. "Red's dead, but it's twenty years for you!"

"The hell you say," he babbled, and snatched up the gun from the floor.

IT WAS all I was waiting for. The blonde and Tonelli were small-fry. Their word wouldn't mean a thing. But Carver's would. He could still lift the lid on Mable Sloan's coffin and drag her out of her grave. So I pinned a second rosebud on him just as Harry Nobby followed by Gleason, of the bank detail, and State's Attorney Beamer burst through the green baize curtains.

Nobby and Gleason helped me to my feet. The little sad-sack shook his fist in my face. "You didn't even order him to drop his-gun," he bellowed. "I saw that with my own eyes. You—"

"Sure. I'm a kill-crazy veteran," I forestalled him.

Nobby tightened his grip around my waist and wanted to know how badly I was shot. I told him I didn't know, but that things were blacking out and I thought they had better get me down to County and notify Sue.

He barked an order for a stretcher. My knees had turned to rubber. If it hadn't been for him and Gleason, I couldn't have managed to stand.

Beamer continued to annoy me. "Phil Carver was a respectable attorney," he insisted. "What was he doing mixed up with a rat like Faber? And why were you so eager to kill him?"

"It's a long story, sad-sack," I began. "Maybe your mother told it to you. Or did you have one? You see once upon a time there was a pretty little blossom, minding her own business, when along came a handsome bee. Then what do you think happened?"

But that was as far as I got. Before I could go into details, the floor and ceiling came together. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Stay Dead, Mable

BEAMER, wearing a surgeon's gown and mask, was trying to burn out my eyes with a blow-torch. I tried to lift an arm to sock him and someone said: "Okay. Switch off the light. He's coming to."

Suddenly the room was blessedly cool. I opened one eye cautiously. Her face as white as the operating-table sheet on which I was lying, Sue was standing beside me holding like death to my right hand. Doc Hartzig was standing beside her admiring his fancy hem-stitching.

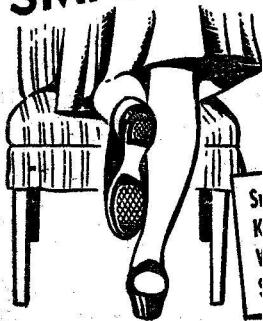
"He'll be all right?" Sue asked.

His eyes twinkling the old Dutchman told her, "Jawohl, Frau Doyle. Yah. Sure. Ach Gott! Such an Irisher I couldn't kill mit a scalpel."

He shook a rubber cased finger in my face. "Young man, someday yet, one chance too many you will take und into you will some lead gedt that old Hartzig can't oudt gedt!"

"Remind me to increase my insurance," I told him.

SMART WOMEN WEAR TREDS



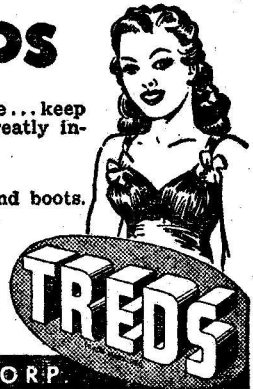
the stick-on soles that stay on. Double shoe mileage...keep shoes new looking...improve walking comfort...greatly increase the life of non-ratoned shoes.

So simple and easy to apply on new shoes or old.

For men's, women's and children's shoes—rubbers and boots.

Smart—modern—thrifty
Keep feet dry
Will not mar floors
Safety—non-skid tread

Pair of TREDs, tube of cement and scraper...all complete with full directions on display card. Only 25c at your favorite Hardware, 5c & 10c or General Store.



AUBURN RUBBER CORP.

He strode off to wash up, leaving the air blue behind him. Sue kissed me hard, her tears wet on my face. "Oh, Tom."

That was all. But it made me feel swell the way she said it. A nurse began to clean up the table preparatory to rolling me onto a stretcher and carting me up to a room. "Nobby is here?" I asked Sue.

"I'm right here behind you, Tom," he said. He walked around where I could see him. "How about it?" he asked the nurse. "Is it all right for him to talk?"

She gathered up a bundle of soiled linen. "You heard what Doctor Hartzig said. Durable Doyle seems to be about as good a name for him as any."

As she pushed through the swinging doors I could see that the waiting room was crowded with police and reporters. A big black cigar tilted until it almost touched his hat brim, sad-sack Beamer was wearing a hole in the floor. "How does the score stand?" I asked Nobby.

He said, "Both Faber and Carver are dead. So are Gimpy and Shields. And I've tucked the blonde and Tonelli away until you could straighten things out. You remember telling me to have young Potter and Mrs. Wren handy when you came to?"

I didn't. But it had been the last thought in my mind. "They're here?" I asked.

He nodded. "But strictly on the q.t." He opened the door of the doctor's lounge and called, "Mrs. Wren," softly.

She came in dragging her feet as if she were walking the last mile. She wasn't icy now. Her eyes were red and swollen with crying. I doubted if she could walk, if it hadn't been for young Potter's arm.

"Who knows they're here?" I asked Nobby.

He shook his head. "No one. I wasn't sticking my neck out until I found out the score."

Young Potter said hesitantly, "We shouldn't have run out on you, Doyle. But I thought you had the situation well in hand and—"

"Forget it," I cut him short. I looked at the woman beside him. "Hello, Mable." She spread her hands in a futile gesture. I could see the worry lines in her face now. She had been kicked around plenty. She expected me to kick her some more.

"What's this Mable business?" Nobby asked.

"She's Mable Sloan, Red Faber's former wife. And her daughter is Mable's kid," I told him.

He said that he still didn't get it.

"It is involved," I admitted. I told the story as I saw it, hoping the nurse would stay out until I had finished. "Some twenty years ago," I told Nobby, "Cora Wren, here, lost her head over Red Faber."

Nobby scowled. "I thought you said her name was Mable."

I told him, "There was a Mable Sloan. Every small town has a Mable. But she had left Eagle River some time before. Cora lost her head over Faber, but she made him marry her. She married him under the name of Mable Sloan. I wouldn't know why unless it was a secret marriage and she didn't want her parents to know about it. Was that the angle, Cora?"

Crying too hard to talk, she nodded that it was.

I continued, "She knew she'd made a mistake—right from the start. But the damage had been done. How long did you live with Faber?" I asked her.

"A week," she sobbed.

"Then you got an annulment, came to Chicago and married Mike Wren with whom you had been in love before you lost your head over Faber. That right?" She nodded.

"But you neglected to tell him about Faber, and he thinks your daughter is his child."

"Stop torturing her," young Potter told me hotly.

"You keep your shirt on," I told him. "What with assault and kidnapping, I've got enough on you to send you up for twenty years."

The skin on his cheek bones grew taut but he didn't answer. He knew I was telling the truth.

Mrs. Wren sobbed. "He was only trying to help me, help Constance."

Nobody wanted to know who Constance was. I told him she was Red Faber's daughter but had been raised to believe Mike was her father.

"It didn't matter to me," young Potter said. "But the truth would have broken her heart. She would have felt that she could never hold up her head again."

"It was a blackmail angle then?" Nobby asked.

"IN A way," I told him. "As I see my part in the picture, Phil Carver, as Red's lawyer, was in possession of the facts. He knew the truth but he couldn't prove it. Too much water had flown under the bridge. It was Red's word against Cora's. Mike wouldn't have listened to him. So they sucked me in as a clincher. My word is known as my bond. Whatever other sins I may have, I don't lie. They knew that Mike would believe me. So Red had Gimpy and Cal pick me up. The general idea as I see it was that I would backtrail the picture, find out it was really Cora Wren, and when I had confronted her with the fact, she would break down and do what they wanted her to. To make certain I didn't slip up, they planted the blonde on me to point directly at Cora. But things didn't work out that way. In the first place, Cora

was fighting back. She phoned me and offered to lay ten grand on the line if I would kill a certain man whom I know now to be Faber. When I turned her down, she confided in the only person she could trust, her daughter's fiancé. And young Sir Galahad here leaped on his horse by smacking me in the bugle and bundling me out to that summer cottage to keep me from finding out any more than I knew. Meanwhile, Red and Carver came to the cottage for Cora's final answer. And you know what happened there."

The nurse came back with an interne and a stretcher.

"And that's that," I summed up the case.

"But I still don't see," Nobby puzzled, "what Carver and Faber hoped to gain."

"Who is going to be our next governor?" I asked him.

"Mike Wren," he said promptly.

"And if you were Public Enemy No. 1, with the electric chair staring you in the face, who would be the man with the power to commute your sentence, even to pardon you openly?"

"The Governor," Nobby answered thoughtfully.

I tied it all together, "And if you were the governor of a state and such a mess was dropped in your lap, what would you do? You'd do the same thing Mike would have done. If he *knew* the facts were as stated, he would have pardoned Red and probably Cal and Gimpy. It would have washed him up politically, sure. But it would have saved his wife's reputation, and the happiness of a sweet, innocent kid whom for twenty years he had believed to be his own daughter."

Nobby swore softly.

I concluded, "As I see it, Red was tired of dodging the law. He wanted to give up. But before he did, he wanted to *know* the fix was in. But it had to be done hush-hush. Once the story broke, he'd lose his lever. That was where I came in. Once I had established the facts he claimed were so, he could lay his cards in front of Mike and collect the promise he wanted, under the threat of exposure." I looked at the crying woman. "But all the

time, Cora, was fighting them—more for Mike's sake, I imagine, than for her own. That right, Cora?"

Her eyes brimming with tears, she told me, "I couldn't let them do that to Mike. He's too fine—too good."

I nodded. "Then stay dead, Mable."

She stared at me, puzzled. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me," I told her.

Young Potter got it before she did and squeezed my hand hard. "You're okay, Doyle," he said warmly.

I said, "In your hat. Now go on. Get her out of here before I climb off this table and pay you back the punch in the bugle I owe you."

Cora spilled tears all over my face while she kissed me as hard as Potter had squeezed my hand. When they had gone out the back door, I asked Nobby, "Can do?"

The big lug cleared a frog from his throat. "Can do."

Sue scrubbed the alien lipstick off my face and replaced it with some of her own. Her eyes were as wet as Cora's. "I'm glad I'm married to you," she whispered. "You're really something pretty fine."

His hand on the door, Nobby hesitated, briefly. "But look. What do you get out of this, Tom?"

"I've got mine," I told him, grinning foolishly.

One of the swinging doors stuck as he went out and I saw Beamer hurry up to him. "No one tells me a thing," the little sad-sack complained. "What is this all about? What's going on here?"

"Well, I'll tell you," Nobby began, "It's a long story, Mr. State's Attorney. It would seem that once upon a time there was a pretty little blossom, minding her own business, when—"

Then the door swung shut and the nurse said sharply, "Stop laughing, Mr. Doyle."

I tried to—but I couldn't. So help me, I laughed so hard I damn near busted my stitches.

THE END

THERE'S STILL A PEACE TO BE WON!

The job isn't over yet — it's more important than ever! Our men are still scattered far and wide. Do your share toward helping your country forge a durable peace by buying Bonds for Peace.

LET YOUR BOND AGE — TO END BONDAGE!



He had mallets on his wrists and his arms were pistons

"You're through in the ring, Donny," she told him. You think a guy can buy new parts for his brain?" So his blue-eyed baby tried to make a killer out of the dumb ex-pug with bees in his head, only to find that his brains weren't gone — they'd just slipped down to his heart!

FINISH FIGHT

By HAL SHERIDAN

HE LIKED blue—a cottage with blue shutters on the windows and blue shingles on the roof. Blue blankets in a crib, someday, maybe. He would grip my arm in his big paw and almost break it, telling me about Honey. She worked in a restaur-

rant, where he was washing dishes. For her, of course, the restaurant was only a stop on the way. But she was always at him, he would tell me. She was at him every day. "Big, brave man," she'd say.

She was cute as a new dime. There was

tinsel in her eyes. "Well, what have you got to offer, Donny?" she would say.

So he'd smell the sweet perfume of her; and every night he would go home, to the hole beneath the street, to sit on his cot and stare. He'd make fists of his two hands and bang them at his head, bang them at the wall, bang them at the bed. He was crazy with the thought of her—of Honey.

"So you want to fight Joe Louis? she would laugh at him. "But anyone can fight Joe Louis, Donny. I can't eat Joe Louis. I can't wear him on my finger—like a diamond. What do you think it costs to keep a girl in nylons, Donny? Peanuts?"

At him all the time, he said, to show her. . . .

I PARKED my car that Friday evening in November as near as I could get to Berg's, the jeweler, on East Ninth. There was quite a crowd, although the cops were clearing them away now. The Press was there already, and Homicide had just rolled in.

"My God," I heard, "I tell you he was crazy. Big? You should have seen him! He came charging out the door like he was a locomotive!"

He knocked one fellow flat. Then women began screaming. Cars began to stop and blow their horns. All you heard, said these people in the crowd, was the horns and screaming.

I shut the street door behind me. Lieutenant Starnes looked around, nodded, grinned and said, "Hello, Tresh."

"Need me?"

"Your day off?" His eyes twinkled as he added, "We can get along, Mike."

I flushed, the way he made it sound, but he slapped me on the back and said, "Stick around, kid, if you want to."

Berg was lying on the floor, just this side of the counter, as if he'd started round the counter and got involved with broken glass. There was a little blood on his bald head, where he'd hit it on the counter showcase in falling. His hand was cut; he'd punched it through the glass. There wasn't much blood where the bullet went in, though—just a small round stain around a small round hole.

Berg was dead. A patrolman blocked the back room, where a dark young man sat on a lounge-chair, his head in his hands.

"Open and shut, Mike," Lieutenant Starnes said. "The ape was after a haul."

"Get it?"

"Plenty, I guess. Mrs. Berg is on her way down now, but we've got a broad idea. A lot of unset stuff—might go as high as seventy-five grand."

"Description?"

"Like a photo for us. Seems the whole town saw him."

"Identify him yet?"

Starnes seemed a little puzzled. "Not yet. But we'll get him."

Starnes led the way, then, into the back room to the patrolman and the dark young man. The bull had his notebook ready. The young man raised his face. Apparently he was getting control of himself now. He looked at us, shivered, and whispered, "Berg was a swell guy. He was a grand guy, Lieutenant."

"Worked here long?" Starnes said.

"Two years."

"I didn't get your name."

"Martin. Paul Martin."

He wore a blue suit. He had a moustache, and his dark hair had a wave in it. His hands were slim and pale. Restlessly they groped through his pockets for cigarettes. He used a lighter, snapped it two or three times, just staring at the flame.

"We were about ready to close," he said. "I'd already drawn the silks across the window. Mr. Berg was removing a few choice pieces from the cases, to put back in the safe for the night—"

"Just the two of you in the store?" Starnes interrupted.

"Yes, sir.—Just Mr. Berg and me. Mrs. Berg came in sometimes, to help out, but she wasn't here tonight. "Well—" Paul Martin drew on the cigarette, took a deep drag. "Berg didn't have a chance, Lieutenant. This big fellow came in and—"

"Jewels," he'd whispered. "Its a stickup. Diamonds."

I listened for a while. There was nothing new in the method. Berg, protesting to the end, had come around the counter to clasp hands with Death. I got a funny feeling, listening to Paul Martin. There was no doubt in my mind now who the big guy was.

So I walked back to the street, found Moran, the beat cop. "I'd have had him," said Moran, "except some dizzy dame got fussed and got between us with her car."

I said, "But the one shot you fired, Moran?" "Got him in the chest, I think. High, could be the shoulder. What the hell, the guy was big. I mean it slapped him and he stumbled, but it didn't knock him down. I was coming across the street—you know, Mike, a million people yelling, all those cars. Well, this dame cut through the center, right between us."

I stood looking up the street. "And he cut into the alley?"

"That's it," Moran admitted. "And that's where I lost him."

I put my hands in the pockets of my top-coat. "Know him, did you, Moran?"

"You know," Moran said slowly, "It's a funny thing. I do know him. I've seen him around somewhere. I got his name on the tip of my tongue and I can't say it."

"DONNY," I would say, time and time again, long ago, "you're on a one way street. The trouble with you is, Donny, you're too *big*. And already there's a fuse out somewhere in your body. Look the way you walked into that right just now. What the hell—you think a guy can buy repair parts for his brain?"

In those days he was always walking into rights. But he was six feet five, weighed two fifty—he could take it. He could always come up, shake his curly head and grin. He was like Carnera, but he never stopped to remember what had happened to Carnera.

Those were happy days for him. He had all the stuff that goes with fleeting fame. He had sports coats for each day in the week, all with little wooden gloves for buttons. He had polish for his hair, and money—like his muscles, like the tremendous strength of him, like his grin—to spend without once thinking. What he wanted, he said, was people yelling, "Hiya, Donny! Hiya, Champ!" I guess what he *really* wanted, even then, was to meet the right girl, a girl who'd wear an apron and wash dishes with him.

Then one day he had no more brains—just bone and muscle. He had two wads of skin that had been ears; his jaw was made of glass, and his nose was broken. He had strange noises in his head—like bees in a matchbox, he would tell me. He had pinups stuck around his walls; the girls he'd known when, would no longer talk to him.

Finally he had this restaurant job, washing dishes, where Honey worked.

"Mike," he would say, "the good things come along if you just wait. Why, she's even got a name for me! Calls me 'Dummy'. She'll say, 'How's the bees, Dummy?' But, Mike, the way she says it, I don't care. She can call me anything she wants to—Ike or Spike, Joe or Moe—anything she wants to, Mike."

All he wanted was to see her lips curve in a smile for him. All he wanted was to look at her. Little feet in patent pumps, blue eyes and blonde hair; smooth, white skin like nothing he had ever touched in all his life. He would think, I guess, she had brains to go with all this tinsel. Class!

Okay. After talking to Moran I knew that it was Donny. God would never put two such men in this small world at the same time. Starnes would get it soon now, from some cop who'd gone to the fights. Hell, someone would be sure to say, "That's Donny."

I drove out to the hole he called his home. "Donny?" I called. No one answered. I walked on tip-toe down the four steps to his door. It was dark inside. I rapped and called out softly again, "Donny!" I tried the door. It opened, but he wasn't home.

I drove on to the restaurant. No, Donny

hadn't showed tonight, they said. Honey? No, she never worked on Fridays either. The boss had just stepped out. He had the pay-books in his safe, and none of the employees knew Honey's address.

It was going hard on nine by the time I got it and then found her. No lock on the outside door—just slots for mail and names. Her name was Mary Ames. There was a long dim hall, with doors off it to other rooms; hers was the very last one. There was a rear exit, a back porch—and light beneath her door, but nothing happened when I rapped.

I tried the knob. "Who is it?" she said.

"The name is Tresh," I said.

Tresh? I fancied I could see the word flashing red lights in her brain. "What do you want?" she said.

"To see you about Donny."

THE DOOR flew open. She almost dragged me in. Her eyes were blue all right, innocent as a Maxfield Parrish blue; she wore a thin blue gown that put exclamation points around her slender figure. She was lovely, all right, but fear had drawn harsh lines. She trembled as we stood there, looking at each other.

"I remember," she chattered. "Mike Tresh—Donny's friend. Donny is always talking about you."

"Where is he?" I said.

The trembling was too much for her. She sat down. "Then you've heard it, too? Oh my God, Mike, I turned on the radio. They described him! It was Donny! Mike," she wailed, "what am I going to do?"

I noticed that the window shades were tightly drawn, that she'd tried to seal the room. I walked across the room. Kitchen off behind the porch? Bedroom? Bath? You couldn't tell.

"Mike," she went on then with sudden hope, "you don't mean it's over and he—he's dead?"

I faced her again. "We haven't found the body."

She pounced on one small word. "We?"

"The police."

"You're a d-detective? You aren't here as Donny's friend now? You're a—a detective?"

"I'm trying hard to keep the two apart, Miss Ames."

"He told you about me?"

"Yes, that's why I'm here, Miss Ames."

Her breathing was volcanic. "Did he tell you everything, Mike? How I pitied him, joked with him?"

When I didn't answer, she moaned, "He was such a simpleton, Mike. His eyes just followed me around like two brown puppies. I felt so *sorry* for him, Mike. The shame of it—a man like that, battered to a pulp. And everyone

just sneered at him, but I—" She discovered I was standing, pleaded, "Oh, sit down, Mike! Don't go away and leave me."

She waited till I'd taken the big chair across from her, then continued, "He'd say, 'Honey, just you wait until I fight Joe Louis.' Mike, it was so *tragic*. I knew he'd never fight anyone again. And then one day he got a new idea. I should wear a ring. And Mike, I was kind. I told him I loved diamonds. I thought he'd buy one for me at the dime store. Mike, I never thought—"

"No, neither did I," I said.

"So when you rapped—" She shivered. Then tears came into her eyes. "Mike, you've got to take me away. You've got to take me somewhere, Mike—until he's caught. I must not be involved—I couldn't bear it! I've got a future. The restaurant's only a job—"

She stopped. She'd seen my scowl. She seemed to hold her breath, and the room was very still until I said, "You aren't concerned, though, about what happens to Donny."

She made limpid pools of her blue eyes. "But he'll be caught!"

I said grimly, "Shot on sight, you mean. They think he's got a gun."

Something happened to her eyes. They narrowed and turned green. Now twice to-night she grabbed one word from me. "Think?"

She blinked. She balanced unawareness like a seal on a tight-rope. "But he shot the jeweler!"

I said, "What's on his mind, Honey, besides you? The fight ring, that's what. Joe Louis, gloves, sweat, canvas and rosin. He hears cheers; he sees white lights and a crowd. He's got bees in his head, and no sense of timing, and it's always the same because he's got hamburger for a brain. He never gets a new idea, and that's why he's Donny."

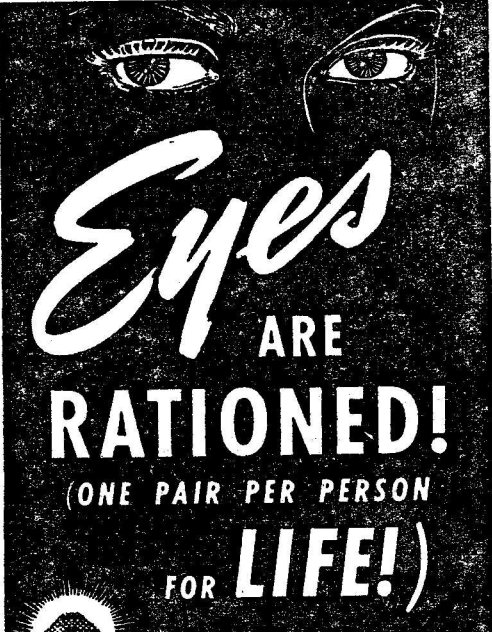
"What are you saying?" she whispered.

"He'd cover, not attack. Okay, he might try a swing. He'd swing like a windmill. You know what I'm saying. I'm saying that he couldn't hurt a fly, that he didn't plan this job and he didn't kill the jeweler!"

"That's right, Tresh," a soft voice said behind me.

PAUL MARTIN. I weighed it all again before I turned. I wondered why Starnes had let him go so soon, how he'd managed to get here so soon. It was after nine now—three whole hours. I had been so sure they would never make this one mistake, to meet like this, tonight, before the case was officially closed.

Martin chuckled behind me. "Hands flat out on the chair-arms, Tresh," he said. "Get his gun, Honey. And watch for prints."



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So he had two guns in his gloved hands as he slid around to Honey's side. Her chatter was gone now; her tears were gone. The blue was gone, and her unawareness. Her eyes were bright and green. "You fool!" she snapped, a shrill note in her voice.

"Poor kid—you wound her up." Paul Martin grinned. "You had *me* going for a while, Tresh. Till we realized you'd come here alone."

"Now you're not worried?" I said.

He made motions with the two guns, to draw my attention to them. "What do you think?"

I said, "She was the dame with the car that got between Moran and Donny." He smiled.

I said, "He had a finger in his coat pocket. Bang-bang, it's a stickup—that's all he was supposed to do. And he had to get away because he didn't have the jewels—not the big haul *you* were going to carry out. He didn't have the gun you'd used on Berg. So she picked him up in the car, around the block. She took him away and put him on ice for you."

He smiled. His eyes were going off and on like small black bulbs.

"So you had to come here for the car tonight," I said.

He laughed. "No soap, Tresh. You shorted."

"Then why—?"

"Why?" The lights had got into his voice. He tried to keep it flat, but it wouldn't hold. It got ragged on the edges. "You're the smart guy, Tresh. You're the copper. You've got the ball now—it's your play."

I got it. It was so damned simple. It was Donny. It was Donny without brains to play a game. He hadn't stayed on ice. He'd got tangled in emotion. He wasn't where they'd put him. He wasn't there when Martin got away from Starnes tonight. When Martin came to kill him and then plant the gun. They were waiting now for Donny to show—here!

Maybe I gave it away. Maybe what was seething there inside of him just broke loose. "No plan is good unless it's kept elastic, Tresh," he said. "And this one stretches like a girdle. Because I got the two guns—yours, and the one the record will show burned down Berg—the one the record will call Donny's. So now you got it, copper. You two shot it out—Donny got you and you got him. That's going to be the answer."

"Sweet," I admitted.

He grinned again. "Like Honey."

"A guy can drown in too much honey."

"Not the way I play."

"And then," I had to keep on talking, "there's the one about the plans of mice and men—"

I stopped. A pin falling would have sounded like a grenade. The footsteps outside in the alley were supposed to have been discreet. They thundered, kicked against tin cans, stumbled on the steps. Now the whole room was shaking.

He crawled across the porch on hands and knees—scratched at the kitchen door. I could hear the wheeze, the gurgle of his breathing.

"Honey—" he pleaded out there. "Honey?"

BLUE shutters on the windows. Blue shingles on the roof. Even in the old days, he was a sucker for blue. I had a corner in him then. When he hit the big dough, I was going to make a million. Maybe it was my fault, in a way, that he'd tried so hard for it. Maybe jeers is what I should have had for him, when he'd say, "If I ever get the big fight, Mike, I'll win it."

He sat out there now on the kitchen floor, looking at her, crying like a baby. It was something in his chest; he tried to show her. His coat was soggy wet with it. He tried to breathe but he could only whistle. He was frightened at the blood, but he had no blood. He had to have iron in his veins to have dragged himself up here.

I started from the chair. Martin snarled, "Hold it." I sank back. Now Martin moved a little toward the kitchen, not yet where Donny could see him.

"The ring," Donny was rasping out in the kitchen, giving her his life. "I got one for you, Honey, like you wanted, like you told me. Sure, I got it, Honey—here. All I did was—"

"Come in the other room," she said.

His sigh was something just to hear. Then, "Honey, you ain't mad at me? Because I didn't stay where you said I should? Honey, you were gone so long," he said. "I just couldn't wait forever. I got something in my chest." He touched the sodden mass. "In here. In my head, the bees, Honey. I keep getting dizzy."

"Donny!" She threw cold water on him with her sharp voice. "Get up! You'll be counted out. They're going to ring the bell now, Donny!"

He was in a haze. He looked around. He couldn't see. He got like he always did when something came too fast for him. Maybe he was looking for the referee. Maybe the kitchen looked like a prize ring to him; he was on the canvas, after trying to take Louis, Dynamite. The Mauler. Donny, trying to be Champ. His hands knotted and he set his jaw. He made a monumental effort and got up to one knee.

"Come on, Donny!" she said.

Sure he would—for her. Anything, for her.

"Dummy" she might call him. Ike or Spike, Joe or Moe—anything she wanted. He could take the Bomber. He could lick the world. For her he could even walk straight to his slaughter.

He got to his feet, scowling, trying to haul in his chin and weave, but the massive might of him was swaying. He got almost to the door—and blinked. He couldn't get it. He raised one arm as if he were dodging a blow. Because now he could see *me*—and I didn't look like Louis.

"Mike—?" he whispered dumbly.

I heard the click, Martin drawing back the hammer on my gun. But Donny didn't seem to hear it. A little sound like that wouldn't have bothered Donny. His face blossomed in a grin. Sure, he knew now why Mike Tresh was on deck. Wasn't this the big night? The crack he'd always wanted at Joe Louis? Sure, he knew Mike would be in his corner. I read all that in his grin. "Mike!" he said, and started swinging for the shadows, swinging with both fists—

To hell with Martin's guns! It was in my mind to say, "*Stand still!*" I don't know now if I said it. I had fifteen feet of room to cross to reach Paul Martin—fifteen miles. Fifteen lives to live in less than one second. "*Donny!*" I yelled, and broke from the chair.

No, no chance at all. I'd known there wouldn't be. I wasn't five feet from the chair when the gun spoke.

You can tell it, I suppose, just how it happened—but words will never flow that fast. There was Martin with his two guns, grease on all his muscles, eyes burning all the bulbs now. The thing was planned to go like light-

ning. Donny first, of course, for Donny had no room to cross, Donny would be nearer. There was Martin, crouched and cool.

The bullet spun Donny half around. In the middle of the hook he'd flung, his left. He missed with the left, but Martin took a quick step back for safety, icy calm, his black eyes shimmering with light. The gun jerked again—two shots that were almost one. But it was like shooting at a tank. Donny landed on him with a right, a left. He had mallets on his wrists instead of hands, and his arms were pistons. Now Martin's guns were throwing lead at Donny in a sort of final, choking frenzy. From the kitchen doorway Honey began screaming. Her voice climbed as though she'd tied it to a kite.

There was no sound then—none at all. And no movement. Martin lay flat on the floor. And Honey had grown roots. Her eyes were fixed on space; her neck was ugly with strained cords.

"Call him Champ," I whispered. "Tell him that he's won—"

Donny, on his hands and knees, wore a tired grin for her. He choked, and reached for something only he could see.

"Damn you," I said. "Talk to him, or I will!"

She began to sob. Maybe he would think it was out of joy for him. Maybe he had found his cottage with blue shutters on the windows after all.

"Hear 'em, Donny?" I said. "Cheers? See 'em, Donny," I said, "throwing their hats into the ring? Donny," I said harshly, fighting now to get the words out, do you feel what it means to *win*, kid?"



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He slammed into George, as gun-fire rocked the corridor.

SAFE DEPOSIT
VAULTS

Y BONDS

BLOOD ON HIS HANDS

By

TALMAGE POWELL

"The boss don't like guys with too many new ideas, and he don't like guys who try to quit on him!" they told Bill. But Bill had a date that night, which not even all the boss' gunsels could make him break!

FOR three days he had been alone, hunted, terror his companion. He had lain in the cheap room in the shady rooming house and fought death. He had seen his blood drip upon the bare, grimy floor; for the first time in these last months he had time to think. . . .

Over and over in his mind, he saw Malone dying again. He and Malone had been trying to steal a car. A cop had spotted them. Malone had fired. Malone had died, and he, Bill Forman, had felt the cop's bullets burning into him.

Slowly, out of the aching void of pain and lonely despair, words had come to haunt him. Words that the old man who had been his father had spoken. Words of his brother, George, spoken months ago: "Manhood is like strong drink, kid. You're tasting it. You've got to learn to control it, or it'll run away with you."

He had called George a sucker. He'd been so very sure of himself back then. He had his sights set—a flashy car, hundred-dollar suits, other guys looking up to him. And Felice! Everything for Felice!

But now he hadn't seen Felice in three days. He didn't have the car and his clothes were stiff with his own blood. He had stared Death in the face, and he wondered about that crack of George's about your manhood running away with you.

During that delirium of two nights ago, the seedy landlady had even threatened to throw him out if he didn't stop his groaning. "I can't have cops coming here," she'd said. "You punk, you cheap gungsel—why don't you crawl out in the alley and die?" But she had taken that hundred-dollar bill he had, the one with which he'd intended to do something nice for Felice. She'd taken it and hadn't thrown him out, for that was her business. She'd been at it a long time, and she called them all punks.

You cheap gungsel! He sighed heavily as he slipped into his coat. The landlady had removed most of the blood. He pulled the gun from beneath his pillow, looked at it, the sudden strangeness of it, and finally dropped it into his pocket.

Buttoning the coat, he rose from his sitting position on the side of the bed. It felt as if a thousand pins were sticking the bottoms of his feet. He swayed a little, dizzy, weak, but after a moment the pliant young strength of him surged up in his veins.

He thought of Felice, too. That helped him keep his feet. He had everything worked out in his mind. He pitied Felice now as he supposed George had once pitied him. "There are two kinds, kid," George had said, "the ones who go wrong because they're born that way, and the ones who go wrong because they're blind for awhile—until it's too late for them to open their eyes. That last kind, Bill—they're the ones to be pitied."

He didn't know how Felice had been born, but he loved her, all the dainty goldness of her. She had been in the delirium, and now she was part of this new resolve that the cop's bullet had burned into him—part of the resolve that was forcing him to get up—and out.

He bent to tie his shoes. The bullet that had struck his arm had merely burned him; the one that had gone through his side had passed through him clean. If that bullet had

lodged, he would have done more than merely look at death.

He started across the room, and when he reached the door blackness was washing over his brain and weakness broke beads of moisture on his brow. He set his teeth, held to the door jamb until his senses steadied again. He was getting out while this thing was fresh and strong in his mind. He was thinking about his mother and what this would mean to her. He was thinking of George, the big, squat ugly man who'd tried to raise him after the old man died. George's eyes had held the bitterness of failure the last time Bill had looked into them, laughing in George's face and calling him sucker. George, Bill had heard, had taken a new job on Snedeker Avenue. He wondered what it would be like to walk up to George again and offer his hand.

He picked his way down the hallway, steadying now, his heart settling to normal, the blackness fading from his brain. A drink, a square meal, a breath of free air—a long, new life ahead of him with Felice beside him. Not for a moment had she been out of his thoughts. The same cop's bullet that had started the cure in his own young soul would serve her as well, for now he could picture the terror; he had seen the end of the road first hand, the noisome fear and loneliness roiling inside of him. He would show it all to Felice; he would make her see the grim, harsh picture of the last three days he had endured, days that were only a preliminary to what might lie ahead.

AT LAST he came out on the sidewalk, escaping the odors of the house. Night was thick and chill about him, clearing the last giddy shreds from his mind. With his arm covering the faint stains of blood left on his coat, he began walking.

He slid on the stool of the bar and told Divilbliss, "I need a bourbon, Divil. Make it double—strictly for medicinal purposes."

"Yeh," Divilbliss laughed. The bar was warm, close, clouded with cigarette smoke, the juke box blaring.

Divilbliss, huge in his white apron, set the bourbon on the bar. "I hear the cops been looking for you, Bill. Something about trying to steal a car."

"They won't have to look long, Divil. I didn't get the car, and what I learned is worth thirty or sixty days in jail."

Divilbliss frowned, then shrugged his shoulders as if the workings of the mind of a punk were too much for him. "Max Donnelly has been around too, asking after you. You should have let your boss know where you were going."

"He won't be my boss much longer, Divil." "I wouldn't talk like that," the bartender

said softly. "Max don't like his men getting big ideas of their own."

"This isn't a big idea, Divil. I'm quitting. Flat—cold. Whatever the law has got to hand out in the way of jail sentences I'm willing to take."

"You talk like a stew, kid."

"Maybe. But I've been bleeding, and for the wrong kind of things. It takes the glamor away, Divil. It starts you to thinking about simple things that most people just take for granted."

"Such as?"

Bill Forman shrugged. "Night against day. Deep, easy breaths against crouching in some hole and sucking in your wind like a dog. Or maybe it all adds up to your funeral—whether you want to be buried in a nice sunny place with a few people really missing you, or just have people be glad that another punk is out of the way."

"Well," Divilbliss said, "if you're thinking of telling all that to Max Donnelly and quitting him, it's your own funeral."

Then the barkeep waddled away to take an order from a pinch-faced youth and a giggling girl in a red dress who clutched his arm. Bill Forman swallowed hard and moved toward the door. "Hey," said Divilbliss, "you left half your drink, Bill."

Bill Forman shook his head, turned, and hurried back out into the night.

He avoided cops as he moved along the streets, burying himself in the crowds of pedestrians. But he was afraid of cops no longer; neither were they all suckers to him. He didn't know whether most people ever thought of cops or just took them for granted. But he was thinking of them in a new way, with a warm feeling for the big honest figures who fought the punks. His brother George had been a sort of cop, too—a night watchman.

He turned a corner by a huge office building of gray stone. The light changed, and he walked across the street, savoring the honking of horns, the feeling of people about him; it brought his recent memory of flight and pain and near-death very close.

He wasn't afraid. Not now. But he wanted time to see Felice and show her this thing he had discovered. She was young; she'd had some bad breaks, but her voice had been good, and she had landed a job singing quiet, sultry little songs in Max Donnelly's night club. She had met people there, and had changed from the sweet kid she must have been once, to the girl who had taught Bill Forman things that had been strange and exciting. Now the excitement was over—but the wonder and strangeness of being alive was again new. He meant to share it with her. He loved her. He didn't intend to overturn an empire for her, only serve whatever time the law saw fit to

give him. It wouldn't be much, for the cheap, small-time criminal acts he'd committed. Then he wanted to get a job and build a house.

HIS hand was shaking when he knocked on her door. Her colored maid answered, eyes going wide. "Why—Mr. Forman!"

"Is Miss Jordan in?"

"She certainly is! She been mighty worried about you."

The maid ushered him inside. He was in a huge, pastel cavern. He didn't know much about such things, but he felt the place too frilly, too stuffy. He didn't like the kewpie doll staring at him from the corner of the deep couch.

Then he was looking at Felice. She came toward him slowly, like a drifting dream, small, delicately curved, with a tiny oval face, a tipped-up nose, a small, pouting mouth.

"Bill!"

He didn't speak. He swallowed hard, simply looking at her.

"Bill! I thought . . . I heard about the fracas you and Malone were in. They got Malone!"

"I know. I saw him die."

She was holding his arms just above the elbows, looking up into his face. "They killed Malone—but you, Bill. . . ."

"I'm still alive."

She kissed him, and he drank it in. Then she stepped back, lithe, buoyant, her laughter tinkling. "Oh, the devil with Malone! You're back—that's what counts. Malone was only a punk. Good riddance if he didn't have enough to take care of himself."

The words went right to the middle of him. He laid his hand lightly on her shoulder. "Maybe I'm just a punk too, Felice. Would you feel that way about me if it had been me the cop got instead of Malone?"

"Silly!" Her tinkling laugh rose, like icicles bumping gently together.

"But Malone—he knew you! You introduced me to Malone. I . . . I think he thought a lot of you."

"Malone?" She snapped her fingers. "That was Malone and me. He took me out a time or two a long time back—a girl needs a little fun, doesn't she? And when he was in the chips he bought me a few flowers and a bracelet. . . ."

He laid his hand over her mouth and stopped the words. His face was dishwater gray. "I don't like to hear you talk like that, Felice."

She pulled back from him, her eyes changing. "What's come over you, Bill? Look—Donnelly is going to be happy as a hophead when he learns you're back in one piece. Tonight at eleven—the biggest job this city has ever seen! Donnelly has spent three days cas-

ing the place—the Renfree Jewelry Company. It's cost Donnelly five grand to a weak-sister clerk to get the inside ropes on the place, the location of the burglar alarms and all that, but it means a hundred grand! Think of that, Bill—a hundred thousand dollars!" She looked at him, and her words hung in the room. She repeated, "What's come over you?"

He reached for a box of cigarettes. He dropped three of them in his pocket, lighted one. He felt the hammering of his pulse, the weight of the things that depended on his next words. His words were heavy, groping for things he felt. "Felice, when you look the old guy with the scythe in the eye you get to see some things in a different light. Flashy cars and diamond-studded watches and having headwaiters nod at you don't mean as much as you thought they did. Those things are fine—if you've got the money to buy them or the guts to make the money. But they can be pretty awful if the money isn't right. You see what I mean?"

She shook her head, eyes narrowed, and moved with her studied, provocative sway toward the couch.

"Well," he licked his lips, "there are other things—you can't touch them. Some people call them decency and self-respect. You lose them, it's going to cost a lot more in the end.

You look the old guy with the scythe in the eye, you begin to see what they mean."

She laughed at him. He clenched his hands slowly and felt himself bleed inside. He was young; but in another way he was old. He loved Felice, always would. He had to make her see this thing.

He told her how Malone had died, screaming. He pictured the terror, the delirium, the agonized three days in the cheap rooming house. He tried to show her what a staggering price Malone had paid for what little easy money he'd gotten. He wanted her to realize, even if it shocked her so that she didn't sleep at night for weeks, that he and she and Max Donnelly were all Malones. Some of them were a little bigger than others, but they were all just like Malone.

She sat quite still, stiffly. He watched every flicker of expression on her face. But her eyes were veiled. He could read nothing.

She rose, walked to the window; she stood there a moment, staring into the darkness outside. Then she turned to him. "But Bill—tonight at eleven . . . a hundred thousand dollars. . . ."

He gripped her shoulders; he shook her a little and said, "If Malone were here, he'd be in on this mess tonight, wouldn't he?"

She studied his face. "Yes, I suppose, but Malone is—"



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"That's exactly what I'm driving at," he said savagely. "Malone is dead! Malone isn't here, and all the jobs he went on in the past for Max Donnelly added up to keep him from being here. It's only a question of time for anybody who packs a rod and thinks he's bigger than the rest of the world put together."

"But, Bill, a hundred thousand dollars! Think of what it would buy! Miami, Rio, Mexico City. . . ."

"I can't make you see." He released her shoulders. "Words won't do it. Words are such nutty little sounds without meaning. You'd have had to see Malone and the blood, and been with me in the delirium really to see."

She was looking at him almost questioning-ly, her mouth pouting. Cute as a child.

He passed his hand across his eyes, turned and started from the room. He waited for her to call after him; his mind shrieked it. *Stop me, Felice. Don't let me go!*

But she said nothing, unless she sobbed a little, and the door closed behind him. He jabbed the elevator button, rode down, her face swimming in his vision. He reached the street, stood looking into the depths of night, as empty and black inside as the darkness pressing down upon him. He'd figured it so carefully—but he hadn't figured any of it without Felice. With her, he'd stick his chin out and tell the world to take a sock. Without her. . . . A shutter fell across his mind. He might as well think of dying.

He stood with his mind burning and a great empty space inside of him. He slapped his fist into his palm a few times. Then with an abrupt twisting of his feet, he turned. He was in the elevator again, walking down the corridor to her apartment.

He jerked the door open without knocking. She was seated on the low bench beside the telephone stand, the ivory phone in her hand. She was small and ethereal and trembling a little.

He said, "Felice. . . ."

She turned, whitened, replaced the phone with a dream-like movement. "Bill. . . . I was phoning the bar across the street. I was going to have Whitey run out and send you back. Don't go away again, Bill!"

"This is the last job?" he said harshly. "After this, tonight, we'll go away, just you and me, and forget all this, maybe pretend that the last months have never happened?"

"The very last job," she breathed. "Darling, I promise you that never again will you go on another job."

Then she raised her face to be kissed.

HIS apartment smelled stale. He opened the windows to let the cool night air blow away the three-day-old tobacco odor. He

crossed the small sitting room, entered the bedroom and flicked on a light.

He pulled the gun from his pocket, tossed it on the bed, and threw his coat over it. He opened the closet door, reached for a suit, a dark blue one, very commonplace, not likely to show up much at right.

He had forty-five minutes in which to change and meet Donnelly. Felice had told him that his appearance would certainly surprise Donnelly. When Bill strolled up to Donnelly's car, it would make the thin, sleek, mustached man very happy.

"He likes you, Bill," she had said as he left her apartment. "But don't tell him you have any ideas about skipping out. Max might not understand."

He was scratching in a dresser drawer for a change of shirts when he heard the sitting-room door open.

He turned, stood for a moment, then moved across the bedroom. On the other side of the small living room, just inside the doorway, stood two men, very quiet.

"Longwell," Bill said. "Capella."

Both men were of medium size. Longwell was the chinless one whose mouth Capella was swarthy, thicker through the shoulders. Hats pulled low, they moved to the bedroom doorway. Longwell said, "We heard you were back, Forman. Donnelly sent us over. The boss wanted us to have a talk with you."

"Take a load off your feet," Bill said, the shirt from the dresser drawer in his hands. "I was on my way to see Donnelly."

"Yeah?" Capella granted. "That ain't the way we heard it."

Bill noticed then the tightness of their faces, the slick sweat on Capella's blue-black chin, the way the corner of Longwell's hanging mouth twitched. "We heard you were skipping, that you didn't like your old pals any more," Longwell said.

Divilbliss! He'd shot off his mouth to Divilbliss and the bartender had passed it on to Donnelly. Divilbliss handed Donnelly penny-ante information occasionally.

"The boss don't like men with too many ideas," Longwell said.

"And he don't like guys who know things trying to quit him," Capella added.

"You should remember that," Bill said. He started taking the fresh shirt off the laundry cardboard. "But I wasn't lying when I said I was on my way to meet Donnelly. You can tag along if you like."

"You think you're cutting yourself in on the job tonight?" Capella asked.

"I might be."

"Then," Longwell wheezed, "you got another think coming. You're not going anywhere."

Bill looked from one to the other of them. A drop of sweat on Capella's chin dropped, perspiration stood in the folds of flesh above his slick, grimy collar. Longwell pulled his hand from his pocket, exposing his gun. "You're staying right here," Longwell repeated. "The boss don't trust you any further than that."

"Yeah," Capella chuckled. "You see, this job tonight is something special. Your brother George is a night watchman. He got himself a new job a few weeks back on Snedeker Avenue. Renfree Jewelry—and a little matter of a hundred thousand dollars—is on Snedeker also."

"Do we have to say more?" Longwell asked.

Bill was aware of the hammering tick of the watch on his wrist. In forty minutes now, Donnelly and the picked men he'd take with him would be entering Renfree Jewelry. The fresh shirt slowly crumpled in his hands. "In forty minutes," he breathed, "you're going to murder my brother!"

"If it takes that," Capella admitted, and Longwell, stepping in close, slashed with his gun. Bill jerked to one side, but he was weak, slow, and the gun hammered fire into his brain. He sank to his knees, clutching at the bed, missing, thinking, "Malone was lucky. I never thought when it came my time to pay that I'd have to do it this way. . . ."

His senses swam back to hazy consciousness slowly. He saw the glow of the bedlamp first, and splayed his hands on the carpet at either side of him to push himself up. The light needling in his eyes, he moved his head. Longwell was sitting in the chair near the bed. Capella was half-sitting in the window sill, his feet planted wide apart on the floor.

They watched him in stony silence as he shoved himself up, tottering to his feet. His voice was a croak, "What time is it?"

"What do you care?" Capella said. "You're not going anywhere."

"It's ten minutes to eleven," Longwell said. "Sit down, little boy blue."

He swayed toward the bed, digesting the bitterness of that. He'd been out cold on the floor for thirty minutes. At eleven, Donnelly and his picked hoods would enter Renfree Jewelry where George was keeping a lonely, solitary watch. George had ten minutes more of life. . . .

"You might say, Forman," Longwell wheezed, "that you're due a cut out of this job tonight. In a way, you put the bee in the boss's bonnet. Knowing you, he wondered what your brother was like. He did a little quiet checking and that led him to the set-up at Renfree Jewelry. When Donnelly walked into that, he forgot all about George being your brother."

"Yeah," Capella laughed. "but he'll remember your brother tonight, Billy boy!"

He looked at them, his face no longer young, but drawn and old. He sat down on the bed and sobbed and Longwell joined in Capella's laughter. While they laughed, he noticed that his coat was still lying on the bed, exactly where he'd tossed it. His hand slid along the bed, covering the inches that separated him from the coat. His hand slipped up under the coat and closed about the gun where he'd tossed it before throwing the coat over it.

He pulled the gun up, and their laughter hung foolishly in their mouths. Capella's hand made a movement toward his coat pocket. Bill told him, "Try it! So help you, try it!"

Gray beneath his swarthinness, Capella's hand edged away. Longwell's mouth clicked, dropped open again.

"Walk to the closet," Bill ordered. They rose, and he moved warily back from them. At the closet door they hesitated, guns bulging in their pockets, hands itching with the thought of what Max Donnelly would do to them for this. "Damn you, get in! I've got about nine minutes and thirty seconds—and I'm not going to waste a second of it!"

They inched into the closet. He crossed the room quickly and locked the door. He remembered that he'd need cab fare. He rifled the pockets of the suit he'd taken from the closet before the arrival of Longwell and Capella. He found three singles in the pants pocket. Capella and Longwell were slinging their weight against the closet door when he ran out of the room.

BEHIND him, the alley was a dark tunnel of night. Under his hands the door had already been sprung—or unlocked with a key that Donnelly's money had bought from the weak-sister employee of Renfree Jewelry. They were inside—if they hadn't already completed the job.

He blinked sweat out of his eyes, eased inside the doorway. The building was huge, strange over him. He groped his way down a ramp to the basement. His hands found asbestos covered pipes. He moved until he found a wall, followed it to a door well.

A stair creaked under his foot. He turned a sharp angle, saw a dim light ahead of him. He emerged in a corridor that evidently ran beside the offices in the rear of the store. The light was a low-wattage night light.

Then he heard the slow, heavy thud of footsteps and the sound of them melted the years away. He was remembering the way George had bought shoes for him, a sled one winter, books and sweaters, baseball bats, and given money to keep him in school. George hadn't complained. He'd stepped in and taken the

old man's place when the old man had died; he'd become the head of the family. He'd never been able to marry and have a home of his own, but the big, squat homely man hadn't kicked about that either. His job had been cut out for him and he had done it.

And Bill had called him sucker, put the squeeze on where it hurt, walking in a crooked path that would, tonight, lead to George's murder. . . .

He watched the heavy form come plodding down the corridor, the watchman's clock swinging at George's side. He stepped out of the stairwell and said, "George!"

The big man stopped. Bill couldn't see his face clearly, but he heard George breathing. Finally George found words. "What the hell are you doing here, punk?"

"No, George, you don't—"

"How'd you get in?"

"Downstairs. I. . . You've got to listen to me. They're laying for you. On this round or the next one, they'll get you. They—"

"Get out of here! And you'd better make it fast, Bill, or I might forget that I ever had a brother."

"George, you—" His voice snapped off as the figures down the corridor came into his vision. He saw the tall lean thinness of Donnelly, so feared, respected and hated. He saw the two men with Donnelly—and the girl beside him.

He stared at Felice, his throat tight, his eyes burning. Why was she on a job like this, why should she take the risk? And he knew in that bleak, bitter moment that she was here because she wasn't Bill Forman's girl. She belonged to Max Donnelly. She was his kind, spawned in the same mold. She had led on an excitement-bewildered kid because of the use she could put him to, the way she'd taken Malone's flowers and bracelets.

He knew that Divilbliss hadn't phoned Donnelly; she had. She had told him that Bill was back, knowing that Donnelly would send a couple of men to take care of the young punk.

There are two kinds, kid. . . . And he had been wrong—her kind wasn't to be pitied. She knew everything she did, everything she wanted. She had weighed her values quite coldly and chosen her path because she had been born that way and she would go on, after the murder of George and Bill Forman tonight; she would never stop. She had come along with Donnelly because they planned a quick get-away, laughing over a hundred-thousand dollars, trampling any crazy young punk or plodding, honest man who got in their path. Only blood would stop her.

He sensed George walking toward him, his heavy, homely face set. He saw her raising

the gun, Donnelly and his men moving like shadows. He said quietly, "They're behind you, George!"

Then he slammed into his brother, spilling George; gunfire rocked the corridor.

He fired blindly. Beside him, he felt George's movement, heard the roar of George's gun. Acrid smoke bit his nostrils and he heard someone scream.

It was an intolerable eternity, with his soul caught up in the gunfire, because she was there and he was here, like two people on opposite sides of a primeval gorge without a bridge between them. Then the shocking impact of a bullet stunned him. He felt the gun fall from his hand, his fingers relaxing. The floor pressed against his face, and dimly he heard the wail of sirens. Then he stopped thinking about her, burning so hotly in the empty space inside of him as his senses dipped in the yawning sea of blackness. . . .

VOICES reached out to him. "He's coming out of it. The ambulance will be here soon. Easy with him."

Feet passed his face. He opened his eyes, police uniforms swirling in his vision. They had heard the shooting and come. And there was a face close to his own, a dumpy body kneeling beside him, a hand pressing his.

"You've come home, kid—we don't intend to let you go again!"

But George could, now. When Bill shouldered his share of the load, George would be able to start a little life of his own, the way a dumpy, good-natured guy ought to. "You okay, George?" He tried to say it loudly, but it bubbled up out of his burning chest a whisper.

"Sure, kid. And you're going to be. You took a tough one, but nothing to worry about. We made mincemeat of the two hoods. Donnelly and the girl got away."

"Got away?"

"But not for long, Bill. There are too many guys on the right side of the fence for them ever to get away for good."

He groped for George's hand as the blackness stole over him once more. George's grip was good, firm, strong.

He heard a cop moving by him. "As my name is Murphy, George, you and your brother sure chopped those two boys of Donnelly's up. Won't they ever learn that glory ain't written in blood?"

Bill forced his eyes open for a short moment. He was just in time to see George raising his free hand. There was blood on George's hand, Bill Forman's blood. "You're a dumb cop, Murph," George said. "It all depends on why and how you're wearing the blood."

TOO MANY CROOKS



"To Al Tigert, I leave the sum of \$600,000, and also. . . ."

By
**DAMON
KNIGHT**

● *Old Man Everard had too much money for his own good, Al thought. But he forgot that \$600,000 didn't add up to much—when you subtracted the life to enjoy it with!* ●

ONE murder was not enough, Al Tigert told himself. He had thought it over very carefully, and he'd figured out that where most people made their mistake was in being too squeamish. They'd kill the man they wanted to kill, and then they'd be so terrified at what they'd done that they'd just run or hide and hope they didn't get caught. And all the time, if they'd take the time to think about it, they'd see that to do the thing right—really right—took two corpses, not one.

Al Tigert had it all figured out. He'd stayed up last night, going over and over it until he got so sleepy he just had to go to bed; and in

the morning he'd thought about it some more during breakfast, and now he was satisfied. Pretty soon now the lawyer would be through, and old Everard would call them into the study to hear his will—him and Julian Bates, Everard's secretary. That was all he had to wait for. Before the day was out Everard would be dead, Julian just as good as, and Al would be the owner of—how much? A million? Two million?

Plenty, anyway.

Sure enough, the next minute the door opened and the lawyer, Mr. Albert, stuck his bald head out. "Mr. Everard is ready for you

now," he said, and held the door open for them.

Julian Bates got up from the window-seat, stroking his thread of mustache nervously. Al was sitting a little closer to the door, so he waited a minute before he got up and ambled slowly over.

He timed it carefully, and when they got near the door they were about even, but Al was going slower, so that it was natural for Julian to step in front of him. Just at that moment, Al speeded up a little and stumbled at the same time. He bumped into Julian and got thrown off balance, fetching up against the door.

The lawyer would remember that, and it would look to the police as if Julian were awfully anxious to get into that room and hear the will.

Julian said over his shoulder, "You don't have to rush," and went on in.

Al said plaintively, "You was rushin', not me," but inwardly he was cursing Julian. Of course, he'd always known Julian was a dope, ever since they were both hired three years ago, but why did the dope have to go and say a thing like that? He might have spoiled everything!

He followed Julian and the lawyer in, and they all sat down around the desk where old Everard was sitting. The witnesses Albert had brought were there too, but they left in a minute.

Al looked at Everard's little gray face and white hair. Such a little guy! he thought, as always. A little weak guy like that, why a baby could kill him.

That thought had gone through his head the very first day. He couldn't get rid of the idea, and so he'd taken the job of male nurse to the old man, even though he'd worked in all the big hospitals, and could again, if he hadn't been blacklisted. It wasn't the money idea so much—he hadn't even known then that there was such a lot of it—but just how easy it would be. Just like holding a kitten under water.

EVERARD examined the last page of the will, then folded it back to the first page and looked up, smiling that funny, shrunken-mouthed smile of his. "Well, boys, you know why you're here," he said. "I know it's an unpleasant duty for both of you, but I want you to remember that I may live a number of years yet and we'll have lots of good times together."

"Sure we will," Julian said. "You'll live to be a hundred."

Dope! Al thought. I bet you'd be glad if he did, too! Yeah!

Aloud, he said, "That's right, Mr. Everard. You take care of yourself the way I tell you

an' you'll probably outlive Julian here." That wasn't a lie; it was almost so.

Everard cackled, and even the sour-faced lawyer smiled. "What do you say to that, Julian?" the old man said. "He's got you there. You are pretty thin, you know."

Julian muttered so nothing and tried to look as if he wasn't mad, but the tops of his ears got red and he wouldn't look at Al.

Everard cleared his throat. "Now boys," he said, "I'm going to read you the part of the will that concerns you, because I want you to know just how well you're going to be provided for when I pass on.

"To Alberforce Tigert"—Al winced—"my nurse, friend and unfailing companion, because of his faithfulness and many kindnesses to me, I leave the sum of six hundred thousand dollars, and I also leave to him my house and property at Rockford Point to belong to him and his heirs in perpetuity.

"To Julian Bates, my faithful secretary, friend and companion, in gratitude for his patience and helpfulness, I leave also the sum of six hundred thousand dollars, and in addition I leave to him my collection of rare postage stamps.

"To Alberforce Tigert and Julian Bates, jointly, I leave my home and property at Montrose, in which, for the three years of my illness, they have served an infirm old man uncomplainingly, and it is my hope that they will continue to live here after I am gone.

"In the event that either of the above-named beneficiaries should die before the terms of this will can be executed, I direct that his portion shall pass to the survivor. If neither should be living when this will is executed, then I direct that their portions shall be allotted to the charities named below, as follows. . . ."

Everard stopped and looked up. "That's all of it about you, boys. Now, you're not to thank me. I know you're grateful, and that's enough for me." He picked up his canes and got up with an effort.

"Here, let me help you, Mr. Everard," Al said.

Everard smiled and shook his head. "No, Al, I'm feeling quite well today and I'd like to manage for myself. As a matter of fact, I think we might go for a little drive out Longport way this afternoon. Our bad weather seems to be over, and it ought to be pretty out there."

"Why, sure," said Al, "but I got a little work I ought to get done first."

"That's all right," Everard nodded, "you'll have plenty of time. I don't want to leave until about three." He started hobbling to the door. The lawyer picked up the will and followed him.

"Will you want me, sir?" Julian asked.

"No, you take the afternoon off, Julian. And run along now, both of you. I want to see Mr. Albert to the door."

Al followed Julian out, thinking hard. Six hundred thousand—twelve hundred, with Julian's share. Well, that was a little disappointing, but if it was all Everard had, you couldn't really blame him. He was a good old guy.

And that auto ride at three was okay too—he could say he was out in the garage tinkering with the car and didn't know what was going on in the house. It was the cook's day off, and he'd have plenty of time—more than five hours.

Julian stopped at the end of the hall when they were out of earshot. "You didn't have to make that remark about me, right in front of the lawyer," he said.

Al looked injured. "Well now, I didn't mean nothing by it," he said. "You oughta be able to take a joke!"

Julian glowered, his weak mouth set. "Now, all right," Al said, "I'm sorry. There, how's that. Look, Julian, you know I didn't mean nothing. We're goin' to be living here together after the old man passes on, ain't we?"

Julian's expression was enigmatic. "Yes," he said.

"Well then, there hadn't ought to be no hard feelings between us. Say, I got time before I have to start workin' on the car. How about a game of pinochle?"

Julian hated pinochle.

He relaxed slightly, but shook his head. "No, I'm going to my room. I have some letters and things to catch up on." He turned abruptly and went up the stairs.

"See you later," Al called after him, and went whistling into the kitchen. He hung around there for a few minutes, looking things over, then went on out to the garage. The alders along the front of the grounds screened him from the road, and besides, the nearest house was half a mile away. He didn't have to do anything, actually. He crawled under

the car and swabbed some cotton waste around so it would look as if he'd been working on it if anybody checked up on him. Then he sat down comfortably, smoked a cigarette and thought some more.

THE NEXT part had to be really good. He took out a fountain pen and a pad—taken from Everard's desk—and then carefully unfolded two pieces of paper. The handwriting on one was Everard's; the other, Julian's.

He studied them carefully, especially the one with Julian's writing on it. Everard's, he had already practiced. He looked at Julian's distinctive 'e'—it had a little hook on top of it—and tried making a cross between that and Everard's 'e'. It was easy enough, and he did it with a couple of other letters. Then he practiced the whole thing until he was sure he had it, and wrote out the final copy:

I won't live much longer anyway, and it's no fun to be a sick man.

Thomas Everard

It was good, if he said so himself. It was a pretty good imitation of the old man's shaky writing if you didn't look too close, but anybody with any brains in their head could see that Julian had really written it.

That was the first step. The next was the gas.

He put a small wrench in his pocket and went on back to the house. The place was quiet; he had it all to himself. He shut all the windows tight, and wadded paper into the cracks.

The gas range was old and crampy. The cook had complained about it, and Everard had wanted to get another several years ago, but they weren't to be had. One fitting, down near the floor, was rusted and loose, and it was always leaking a little. Al went to work on it with his wrench.

He worked the fitting loose and heard the hiss of escaping gas and smelled it coming out.



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He waited as long as he dared, then went down in the cellar and turned off the gas. When he came up again, it was pretty thick. He opened all the jets on the range, then hurried on through the kitchen, shut the door behind him, and went down to Everard's study.

Everard looked up and smiled as he came in. "Hello, Al. Getting near lunch time?"

"Yessir," Al said. "But there's something in the kitchen I think you better look at."

"Oh, my," said Everard. "Not the gas range?"

"Yessir. It's leaking pretty bad and I can't seem to shut it off."

Everard got his canes and pulled himself up from the chair. "Well, I'll look at it, but I don't know what we'll do if you can't fix it. No," he said, hobbling to the door, "you don't have to help me, Al. I'm not dead yet, you know." He cackled.

"No, sir," said Al. He opened the kitchen door for Everard, let him get through, and then slipped in fast and closed the door.

Everard coughed rackingly. "Goodness, Al, it is leaking badly. Why—why are the windows shut, Al? Mph!"

The canes clattered to the floor as Al got one hand over the old man's face and grabbed him around the middle with the other arm. He was careful not to hurt him any—he just stood there and kept him from breathing until the slender body went limp—and for an extra minute after that to make sure.

Everard's face was blue. Al stooped over him and felt for a heartbeat, but there was really no point to it. He was dead, all right.

Al straightened him out, folded his arms on his chest, and laid the canes and the note beside him. That was all there was to that. He stuffed some more paper around the outside door and then left the other way. He went down the hall, out the front door and around the house to the garage. There was nobody in sight, not even a car on the road.

Al looked at his wristwatch, that the old man had given him last year. Twenty of twelve. Julian, the dope, ought to be coming down for his lunch any minute now.

He went out the little back door of the garage and peeked around the corner. Julian's window was open, but there was nothing visible through it. He waited patiently, and a few minutes later saw Julian's dark head move across the room. It was gone for a few minutes more, then moved across the other way, and then Al heard the faint sound of a door slamming.

He shifted his gaze to the closed kitchen windows. There was a long wait, and then one of them suddenly flew up with a bang, followed by the other two. Al shook hands with himself.

Now give him time to phone. . . He waited until fifteen minutes had gone by, and then sauntered over to the house, whistling softly to himself.

He let himself in at the back door, and stopped, staring at the body on the floor. Julian was in the room, looking dazed.

"Jeez!" said Al.

Julian looked at him. Al noticed with satisfaction that the hall door was open as well as the windows. He'd left the back door open when he came in, and the room was airing out nicely.

Julian kept on looking at him, big-eyed. The dope, Al thought, he don't even realize he's just inherited six hundred thousand bucks!

"Jeez!" he said again. "He bumped himself off!"

"Did he?" asked Julian coldly.

"Meaning like what?" Al asked.

"I don't know," said Julian. "We'll leave that to the sheriff."

"Yeah, maybe we better," said Al. "I was out fixing the car all morning. Where was you?"

"Listen," said Julian slowly. "Are you trying to pin this on me? Is that the game?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," said Al, dead-pan. "Me, I thought it was suicide."

The doorbell rang. Julian said, "I'll get it. You stay here." He left.

Al waited, whistling softly to himself, until Julian came back with three men. They sorted themselves out quickly. The skinny guy was the coroner, name of Jenkins. He examined the body quickly, said, "Asphyxiation," and got out of the way. The other two, the big heavy one and the tall young one, were Sheriff Hamilton and his deputy.

Hamilton had a red, jolly face that looked like it smiled a lot, but his eyes were little and hard and they didn't miss anything. He said, "Who are you?" and Al told him.

"You in the house when it happened?"

"No sir," said Al. "I been out in the garage since about ten, fixing the car so Mr. Everard could go out riding this afternoon. I sure never thought he'd do a thing like this. Matter of fact, I don't see—"

"I'll get to you later," the sheriff said. "Bates, you say you found the body about half an hour ago?"

"Just about, I guess," said Julian. "It was just five minutes or so before I called you."

"That check, Doc?" Hamilton asked.

"Close enough. I'd say it happened between eleven-fifteen and eleven-thirty."

"Uh-huh." The deputy picked up the suicide note and handed it to him, and he read it. "How thick was the gas in here when you found him, Bates?"

"Oh, very thick," Julian told him. "The

windows and doors were all shut and stuffed with paper—"

"Yeah, I can see that," said Hamilton. "All except that one." He gestured at the hall door. "Funny he'd leave that one out, isn't it?"

Julian looked. "I—I hadn't noticed," he said. "I can't imagine why he should have, unless—"

"Okay, I'll get back to you," said Hamilton. He nodded at Al. "You were going driving this afternoon, were you? Where to?"

"Why, out Longport way—no place in particular. But—"

"Pleasure drive," said Hamilton. "Funny a man should tell his chauffeur to get the car ready for a pleasure drive, and then kill himself."

He sighed and looked from Julian to Al. "You two were the only ones around the place, eh?" he said. "Could anybody else have got in?"

"No, sir," said Al. "I only used the back door, and I locked that behind me when I went out."

Hamilton sighed again. "More damn murderers," he said slowly, "figure the perfect way to kill a man is to smother him and then leave him in the kitchen with the gas on."

HAMILTON looked at Julian. "Would you say offhand," he asked, "that either one of you stood to gain by Mr. Everard's death?"

Julian was paler than usual. He said stiffly, "Yes, both of us did. Mr. Everard read us his new will this morning—each of us was to get six hundred thousand dollars."

Hamilton whistled softly. "This morning, eh? Quick work."

Julian said, "Sheriff, if you're insinuating that I—"

"Who drew up the will?" Hamilton asked easily.

"Mr. Albert," said Al. "Sheriff, I don't see how—"

"Okay, later," said Hamilton. He nodded at the deputy. "Get him up here."

The deputy went out, and Hamilton wandered over to the gas range. He looked at the handles without touching them. "These were open when you came in, were they?" he asked Julian.

"Yes."

"And you closed 'em, naturally. No good looking for prints." He opened one part way, started to close it again, then stopped, and stood—listening. He opened the jet all the way. There was no sound. He tried the others, with the same result.

After a moment he turned to Julian. "Did you turn off the gas in the basement?" he asked.

"No sir," said Al, "I did. I been tryin' to tell you, Sheriff. I was goin' to say, I don't see how Mr. Everard killed himself with gas, because it was leakin' this morning and I turned it off, and he was too weak to ever climb down them cellar stairs, let alone get back up again."

The deputy came back just as Julian started for Al. "Grab him," said Hamilton. The deputy seized Julian's arms and held them behind his back.

"Albert's on his way," he said to Hamilton. Julian was writhing and cursing incoherently.

"Take it easy, son," said Hamilton. "Maybe you'll live longer."

"He did it!" shouted Julian. "He did it and he's trying to pin it onto me!"

"Take it easy," said the sheriff. "Anything you got to say, you can say in court. You can consider yourself under arrest for the murder of Thomas Everard."

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He looked around the room, then added, "Handcuff him, Fred, and bring him into the front room. When you get done with that, you can take your pictures so Jenkins can get the body out. You better phone for the hearse, Jenkins."

The corner nodded and went out, and a minute later the deputy followed him with the raving Julian. Hamilton started out behind them, and Al tagged along.

Like clockwork, he thought. One million, two hundred thousand bucks. Oh, baby!

"Talk about quick work," he said, "you sure cleaned this case up quick, Sheriff."

"Never saw a killer yet that didn't make a mistake," said Hamilton reflectively.

That's easy, Al thought. The ones that don't make no mistakes are the ones you don't see.

"Sooner or later," the sheriff added.

Al grinned comfortably.

The doorbell rang just as Fred reached the study with Julian, now limp and docile. "Go ahead and answer it," said Hamilton. "I'll take care of him."

Fred opened the door. Two men stood there, a state trooper and a scrawny little man in a brown jacket.

"Hello, Fred," said the trooper, looking surprised. "What's the trouble?"

"Murder," said Fred succinctly.

"Mr. Everard?" Fred nodded. "Gee, I'm sorry to hear that. Hello, Sheriff."

"Hiya," said Hamilton. "What brings you here?"

The trooper shrugged. "Penny-ante stuff. An unsafe bridge on the Longport road. I sent Joe back to town for road-blocks, but meanwhile I got to warn everybody out here not to use it.

"Some nut did it. Storm the other night partly washed out the supports, and this guy was finishing the job. Mr. Peters here caught him at it—chased him, but he got away."

Another dope, though Al tolerantly. That's

no way to kill anybody. That's the kind of dumb stunt Julian would pull—

He felt a little chilly all of a sudden. He wished they would shut that front door.

THE SHERIFF said, "Longport road, er? That's a funny thing. You get a look at the man, Mr. Peters?"

"You bet," said Peters shrilly. "Saw him distinct. Tall feller, dark hair, wearing a red necktie. I'd know 'im anyplace."

"You would, huh," Hamilton said. That was a cold sort of voice the sheriff had, Al thought. Not a friendly voice at all. "About what time was this, would you say?"

"Twenty past eleven," the little man said. "I know, because I started out at eleven, and it always takes me twenty minutes to get to the bridge. He was down there with a crowbar, pryin' at them supports that was sort of splintered anyway—"

"Twenty past," Hamilton repeated musingly. "And from here to there is a good half hour. So a guy who was busting that bridge at eleven-twenty couldn't very well be killing a guy here at eleven-thirty, could he?"

He reached out and pulled Julian into view. The little man gaped. "Why, that's the man!" he yelled. "That's him, sure as you're born! Now how in the heck did you—"

Al was halfway down the hall, tiptoeing backwards. He decided it was about time to run.

He heard a yell, and crashed through the kitchen door. A shot blasted, an instant too late. In another second he was past Everard's cold body and heading out the back door. He angled off to the right, aiming for the line of alders beyond the garage. If he could get past them, there were woods beyond. . . .

That dope, Julian! he thought bitterly, just as the second shot blazed from a kitchen window and he went down in a tangle, his leg broken and useless beneath him. That dope, Julian! No imagination!

MONEY—MEET YOUR MAKER

DURING the Gold Rush of '49, California was overrun with counterfeiters. Their methods varied from loading to moulding.

Loading consisted of splitting genuine gold coins, hollowing out the halves and refilling them with a worthless alloy. Another trick was to bore holes in genuine coins saving the gold and then plugging the holes with cheap metals.

Many counterfeiters preferred to mould their own coins. These cleverly made alloy coins were hard to detect because they had the correct weight and color—as well as the right "ring" when dropped on a counter.

One counterfeiter was sentenced to San Quentin in 1866 because the coins he made were too good. He specialized in ten and twenty-dollar gold pieces. He passed several of these in a town called Tuolumne. Later in the same town, he won two of his own coins in a gambling game. His own work was so perfect, he did not recognize the coins as being counterfeit! He was arrested trying to spend them in another city.

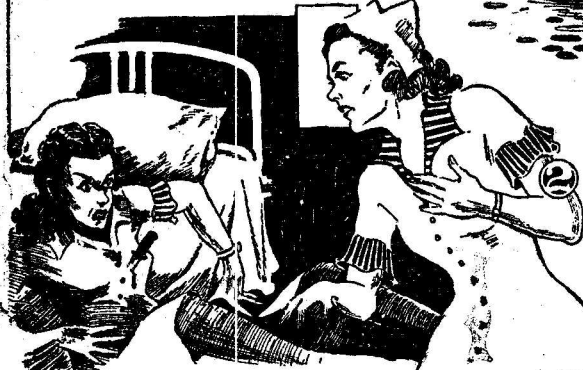
— John D. Fitzgerald



WHEN GANGDOM RULED

AN ILLUSTRATED CHRONICLE OF THE TURBULENT TWENTIES by WINDAS

When gangsters set out to recruit new members for their vicious dope trade, they flung aside the last shreds of decency. They scouted the high schools of the nation, tempting youth with the innocuous-looking bait of marihuana. Two nice kids, Sophie Uhlman and her schoolboy sweetheart Wesley Murray, drowned themselves in Wennebec Lake fearing they had become incurable addicts.



Even hospitals were not exempt from the sinister scouting of drug traffickers. Pretty Claudine Tully, an exemplary student nurse before she smoked her first 'weed' for a thrill, finally became crazed with marihuana and fatally stabbed her room-mate during a silly quarrel.

Luke Wendall was a brilliant scholar with a splendid future ahead. His God-fearing parents were crushed with horror and shame when Luke, under the maddening urge of marihuana, killed a police officer who tried to arrest him, and was in turn slain by pursuing patrolmen.



Newspapers daily reported homicides and suicides due to the corrupt weed. Ellen Bowles, who paid her way through school working at a soda fountain, killed her aunt and herself after an orgy of marihuana. But the brutes who taught her to smoke it, and were really responsible for the tragedy, went scot free.

A Tense Novel of Murder

**By
WILLIAM ROUGH**



Cassidy drew out his gun,
still watching the mirror—

From the plush swank of *The Brake-*
ways, where Paulie Blakewell lay in
a pool of his own blood, to the dark,
smelly tenement where Pusher Craig
lay with a shiv in his back, was a long
haul—but every bloodstained foot-
step along the way seemed to Cassidy
to fit the shoes of the kill-crazy kid
he'd promised to protect!

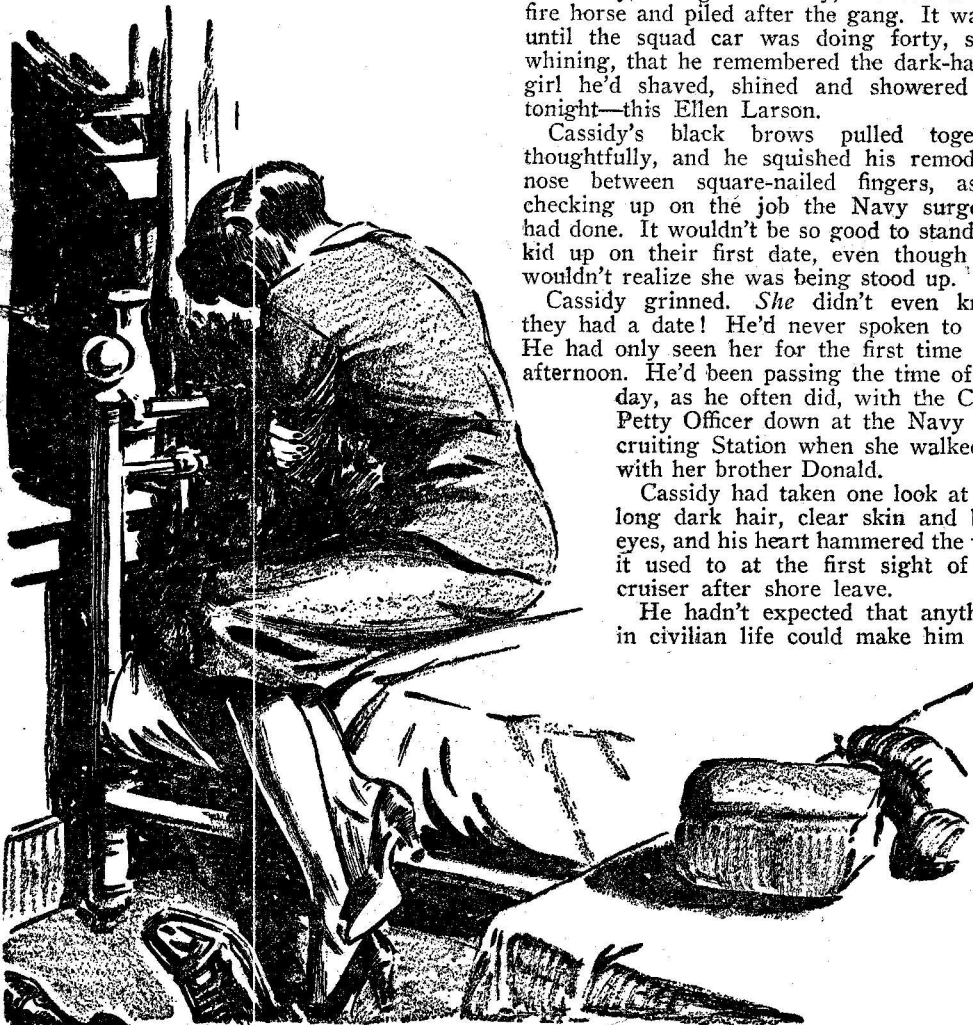


RUN, KILLER, RUN!

CHAPTER ONE

Out Like A Light

THE BOYS loafing in the squad room gave various cucks and two-toned whistles when Cassidy drifted in a little after eight o'clock, wearing his new tan tropical worsted suit, maroon shirt and snappily-banded Panama hat. Cassidy's dark eyes, though usually unreadable, were good humored about it. He said her name was none of their business and no, she didn't have a sister, and did they want to play a couple hands of rummy or not.



He reached for the deck of battered cards just about the same time the desk sergeant fielded the telephone and grunted, "City Hall. Yeah. Yeah. Unh! . . . Yeah, yeah! Don't touch nothin'!"

Of course there was no rummy then.

It seemed that Toots Frane, Paulie Blackwell's partner in the numbers game, and a friend had just stopped by Blackwell's apartment to pick him up and take him over to his nite spot, *The Bluebonnet*—but if Blackwell was to be picked up this night, it looked as though it would be by morgue men, not Toots Frane and friend.

Cassidy, though off duty, reacted like a fire horse and piled over the gang. It wasn't until the squad car was doing forty, siren whining, that he remembered the dark-haired girl he'd shaved, shined and showered for tonight—this Ellen Larson.

Cassidy's black brows pulled together thoughtfully, and he squished his remodeled nose between square-nailed fingers, as if checking up on the job the Navy surgeons had done. It wouldn't be so good to stand the kid up on their first date, even though she wouldn't realize she was being stood up.

Cassidy grinned. *She* didn't even know they had a date! He'd never spoken to her. He had only seen her for the first time this afternoon. He'd been passing the time of the day, as he often did, with the Chief Petty Officer down at the Navy Recruiting Station when she walked in with her brother Donald.

Cassidy had taken one look at her long dark hair, clear skin and blue eyes, and his heart hammered the way it used to at the first sight of his cruiser after shore leave.

He hadn't expected that anything in civilian life could make him feel

that way again. He sort of held his breath and looked and listened while she hustled her brother into the Navy. Hustled was the word for it, too. She wanted the kid in, but quick, wanted him processed and shipped out with the contingent that was leaving for boot camp tonight.

Cassidy heard her say she and the brother were orphans and sized up the situation as a girl, no more than twenty-four herself, trying to keep a younger brother in line and not making such a good job of it. Donald Larson was a husky kid with brown hair and eyes a shade lighter than Ellen's. One of the eyes sported a liver-hued shiner, and the kid's lip was cut.

Cassidy didn't try to make anything out of it beyond the obvious facts. He decided he'd spruce up a bit and be down at the station tonight. Ellen was all smiles because Donald was in, but once she put him on the train, she'd realize she was all alone. At that point, a certain second-grade detective would step in.

The squad car's brakes squealed in front of the swank Brakeways Apartments. Cassidy saw that there was plenty of time for a look-see at Paulie Blackwell's unmourned cadaver and followed Lanahan, Burke, Stolz and Halloran across the sleek lobby of the apartment palace.

And wouldn't a joint like this be the place to set up light housekeeping! he thought. He wrinkled his nose. With murder a couple of flights up, the glamour was strictly camouflage, something like the elevator boy's uniform. Trimly tailored, the brass-buttoned blue tunic and red trousers made the elevator operator look like a military school cadet—from the neck down. Take a look at the thin gray hair and wrinkled face and you'd see he was sixty if he was a day.

"Paulie Blackwell's place, pop," one of the cops ordered.

"Sammis is the name, flatfoot! I'm nobody's pop!"

Cassidy grinned. There were two elevators; a regular sized cab, and an automatic, smaller car. On the third floor, the regular car heaved and bucked, stopped a full foot higher than the floor level.

Cassidy thought Sammis had bounced them for spite, but as he stepped down he heard the wiry little man mumble, "The damn crate's been needing a mechanic for a month. I guess you gangbusters'll want my statement, huh?" Cassidy didn't say yes or no.

TOOTS FRANE, a not bad looking, black-haired six-footer, dressed in a white jacket and black evening trousers, was lounging in the doorway of Blackwell's apartment. He stood aside, moved his chin the least bit toward the living room

Blackwell's slim body, clad in green rayon pajamas, was spread-eagled in front of the fieldstone fireplace. His marceled blond head was on the fireplace floor, pillowed on an in-laid boulder that some farmer, Cassidy reflected, had probably sweated hours to wrench from his cornfield.

Cassidy noted the scuffed beige rug, overturned lamps and such, and saw no novelty there. Someone had given Paulie a going over, and knocked him into the fireplace where he'd fractured his skull. Blackwell's thin lips were cut, his face bruised, and his small, lobeless right ear was torn where it joined the scalp. He didn't look much like a dandy and lady-killer now, Cassidy decided.

A numbers writer's book lay beside an overturned chair.

Toots Frane kept his voice carefully monotonous. "Marty and I stop by every night around this time to pick Paulie up and split the day's take on the numbers wheel. We found him like that. Right, Marty?"

"Right."

Cassidy looked at the chunky, bald, wooden-faced man with Frane and knew that Marty would be saying, "Right," from here on in.

Toots Frane's eyes were smooth and green as olives. "Some creep got Paulie out of bed and beat up on him. Suppose you bright boys find him."

"Suppose you make a statement that holds together," snapped Lanahan, oldest of the cops and therefore automatically in charge till the inspector's favorite bar was contacted.

Lanahan sneered, "Now that Blackwell's pushed, you don't have to split the numbers take with—"

"You can stop there, copper! I was with three other guys. The elevator jockey will tell you this is the first I came up today, and Paulie's been meat for hours."

Sammis said, "That's right."

Cassidy touched the numbers book with a toe. "Yours?" he asked Frane.

"It's one of the kind my boys use, but I didn't drop it."

"Could you tell whose it is?"

"I could look at the serial number and call my office and ask who the book was issued to," Frane said disinterestedly. "I figured you'd want to do it yourself."

"You figure cops good," Lanahan sniffed. "Check it, Stolz." He turned to the elevator operator. "Who'd you bring up here today?"

Sammis fingered one of the brass buttons on his blue tunic. "One kid," he said. "About two-thirty, right after I came on. He's one of Mr. Frane's numbers writers."

Frane took a step closer. Sammis said, "You wouldn't be trying to scare an old man, would you? The kid's name is Donald Larson."

CASSIDY heard it quite clearly, but his watch ticked a half-dozen times before it sank in. Then he felt his lips curve in something that wasn't a grin.

"Larson," he said. "Brown-haired, blue-eyed kid? Husky, about eighteen?" Sammis nodded.

"That's him!" Toots Frane said harshly. "The squirt's too big for his pants. He took a poke at Paulie just last night."

Cassidy said hollowly, ignoring Frane, "Did the kid have a shiner, a cut lip?" And when Sammis nodded again, Cassidy grated, "Did he have them *before* he came up here?"

Sammis shook his head. "No. He was okay when he came in; cut up when he went out."

Cassidy swallowed. He felt Stolz, Burke and Lanahan eyeing him. Then Stolz, who'd been on the telephone through all this, said into it, "Larson, eh?" and hung up. "The book belongs to the same pigeon."

Lanahan said quietly, "Friend of yours, Pat?"

Cassidy looked straight ahead. "Never saw him before today."

"Oh. Well, where can we pick him up?" "I'll get him."

"Want somebody to go along?" Cassidy shook his head, looked at Frane. "Why did Larson poke Blackwell last night?"

Frane sneered, "Because Paulie was making time with Larson's sister, and Larson didn't like it."

Cassidy turned and walked out, seeing things in the present only hazily. What he saw clearly, now that he'd got that long, dark hair out of his eyes, was the reason why Ellen Larson had wanted her brother shipped out so quick. After killing Blackwell, Donald had

got panicky, and rushed to his sister. She'd said "Join the Navy." He had been at Blackwell's around two-thirty. It had been an hour later when Cassidy saw them at the recruiting station. The time element checked.

"I'll take you down," said a voice in Cassidy's ear, and he saw that Sammis had followed him. He stepped up into the cage. His foot snagged the sill at the instep. Sammis caught him expertly, complaining, "I bet I saved this apartment house a dozen law suits catching people who trip on and off this crate since it busted."

He clanged the doors. The cage dropped. Sammis said suddenly, "That Larson kid ain't a killer."

Cassidy started. "Huh? Get on the jury, then."

"Honest, he ain't," Sammis insisted. "He's just one of these here juvenile delinquents, maybe. His sister is nice people and—"

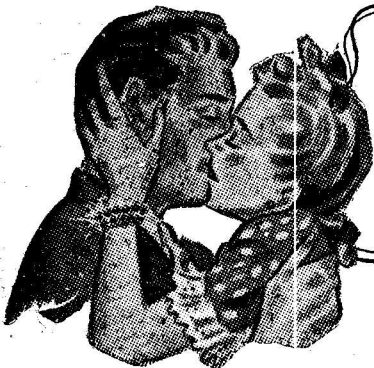
"What do you know about his sister?" Cassidy snapped.

"Well, nothing. But I got eyes. I saw her here and—"

"And you don't *see* nice people in a joint like this! Lemme out, pop. Lemme get the air."

THE C.P.O. was already herding the contingent for boot camp through the gate of Track Five when Cassidy loped across the railroad station. He did not notice the slope-shouldered man who had followed him from Frane's apartment house.

Donald Larson was nowhere in sight. Cassidy swerved toward the C.P.O., then saw the girl and came to a halt as abruptly as if he'd applied brakes like those on the hissing loco-



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motives below. She was wearing a crisp tan gabardine suit, a yellow blouse, no hat. Ten years ago, she'd probably been leggy as a colt; now she knew how to carry herself.

Cassidy went toward her stiffly. "Donald go through yet?"

Her blue eyes leaped to his eagerly. "No. Why, no, he didn't. Are you a friend of Donny's? I thought I'd be the only one here to see him off."

"Where is he?"

"Why, he—" Ellen Larson's glance barely flickered, but he saw she no longer mistook him for a friend. "Who are you, please?" she said tightly.

Cassidy brushed past her, fired questions at the C.P.O. Yes, Larson was somewhere around. He hadn't been checked through the gate yet. Probably he'd stepped over to buy a magazine.

The C.P.O. asked, "What do you want him for, Pat?"

"Murder," Cassidy said laconically, then whirled at the sound of a tiny moaned, "No!"

The girl's face started to go to pieces, but she caught it with the same resolution with which a wounded man denies pain. Cassidy started to mumble something in a softer tone, turned his back again. Sympathize with them for even a second and they'll hang around you with those dead-looking eyes until the trial's over.

"Uh-oh!" chirped the C.P.O. "You want her, you better grab her!"

Cassidy glanced around. Ellen Larson was a dozen feet away, silken legs flashing. Cassidy made a disgusted sound, took off after her, fingers tensing to clamp her shoulder. Instead, he caught her elbow.

"Easy, baby," he advised. "You can't get him out of it this way. Use your head now."

"I won't! He didn't do it!"

Cassidy swung her around. Donald Larson had appeared. He was coming toward them, a magazine and a box of candy under his arm. Cassidy still didn't notice the slope-shouldered man, closing in. Suddenly, the girl pulled a little, looked around, and saw Donald. Her lips parted, but she couldn't make her vocal chords work.

Then Donald said, "Here's a peace offering, sis," and Ellen cried, "Run, Donny! This man's a detective! He's going to arrest you for murder!"

Donald backtracked instinctively. Cassidy spat out a curse, took a step toward the boy. He felt his coat tails caught from behind.

"Run, Donny!" Ellen cried again.

"You little fool!" Cassidy flung at her. "This won't get you any—wait! Larson, you dumb kid, wait!"

Donald was ducking through the crowd. Cassidy ploughed ahead, flailing his arm be-

hind him to knock Ellen's hands loose. He had a hard fist, and he felt it connect. A muted cry of pain came from behind him, and he was free.

Donald Larson looked back over his shoulder, ran smack into a brace of fat men.

"Hold him!" Cassidy roared and the fat men pawed at Donald. Cassidy had the kid, then. He had only a couple of yards to go. His right hand was snaking for the handcuffs in his hip pocket when the slope-shouldered man angled in from the side, chopping down on the collar-bone of one fat man, kneeling the other.

"Beat it!" he said hoarsely to Donald. "The blue convertible in the alley!"

Cassidy had his cuffs out by then. He kept them coming, swung them in a snappy arc which, if it had been completed, would have ended on the slope-shouldered man's cheekbone. It wasn't completed.

The man was in his fifties, with short iron-gray hair and bloodshot hazel eyes, but he moved fast. His left forearm barred Cassidy's slicing right, felt like a bar of spring steel. His right cut up into Cassidy's solar plexus, and travelled three inches after that—with Cassidy speared on the end of it.

CHAPTER TWO

A Look At Death

CASSIDY wasn't interested in much for the next five minutes. He lay doubled up on the smooth eight-sided designs of the station floor, both hands clutched to his stomach. He couldn't move air either in or out of his bloodless lips for a full minute. His glassy eyes rolled, but saw nothing.

When his stomach bucked, at last, he turned his head sideways and let go. He felt better instantly, not all pushed together in the middle, but he was no stronger and didn't try to get up.

He saw the legs of the people who immediately formed a kibitzing circle around him, and heard opinions passed that he was drunk, sick, and an epileptic, but didn't care one way or the other. His only thought was that he was going to look good downtown, all right.

That put some moxie in him. He lurched upright. His eyes bugged out as he saw Ellen picking up his Panama, one rounded knee flashing as she stooped.

Cassidy snatched the hat from her, staggered. She caught his arm. He swept it away, scooped up his handcuffs, cut them back and forth at the kibitzers.

"Get going! Beat it! Show's over!"

He leered at the people and grabbed Ellen's wrist. She offered just the least resistance when the cuffs touched her skin, then relaxed.

"If I'd been trying to get away, I'd be gone," she said quietly.

"Nuts!" Cassidy clicked the bracelets.

"Oh! Wait a minute! Please, Mr.—?"

"Cassidy. Patrick Michael Sucker Cassidy!"

"Please, may I get my candy?"

Cassidy called himself six kinds of a fool, but let her pull him to where the candy box had fallen. He didn't move to help her. She stooped, showing the knee again, and hugged the box tightly with her free arm.

In the squad car, she said suddenly, "Listen, if Donald did do something wrong, I want him to take his medicine."

"No kidding!"

"All right, *be that way!*" she snapped. "I thought you were *half decent!*"

"New suits always make a guy look goofy."

"Oh, aren't you clever, though! Aren't you smart! One look at a person and you know him inside out! You—"

Cassidy pointedly switched on the radio.

Ellen chewed her lip. "Maybe you'll understand this tack better. You were obviously detailed to arrest Donny and you failed. You'll get heck for that, and it will be worse because you didn't report at once that you'd failed."

"Holy Mother!" Cassidy breathed. She was right.

"Now you've *got* to find Donny," she said.

Cassidy's dark eyes glittered. "So you know where he'd lam to? I bet you do. Who was that slope-shouldered guy who got him away?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I knew. He helped Donny." She leaned forward a little. "But if you tell me who Donny killed and how it happened—*maybe* I'll tell him to give himself up."

Cassidy started to make a crack, caught himself. The smart thing was to play along, pump her.

"Okay, blue-eyes," Cassidy said. "Who did he kill? A friend of yours: Paulie Blackwell." "Blackwell?"

Cassidy rapped on the steering wheel. "Just cut the wide-eyed stuff, baby. Paulie and your brother had a brawl this afternoon."

"I know it," Ellen said impatiently. "Donny told me all about it when I met him at the recruiting station and asked how he'd hurt his face. He punched Mr. Blackwell and—"

"*Mister* Blackwell, is it?" Cassidy sneered. "You're not going to deny you were running around with him, are you?"

Her lips compressed. "No, I see I can't deny anything with you! But if it weren't for Donny's sake, I'd ignore it. I was out with him three times. The only reason I went at all was to show Donny that he couldn't get mixed up with shady characters without dragging in his loved ones, too."

"This," Cassidy said to the roof of the car, "is going to be good."

"If only I didn't have to think of Donny!" Ellen Larson cried, voice shaking, "Listen Cassidy! When Donny started selling numbers for that Toots Frane, I knew he was headed for trouble. I tried to get him to quit, but he said he could take care of himself and no harm would come to me, so what did I care? You know how kids are. Well, then I saw Mr. Blackwell at his night club one night and learned he was Toots Frane's partner. He seemed like a nice person—"

Cassidy finished, "And you went over and asked him if he couldn't use his influence to get Frane to fire little Donny."

"That's exactly what I did!"

"And he looked you over and said maybe it could be arranged, would you drop by his apartment some time." Cassidy's voice was monotonous. "So you looked up at him, all trustful and starry-eyed—"

ELLEN LARSON'S palm met Cassidy's cheek with the report of a small-calibre pistol shot.

"Oh!" She shrank. "Oh, I'm—" She stopped. "No, I'm not sorry either!" she said defiantly. "You had that coming!"



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"Yeah, I guess I— My God, now you've got *me* doing it!" Cassidy blurted. "Go ahead. I'll listen to the business," he said shortly.

She clutched the box of candy. "You're right, of course, but I knew Donny's eyes would open if I went out with Mr. Blackwell. Men are funny about the women they love."

"They're a riot, blue-eyes."

"Donny was furious. He said I'd get what some other girl got who'd gone with Mr. Blackwell. Maxine something-or-other," she said. "I thought Donny was just scaring me, and I went out with Mr. Blackwell again, and then again last night. When we returned to his apartment, Donny was there and he tried to punch Blackwell. Toots Frane stopped him, and when I got Donny home I said I'd never look at Blackwell again if Donny would join the Navy today. He agreed."

Cassidy said quietly, "Only first he went back to Blackwell's today and killed him."

The paper on the candy box rustled. A half dozen cars swished past. Cassidy tinkered his nose. He'd had it folded over when a rookie cop, then squashed again when a near-miss on his cruiser threw him against a bulkhead. The Navy surgeons had straightened the nose out again, and now it never felt right.

Ellen Larson's voice was ragged. "He didn't say he'd killed Blackwell."

"He probably didn't stop to examine the punk when he didn't get up."

Cassidy stopped. "Coach her in how to make it manslaughter while you're at it," he railed at himself, silently.

He slapped the steering wheel. "Well, that's how it is, lady. Now, about him taking his medicine. Where is he?" Cassidy gunned the car.

The sound of the motor stiffened her. She dug fingers into his biceps. "Wait! I don't *want* him to take his medicine—who would? But I know he has to, if he's really killed a man. I know it will be worse if he runs away. That's what I want to tell him."

Cassidy rammed in the clutch. "Where is he?"

"Oh, but I can't take you there! I won't turn him in, unless he agrees to it."

"Well, you held me up a couple minutes more," Cassidy rapped. "Congratulations! While we're horsing around, he's getting out of town."

"I don't think so. I'll bet Pusher took him home—oh!"

If she hadn't broke off voluntarily, the jerk of the big sedan would have stopped her anyhow. Cassidy had let the clutch out so abruptly, the car stalled.

"Pusher?" he was muttering. "Pusher? A nickname. Pusher—a nickname for a box-fighter? Yeah, who could hit like that except

a pro? Thanks, blue eyes. It'll take me about forty-two seconds talking to a fight promoter to get the rest."

Cassidy smacked his lips. "Pusher, eh? I got business with Pusher!"

It was almost a sob. "If you make just one slip with a man like you, you lose, don't you? I don't know whether to admire you or—"

"I'm doing my job!" Cassidy lashed. "You're like the rest: when it happens to somebody in the newspapers, you yammer because the cops aren't on the ball. But let it happen to you once, and you'll try to blow us up every inch way. I'm taking you downtown. Then I'll get Pusher."

"Cassidy, let me come with you! Let me talk to Donny before you arrest him. It's always a point in your favor if you come voluntarily, and I can make him see it, but you can't."

"Nothing doing."

"Oh, don't you ever get human? What about this, then? If Pusher and Donny see you alone, they'll run. If I'm along, Donny will want to talk to me."

Cassidy's black brows made a straight dark line over the bridge of his nose.

"Okay, who's Pusher?"

"Harold Craig is his name," Ellen said eagerly.

"Where does he live?"

"Just a couple blocks from Blackwell's apartment, at 747 Bascomb," Ellen answered.

Cassidy's lip curled as he saw Ellen twirling the empty link of the handcuffs from her wrist.

She murmured, "I was only thinking that if Donny spies these things on me, he might—"

"Here," Cassidy shoved the key to the cuffs at her.

Minutes later, they drove into a slum district. You hate injustice, don't you, Cassidy?" Ellen asked.

Cassidy sneered, "Don't tell me you read books? What *do* you do?"

"I'm a school teacher. I teach third grade. I know when little boys are acting like little boys, too."

"Now who's the clever one?" Cassidy mocked. "You didn't do so hot with little Donald. Sorry." His eyes tightened. "There's a blue convertible, all right."

"Cassidy, do you—" she swallowed—"carry a gun?"

"What *do* you think, baby? Bring your box of candy. It makes a nice touch in case they're watching us from a window."

CASSIDY skirted the garbage cans in front of 747 Bascomb, a crumbling building of faded red brick. He saw shirt-sleeved men

and frowzy womer sagging on the stoop and turned to help Ellen. The sight of her crisp freshness against all this hit him, driving everything else out of his head for a second. Then he jerked, scowled and pulled her to the steps a bit more vigorously than was necessary.

"What room's Pusher Craig got?" he said to a pair of the eyes that were taking them in. The mouth under that particular pair hardened. Cassidy shrugged. It took more than a nice suit to fool these babies.

Ellen said, "Do you know which room is Mr. Craig's?" to an old hag, and the hag sniffed, "Third floor, second door on the right, dearie. I'm not ignorant."

"Thank you," Ellen smiled.

"La de da," Cassidy thought and started the climb up creaky stairs that heralded their approach better than a burglar alarm could have done.

Ellen hurried along behind him. "On the first floor landing," she said. "Let me go first."

"Oh, no," Cassidy said, and concealed the movement that brought his gun from under his sweaty armpit.

There was no need of the gun, though. Not then. Pusher Craig didn't answer his door, but it yielded to Cassidy's touch.

He swept Ellen aside and went in. He took in the setup so fast, his gun was back in its holster when Ellen followed, asking, "Why did you push me aside, Cas— Oh God!"

"Don't scream." Cassidy turned on the light, kicked the door.

Ellen's eyes were shut. "Is it . . . Is it Donny?"

"No, it's not Donald. Look at the wall."

Cassidy didn't move for a little, after that. Finally, his hand squished his nose and he glanced up from Pusher Craig's body to see just how come a butcher knife had been so handy.

There was a loaf of bread and a bologna-shaped ring of meat on a wobbly, oilcloth-covered table. Pusher had been having himself a snack.

The knife had been driven in only once, between his sloping shoulders. He hadn't fallen. He'd buckled at the knees, bending practically double, and he hadn't straightened out much on the floor.

Cassidy scowled at the telephone. It seemed out of place in a tenement room. But he picked the thing up.

"Police business," he said into it. "Get me Paul Blackwell's apartment in the Brakeways Apartments. . . . No, it's no gag, tootsy. If you think so, put your supervisor on." The phone company began cooperating then, and Cassidy said to Ellen's back. "Feel better now?"

"Uh-huh."

"Not if you say it like that. Keep looking at the wall."

Lanahan answered the phone at Blackwell's apartment. He dropped his tone when he recognized Cassidy's voice. "What's the holdup, Pat?" he asked. "Did you get that kid? He did more than just slug Blackwell."

"Now what?" Cassidy said.

Lanahan said, "The medical examiner says a guy's skull doesn't get battered spongy if he just got knocked down, and that's the way the back of Paulie's head is. We figure that after he knocked him out, the kid grabbed him by the ears and bounced his head on the fireplace floor. He'll have a helluva time making it self-defense or manslaughter now."

"Yeah," Cassidy said dully. He'd just decided himself that the job done on Pusher wasn't the work of a kid who used his dukes.

"You got the kid, Pat?" Lanahan pressed.

"I got another kill," Cassidy said. "Are Toots Frane and that Marty guy still there?"

"They got drag with the Inspector," Lanahan sniffed. "We let 'em go a half-hour ago. Come on, what have you got? What happened to the Larson kid?"

"Why—" Cassidy's dark eyes centered on the cracked mirror which reflected the doorway behind him. The door was being pushed in slowly. . . .

"I'll tell you about that," Cassidy said, voice unaltered. "I'm at 747 Bascomb, third floor, second door on the right. Harold Craig's place. Old time pug. A knife was used, not more than twenty minutes ago."

"What about the kid?" Lanahan growled.

Cassidy drew out his gun, held it in front of him, still watching the mirror. As the door opened enough to reveal who was pushing it, he said into the phone, "I'll bring him in. Everything's under control now."

CHAPTER THREE

Killer In Knee Pants

HE HUNG up without hurrying, turned around and said, "Don't monkey with me this time, kid," holding the gun on the husky, brown-haired, blue-eyed boy in the doorway.

Ellen Larson whirled. "Donny!"

"Come on in," Cassidy ordered. "Slow."

Donald Larson paid no attention. His blue eyes were bugging out at the sight of Pusher Craig.

"He didn't do this one, Cassidy," Ellen cried. "Look at him. You can tell."

Cassidy pursed his lips, not answering. Donald Larson was doing a surprise routine, all right, yet sometimes it hit them that way the second time they looked at what they'd done. Cassidy had even see them faint.

"Get in, kid, get in," he said impatiently.

Donald Larson shook his head vaguely, then saw Cassidy's gun for the first time. He started tightening up.

"Better not, kid," Cassidy advised. "I'm good with it."

The boy choked, "Do you think I did that?"

"No! No, he doesn't, Donny!" Ellen said shrilly. "He's fair, Donny! He's a policeman, but he'll help you if—"

"Shut up, Ellen!" Donald burst.

"Relax, kid," Cassidy put in. "She's giving it to you straight: you'll get a fair shake from me. Give me a couple answers, that's all."

Donald shook his head, lips tight.

Cassidy went on reasonably, "Less than a half hour ago, Pusher got you away from me and brought you here, right? If you didn't do it, where were you when it happened? Did you and Pusher meet anyone else?"

"Answer him, Donny," Ellen pleaded. "I can see how you might have accidentally killed Paul Blackwell, but I know you didn't do this."

"Blackwell?" Donald jerked. "I didn't kill him either. I beat him up, but he was alive when I left. Somebody's trying to frame me."

Here it comes, Cassidy thought. Don't they all try it? He said persuasively, "We'll work all that out downtown. Just take it easy, kid."

He squinted at something the boy was carrying under his arm. "What have you got there?"

Donald jerked it out from under his arm. Cassidy saw it was a picture frame, though he couldn't make out the features of the person in the photograph. Donald was waving it wildly.

"It's a picture of Maxine, that other girl Paulie Blackwell played dirty," Donald burst. "I found it in— Never mind where I found it!" he snarled suddenly. "You wouldn't do anything, anyway! I'll have to do it myself if I don't want to be a fall guy!"

"Don't, kid!" Cassidy yelled. "I'm warning you—"

But Donald had jumped backwards into the hall. He paid no attention to Cassidy. He cut toward the rickety staircase.

Cassidy went into the hall in a stride.

Cassidy was at the top of the staircase in no time. Donald was a third of the way down. Cassidy put a shot over the kid's shoulder. "Stop, kid!" he yelled.

Donald kept going. Cassidy threw another shot, still holding high. The noise was terrific against the walls of the narrow staircase.

"The next one'll be center, kid!" Cassidy bawled.

Donald probably couldn't have stopped if he'd tried. Cassidy dropped the gun barrel, face gaunt. He'd have a clean shot as Donald hit the second floor landing. He stuck out his arm, stiffened it.

"God, no!" Ellen shrieked.

Cassidy's lips peeled back on white teeth. Gun-thunder rocked the walls. Donald Larson's husky frame jerked. The picture frame dropped from his right hand as the arm dangled. He crashed into the wall at the bottom of the stairs and sagged down. Then he flung himself sideways, out of sight around the ell. His footsteps thudded.

Cassidy sailed down the stairs, cursing, telling himself it was Ellen's shriek that had thrown out his aim. He knew it wasn't so. Even if she'd been silent, her mere presence, would have been enough to hold his sights at two o'clock, putting the slug in Donald's shoulder instead of his spine. And now the kid had a full start.

At that, Cassidy might have caught him, if the neighborhood hadn't been isolationist when it came to cops. "Which way?" he panted when he skidded out onto the stoop.

Silence.

A kid start to lift a finger to point, and got it smacked down. "Yuh little stoolie!"

Cassidy's eyes cruised right and left and across the street. There were open doors, alleys, side streets, and even a subway kiosk handy. He'd have needed a crystal ball to guess which way Donald Larson had fled.

OVER his shoulder curtly, as he turned back into the building, he said, "Get the beat cop up here or I'll sic the health officer on you."

Ellen Larson was halfway down the staircase between the second and third floors, slumped there, shivering, when Cassidy stooped on the second floor landing and picked up the picture frame Donald had dropped. He tried to ignore her, felt himself gripping the frame too hard. He grunted, "Relax; he's only scratched."

He was able to concentrate on the picture in the frame then. It was a theatrical photograph of a blonde girl. A year ago, Cassidy might have looked twice at it, if he'd seen it pinned up in a buddy's locker aboard his cruiser, but now he merely catalogued the too-wide eyes and too-small mouth for future identification. The inscription said, "For Daddy, with all my love, Maxine."

Cassidy squished his nose. He didn't see how the boy could have found the picture anywhere but in Pusher Craig's room, yet the gray-haired, slope-shouldered man certainly hadn't had the earmarks of a sugar daddy.

Cassidy suddenly felt that little tingle a hunter feels when he hears his quarry. Suppose the inscription's "Daddy" meant a real Daddy, not a sugar? Suppose Pusher Craig had been this Maxine's old man?

Cassidy recalled the boy's exact words. Donald had burst, "Never mind where I found it. You wouldn't do anything, anyway."

I'll have to do it myself if I don't want to be a fall guy."

Cassidy licked his lips. If he allowed—for just one second—that maybe Donald was innocent, then the kid was going to bull into something rugged.

"Step on it!" he barked at Ellen. "That dumb kid'll get hurt!" Her eyes widened. Her lips parted.

Cassidy caught his breath. A step would have put him beside her, arms around her, nose nuzzling that dark hair. And he wouldn't have been a bit ashamed. He didn't care, see! Everybody has to have somebody, he told himself, without apology. The married guys on the cruiser were right. What's the percentage—if it's not for somebody you love?

"Save it!" he snapped suddenly, when she would have whispered something. It was still no good if her brother was a killer. . . .

CASSIDY shoved the picture of Maxine under the bulbous nose of the husky doorman in front of *The Bluebonnet*, the late Paulie Blackwell's nite-spot.

"Know her?" he asked.

"I'm new here."

"Toots and Marty inside?"

"Dunno."

Cassidy took Ellen's arm, stepped into the club through plate glass doors tinted blue. The blue motif was carried out in decoration, blended with silver and chrome skillfully to prevent a depressing effect. An eight-piece jive outfit was bearing down, and gay couples crowded the dance floor.

"Never mind the hat," Cassidy said to the statuesque hat check girl. "Know her?" He used the picture of Maxine again, and this time got results in a swift intake of breath, followed by a tightening of carmined lips and an eye reaction that showed equal parts of fear, defiance and caution. Cassidy just waited.

"Are you kidding?" the girl said, finally. "It's a picture of Maxine Starr. It's no secret. The police gave us a clean bill of health."

Cassidy's brows lifted. "You needed one?"

"Well, no, but she worked here. Naturally, when a girl kills herself, the police look for the reason."

"Where's Paulie's office?"

"Up the stairs behind you. He's not there."

"I know," Cassidy said. "Toots is, isn't he?"

"Find out."

Cassidy took Ellen's arm, steered her to the stairs. Their feet made no noise on the deep-toned blue carpeting. Cassidy knocked on a door at the top, and a voice invited, "Come on in, copper."

Cassidy opened the door, letting Ellen precede him, and said to Toots Frane and the bald, chunky Marty, "That doorman isn't so

new he doesn't know cops. Am I right, Frane?"

"He's got a nose," Frane said, green eyes glittering. "I can generally take it," Cassidy murmured. "Tonight I'm not in the mood."

He tossed Maxine's picture on the polished mahogany flat-topped desk that Frane had inherited. "What's her right name?"

Frane's eyes were bright emerald chips. "I've been asked that over and over. Every time, I say I don't know. Right, Marty?"

"Right."

Cassidy said, "Is a Pusher Craig one of your number writers?"

"So?"

Cassidy said conversationally to Ellen, "That accounts for Craig having a telephone in his studio. He used it to field his suckers."

Cassidy studied the chunky, bald man. Marty wore a double-breasted, pin striped gray suit with long rolled lapels, but the tailoring failed to slim him.

"There are two kills tied in now," Cassidy said. Their faces were poker.

Marty stood up, filled his thick chest, stepped to the desk and looked at the picture. "Where'd you get it?" he asked Cassidy, his face expressionless. "From Pusher Craig?"

"In a way. Why?"

Marty held up a tight fist. "He'll be sorry," he said.

"He is," Cassidy murmured.

"He'll be *sorrier*, then," Marty promised.

"Cluck!" Frane snapped. "Don't you get it? Pusher's the second kill this Dick Tracy's horsing about."

Cassidy felt a touch on his elbow. He leaned toward Ellen. "Cassidy, Marty was in love with that girl," she whispered. "Look at him."

Cassidy's eyes swiveled, and he saw Marty staring again at Maxine's picture. He wouldn't have tried to interpret the expression on the chunky man's face himself, but now that feminine intuition had put a name to it, he saw that it fit.

Cassidy said to him, "I've been away for a while, so I don't know the scenario on Maxine. What about it?"

Marty returned to his chair. "Paulie Blackwell picked her up somewhere, gave her a spot singing, played her, then dropped her and she drank a bottle of sleeping stuff. She left a note that proved it. I checked it personally. It was two years and three months ago, so let it lay."

"And in all that time," Cassidy said swiftly, "you didn't get a chance to hit back at Paulie?"

Marty said, without any emotion whatever, "I've hit him plenty, only he didn't know about it. You can really do a guy dirt if he thinks you're his pal. Ask Toots. If Blackwell had lived another three months—"

"Shut up, Marty!" Toots lashed. "We're not in this. All we did was find Paulie and call the cops."

"Mm," Cassidy said. "How did you get into Blackwell's apartment, by the way, if he wasn't answering the door?"

"The door wasn't locked," Frane snapped. "Wise up. You can't make anything out of it. We walked in there, saw Paulie, grabbed the phone and called copper."

"GIVE 'em enough rope, I always say," Cassidy murmured. "You heard what he said, Ellen."

Frane's eyes were glittering emerald chips. "What did I say?"

Cassidy tried to make his voice taunting, though he knew he wasn't much good at it. "You said enough for me to check around and see if maybe you didn't find Blackwell's body before you claim you did."

He might have imagined it, Cassidy conceded, but he thought Frane caught his breath. Mary showed no reaction whatever. Suddenly, Frane was scribbling on a sheet of paper. He started to hand it to Marty. Cassidy moved in. Marty put out a thick arm that was not unlike a heavy branch jutting from a tree trunk. Cassidy caught himself before he ran into it, reached for his armpit.

"Better not," Frane said. "You can't rough us up in our own joint." He moved the gun he'd whisked from the desk. "You see you can't, don't you?"

Marty crumpled the paper Frane had dropped on the desk, shoved it into his pocket and walked out.

Frane laid his gun on the polished desk. "Don't worry. I didn't send him to do nothing." He flicked a forefinger at Maxine's picture. "Do you think I'd jam myself for a fluff like her? Especially when she's dead?"

Cassidy picked up the photograph. "Come on," he told Ellen and started for the door. He opened it, took a step through, then shot back over his shoulder, "Her name was Craig, wasn't it?"

A second later, he told himself he should have known better than to expect a surprise reaction from the black-haired, green-eyed man. He slammed the door harder than necessary, and stared moodily at the blue carpeting on the way back down.

"Did you learn anything?" Ellen asked quietly.

"Something," Cassidy said. "Toots claims he and Marty walked into Blackwell's and called the cops without telling anybody else. Yet Sammis, the grouchy elevator operator in the Brakeways Apartments, said, 'I guess you gangbusters'll want my statement.'"

Ellen hurried to keep up with Cassidy's long strides. "Then even though Frane said

he hadn't told anyone about the body, Sammis knew?"

"We-ell," Cassidy said hesitantly, "I wouldn't want you to quote me. Sammis could have been guessing. On the other hand, Toots said the door to Paulie's apartment was unlocked, and that doesn't sound like Paulie. It doesn't seem as if a killer would stop to switch the spring lock off on the way out, either, and I'm pretty sure Paulie Blackwell wouldn't have trusted Toots Frane with a key.

"I'd say Paulie's door was locked right along. That means that when Frane and Marty got there, they couldn't have got in unless somebody let them in. Sammis would know where to get a master key, wouldn't he? So Marty and Toots might have slipped Sammis a few bills to admit them."

"Oh!"

"And I don't only mean tonight, when Toots and Marty came in and called the cops," Cassidy said, pushing through the blue-tinted front doors again. "Maybe they got in this afternoon, right after Donny slammed out."

"Cassidy!" she cried. "Then you *don't* think Donny did it?" Ellen hugged the box of candy. "Gee, I could almost eat a piece of this!"

Cassidy scowled. "Don't bite off more than I give you to chew on, blue-eyes." He put her in the car.

"Where are we going, Cassidy?" she asked.

A voice from the back said, "We're just driving through the park for a while. Unless you ain't got the gas, pal."

"Who is it?" Cassidy asked Ellen.

She said breathlessly, "He has a handkerchief over his face. He's big, and he has a gun."

"Turn right, pal," the man ordered. Cassidy turned left.

His right shoulder screamed with pain. The man had chopped his gun barrel on the chords between Cassidy's neck and shoulder. "Turn right, pal."

Cassidy turned right.

He glanced right and left along the street. They were out of the nite-club district now. There wasn't much traffic on the wide, black-topped street. Ahead lay the park, with boulevard lights winking among the trees and shrubbery.

Cassidy said idly, "What did you mean back there when you said you can really do a guy dirt if he thinks you're his pal?"

"No savvy."

"Maxine was your girl, wasn't she, Marty?" Cassidy pressed. "It's okay; I recognize your voice. Was Pusher Craig her old man?"

"The hell with you. No, he wasn't."

"You must have been nuts about her. But then I guess some guys fall hard enough to

do anything for a kid." Cassidy stopped abruptly.

"Yeah," Marty said thickly. "I don't know what she had. But I took one look and I was gone."

CHAPTER FOUR

Second-Fiddle to a Corpse

HE MADE a sound that might have been a laugh. "I was too late, though. Paulie had already filled her full of guff. She was nuts about him. I knew he'd let her down, but all I could see to do was hang around until he gave her her walking papers."

Cassidy sensed Ellen's movement as she half turned in her seat, but paid no attention.

"When she killed herself," Marty said, voice flat, "Toots met me and said you can't make a guy suffer if you kill him right off. He was right. We got together, organized things our way, making like we were still Paulie's friends. We got him to borrow money, gamble and stuff like that. We lined up the boys in the numbers racket on our side. In another couple months, we would have dumped Paulie in the gutter."

"Only today you lost your temper," Cassidy put in swiftly. "You went to his apartment just after young Larson beat him up. He was still sore, and you had a fight, and saw your chance to give it to him with a fall guy handy—"

"Nuts, copper!"

Cassidy kept studying the mirror, alert for any sign of change in the chunky man. "Listen, Marty, what did Toots scribble on that note he gave you back in the office? Lemme guess, boy. You just said I should drive around a while. Toots ordered you to keep me occupied, right?"

Cassidy slowed the car imperceptibly. "Now why would he want me out of the way?" he asked. "Because he's got to cover something, get it? That crack I made about maybe he saw Paulie's body *before* you two went to the apartment tonight scared him."

Cassidy dropped his right hand from the steering wheel, and let it be in his lap for a second, then started worming it toward his armpit. "When I said I was going to check up—"

Ellen Larson cried "Don't, Cassidy!" and threw herself up against the seat, both hands clawing for Marty's gun. She'd seen Cassidy start to draw.

Cassidy's right foot stabbed the brake instinctively, but both his hands were off the steering wheel now as he surged around. The car lurched, skidded.

Marty's gun went off thunderously. Events seemed to freeze before Cassidy's eyes, then

begin again in slow motion. He saw Ellen stiffen, then slide back into her seat and up against the door, her mouth open, her blue eyes wide and uncomprehending.

He saw a blur of green shrubbery as the car sluiced sideways, rocked over the curb and into the park, kissing a tree.

He heard Marty gurgle, "Gawd, I didn't mean to kill her!"

Then sight and hearing stopped registering. All Cassidy was conscious of was the sense of touch: the clawing of his fingers on Marty's throat, the "splat-splat" of his fist battering Marty's face.

An intern at City Hospital told Cassidy later, "It's a freak wound. She didn't hemorrhage, so the slug must've missed her lungs. We'll have to wait for Surgery to find out the rest."

Cassidy turned back to the squadcar which had an accordion fender and some broken windows. He stared at the box of candy in the front seat. There was blood on the paper. Cassidy said something away down in his chest, replaced the bullets he'd fired at Donny, and took hold of the steering wheel.

BOTH elevator indicators, the one above the regular cage and the one above the smaller car, at the Brakeways Apartments pointed to 3. Cassidy buzzed for the regular car. Nothing happened. He stepped to the automatic car, held his thumb on the button till the cables began to sing. When the doors opened, he got in, pushed the 3 button, took off his Panama hat and wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He was putting the hat back on again, the cage about midway between the second and third floors, when he heard it. He'd heard men in mortal pain before, but nothing quite like this.

The shriek seemed to go right past his ear. It started, it seemed, over his head, keened downwards toward him, passed him by and continued on down. It didn't seem to come from human vocal chords, yet it was too full for that of a cat.

It tore off abruptly, and blended into another swift dull sound that was familiar somehow, yet strangely distorted—a thud that wasn't quite a thud because it was deep and far away. Then there was only the whine of the cables till the car stopped on the third floor and the doors opened.

Cassidy came out of the cage fast, eyes up at their normal height. So for a second he didn't see the red pants legs of a man sticking out from under the other elevator's floor. When he did see them, he dived, grabbed the man's ankles, and hauled on them. The elevator had stuck a full two feet above floor level, he saw, and somehow Sammis had got

his head and shoulders into the crack and looked as if the rest of him was about to follow. Cassidy yanked him back, pulling him half way across the corridor on his belly.

"Lemme g-go!" Sammis sputtered, his nose in the carpet. "The son didn't get *me!* I got him!"

Cassidy released the wiry little man's ankles. Sammis' face was ashen, his gray eyes bloodshot and watery, and his lungs were pumping spasmodically. He was trying to say more, but not getting it out.

Cassidy said, "Take five, pop," and stepped back to the elevator, squatted and stuck his head into the two-foot space between the floor of the corridor and the floor of the elevator. At the bottom of the shaft, he saw a white jacket and black evening trousers twisted awkwardly. It was too dark to make out much more. He pulled his head back, stood up and looked at Sammis.

"Toots Frane?" he asked.

Sammis lurched to his feet. His natty blue tunic was in the same mussed condition as Cassidy's tan suit. One of the brass buttons was gone. He pointed a finger shakily toward the door of Paulie Blackwell's apartment. "I opened the door to chin a little with the cop stationed there. He was sprawled on the floor and Toots Frane was at the safe. I started to back out. He came at me. He must've played f-football once."

Sammis shivered, stared at a spot in front of the cocked elevator. "He tackled me right about there, tried to push me down the shaft. Gawd—I dunno how I hung on! I guess the buzzer gave me strength. I heard it and prayed somebody would come."

"You're all right," Cassidy said. He opened the door of Blackwell's apartment, bent over Halloran, pushed and prodded him till he was sure Halloran had merely been clipped good from behind and would live to get hell for it.

He glanced at the wall beside the field-stone fireplace where an oil painting had been torn aside to reveal a wall safe. The safe door was open. Papers and documents were strewn on the beige carpet under it.

Cassidy didn't bother with these. If Frane hadn't got what he wanted, it was still there. If he'd got it, it was at the bottom of the elevator shaft.

Cassidy pulled the apartment door shut again. "How do we get down to the basement, pop?" he asked Sammis.

Sammis shuddered. "What's your hurry?" "Guys have fallen farther than that and made statements," Cassidy said succinctly.

Five minutes later, straightening from Toots Frane's body and wiping his palms, he added, "It'll take a spiritualist to get one out of this one, though."

"You s-s-said it," Sammis chattered. "Boy, he's s-squashed!"

CASSIDY looked up to where light from the third-floor corridor splotted the dark shaft. His glance played down slowly to Frane's open green eyes again, then to the steel screening that made a cage for the elevator pit here in the cellar. The cage was designed to keep people from wandering under the car. It had a door which Sammis had unlocked with a key he'd got in the janitor's office. Cassidy had noticed a telephone there. He stepped out of the pit, started back that way. Then he recalled why he'd come here in the first place. He'd been looking for Sammis.

"Suppose you sing, pop," he said.

Sammis snapped, "I'm nobody's pop!" His gray eyes widened. "Sing? What do you mean?"

Cassidy put a patient expression on his face. "Frane said he didn't tell anybody but cops on the telephone that Blackwell was dead, yet when you brought us up tonight, you asked did we want your statement. You knew something was up in Blackwell's place."

Sammis blurted, "I just saw cops and guessed!"

"Too late, pop. Not snappy enough. You *did* know Blackwell was dead. Let's have it." Sammis shuffled.

Cassidy pulled out his papers. "Here or downtown, pop."

"All right. Toots discovered the body this afternoon about five-thirty. I let him in, but didn't go in with him. When he came out, he told me to keep mum about him being here." "Did you tell him young Larson had been here?"

Sammis looked down. "He got it out of me, all right. He knew somebody had beat Blackwell up, but I'll bet he's the one who finished the job. He saw Blackwell cut up and figured if Blackwell died, the guy who'd fought with him would be blamed."

"Could be," Cassidy said. "And after the inspector let him go tonight, Toots *could* have gone straight from here to Pusher Craig's. Suppose you scoot into the janitor's office there, call Craig's place, and tell the cops there to come over."

Sammis trotted down the long cellar. Cassidy drifted along behind him, stopped outside the janitor's office when Sammis went in. Sammis picked up the phone and gave the number of Pusher Craig's telephone without looking in the book for it.

Cassidy lounged in the door. He was now able to diagram almost everything that had happened this night. Suddenly he recalled Ellen's words: "If you make just one slip with a man like you, you lose."

His eyes flickered. Then he remembered the rest of what she'd said: "I don't know whether to admire you or—"

She hadn't finished, but it came to Cassidy that she didn't hate him, after all. She'd risked her own life when she'd thought he'd muff his draw and be shot by Marty. Now, it was going to work out. She was okay. Donald was okay. Weight came off Cassidy's shoulders, and the bitter twist of his lips relaxed.

He caught the telephone as Sammis cradled it and called City Hospital.

When he put the phone down, he said to Sammis, "That's a break for you, pop. My girl's okay."

Sammis goggled. "A break for me?"

"Yeah. I'd have cut you up if anything happened to her. You know how a guy feels about a girl. You keep saying you're nobody's pop, but I think you are—or were. I think you were Maxine Starr's pop."

Sammis fell back a step. Cassidy's eyes tightened, he saw there was only the one door to the office in which he was standing, and relaxed again.

"I think you live at 747 Bascomb, too," Cassidy went on. "You seemed to know the phone number there without having to look it up.

"When young Larson came into Pusher's room while Ellen and I were there, he didn't come up or down any stairs or I'd have heard 'em creak. That means he came from somewhere from down the corridor on that floor. Check? Larson was carrying Maxine's picture, so *that* came from down the corridor, too, and would have pointed to you. I guess Blackwell had something that would have proved you were Maxine's pop, and that's why you had Toots Frane open Blackwell's safe."

Cassidy's fingers probed under Sammis' blue tunic, came away with a piece of stiff paper.

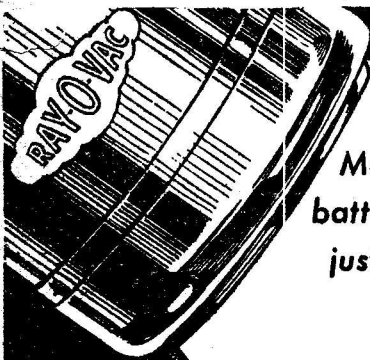
"A birth-certificate for Maxine Sammis," he nodded. "Blackwell needed this when Maxine went to work in his club. So he knew right along that you were her pop!"

Sammis flopped into a chair. "Do you think he'd have let me keep the job running the elevator in the same building with him if he'd known I was Maxine's father and hated his guts?"

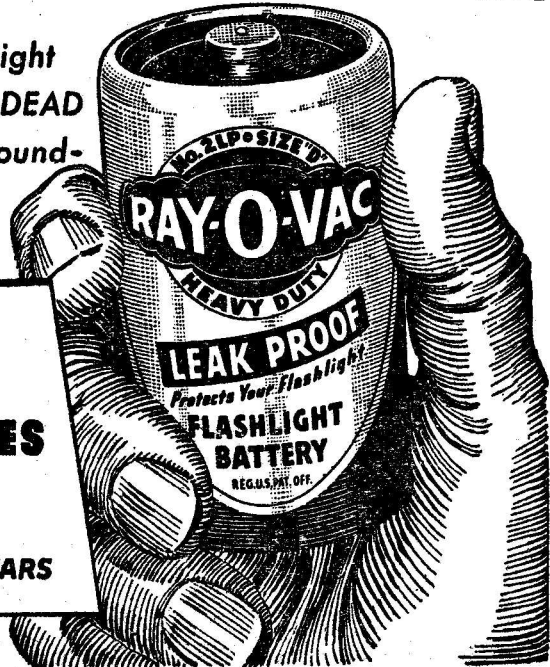
Cassidy frowned. "But he had Maxine's birth certificate."

"Yeah, but he never knew *my* last name," Sammis said dully. "He was just another guy who called me pop."

"Whoa. Easy," Cassidy advised. "From the beginning, will you?"



Many flashlight
batteries GO DEAD
just lying around—
BUT



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SAMMIS got a grip on himself. "They met in the elevator. How do you like that? Maxine brought me a sandwich one night. Blackwell saw her and gave her the eye. I tell you, copper, I saw it all. I knew what would happen."

Sammis put his head in his hands, pressed his temples. "But a father can't do much with his kids these days, can he?"

Sammis swallowed. "She killed herself when Blackwell said he wouldn't marry her."

Cassidy moved his shoulders restively. "This afternoon you boiled over, right?" he said.

"Yeah, I did," Sammis said. "When young Larson came out of Blackwell's, he told me he'd given Paulie a going-away present and told me if Ellen ever came here again to write him in the Navy. See, it was me who warned Donny about what his sis was getting into. I'd seen the kid go up and down with Toots Frane and took a liking to him. Pusher Craig used to loaf around here, chinning with me, and he met Donny in the elevator, too. When they found out they were both writing numbers for Frane and Blackwell, they got chummy, too. That's why Pusher was ready to do the kid a favor tonight and help me hide him out."

"Well, after Donny left Blackwell's this afternoon, headed for the recruiting station, I went up and looked in on Blackwell. I wanted to see how bad Donny had beat him up. I wanted to gloat, I guess."

Sammis' voice started rising again. "There he was, sprawled out, groaning. When he saw me, he called me pop. He cursed me."

Sammis sprang to his feet. "The next thing I knew I was on top of him. I was yelling, 'Pop? Do you know who I am?' I grabbed him by the ears and bounced his head and let him know whose pop I was! I told him and I banged him! I killed him right there!"

Cassidy wanted to look away, yet couldn't. The old man's face was breaking into little pieces. His eyes gleamed and his mouth was half open. And then, suddenly, his eyes went over Cassidy's shoulder, narrowed. Cassidy felt an arm encircle his neck from behind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Up and Down With Death

A VOICE cried, "Run, pop! Beat it! I'll hold him! You gave me a break!"

Cassidy started to work a judo hold. If Sammis had broken for it, he might have got clean away. As it was, the wiry little man dived at Cassidy, clawed inside Cassidy's coat.

Cassidy's gun leveled. "Stand back, kid!" he warned.

"Wait, pop! Don't kill him!" Donald Larson's voice.

"I gotta. He knows I'm Maxine's father! But the other cops don't! If I shut him up—"

"No, pop!" Donald cried. "Just get away! Give me the gun! I'll hold him here!"

Cassidy didn't breath. He knew death when he saw it. It was in Sammis' gleaming eyes. Sammis' tongue moved out over his lips. Once. Twice. He burst, "He's gotta go!"

Cassidy set himself for a lunge. Suddenly he was swept aside from behind. Donald Larson started at Sammis.

"I won't let you kill him!" he yelled, but he was in no shape at all to fight. His right arm dangled helplessly from the shoulder which Cassidy's bullet had broken earlier. Sammis merely sidestepped the boy, then hopped sideways so he could cover them both.

Donny kept coming, lurched. He was too weak to do more. He started to fold, caught a chair.

"You're not a killer, pop," he panted. "Not like this, anyhow."

"I gotta," Sammis said thickly. "I tried to give you a break, Donny."

"It's too late, pop. You shouldn't have killed Pusher. He was on our side."

"Until things got tough or he got a chance to bleed me," Sammis rasped. "I could tell by the way he looked at me when I stopped in his room, after talking to you. He had me over a barrel and knew it. He sliced himself a piece of meat, put the knife down, reached for the bread and I—"

Cassidy nodded. "That's about everything, then, until Donny lammed out on me, I pinked him and he dropped Maxine's picture. Did you come right here, kid?"

Donny nodded. "I wanted to talk to pop and give him a chance to explain. I came into the cellar here. He put me back in the coal bin, said to wait till he got the cops out of the building and he'd tell me all about it. Then I heard that scream and Toots Frane's body bounced down the shaft. Then you and pop came down and I heard you sew him up. I still wanted to give him a break because he'd given me one—"

Sammis worked his way sideways to the office door. His lips were compressed. "Yeah. Toots knew I hated Blackwell, but didn't know why. That's why he was pretty sure I'd keep mum about him discovering Blackwell's body earlier than he admitted. But when you showed him Maxine's picture and seemed interested, said she was tied in somehow, Toots guessed she was my kid. He knew she wasn't Pusher's. He came here about a half hour ago, told me he could turn me in anytime he felt like it, but that he wouldn't, so long as he was cleared of killing Blackwell. He said if I could find a fall guy, he'd keep mum. I said I had Donny locked in the coal bin and we could put it all on him,

if Toots would open Blackwell's safe and get Maxine's birth-certificate for me."

Cassidy squinted. "I figured that. If Toots had wanted anything out of the safe for himself, he would have got it earlier."

"I knew he'd double-cross me, though," Sammis said. "So as soon as he got the safe open, I slugged him. We'd knocked the cop out first. I dragged Toots out into the corridor and waited till I heard somebody coming up in the automatic car. Then I pushed him down, screamed and made like he'd tried to push me."

"I didn't swallow it, though," Cassidy said. "There was no reason for Toots to kill Blackwell. Toots and Marty bled Blackwell, but they didn't have to kill him. In fact, they wanted him to live. They wanted to see him in the gutter."

"Maybe. But with you gone, other cops will be glad to put it on Toots."

Cassidy looked squarely at Sammis, "With me gone, they'll *know* something is fishy. You can't take the slugs out of my carcass after you shoot, pop."

When Cassidy stopped talking, there was a brief hush. Then the elevator cables whined. Sammis jerked, backed out of the office, his eyes quite mad now. "Come on," he said. "Both of you."

SAMMIS backed down the cellar, gun steady. At the steel cage surrounding the elevator pit, he stopped, waited for them.

Cassidy was supporting the husky, brown-haired kid now, and Sammis ducked behind him and heaved the pair of them through the iron gate into the elevator pit.

The clang of the iron gate stopped Cassidy's heart for a second. "Mother of God, pop, you can't do it!" he breathed.

"It's my way out," Sammis said. "My way out! I'll say you and the kid came down to look at Frane and the elevator wouldn't stop. Everybody knows it's half busted. And there'll be no bullet holes to give me away!"

He scuttled up the cellar stairs to the first floor to get the automatic cage, which had not been built to descend as far as the cellar.

Cassidy tried to call out. His tongue was a tasteless piece of velvet. He eased Donny to the concrete, and stared up the elevator shaft. The regular car was still on the third floor. It had been the automatic car they'd heard whine a moment earlier.

Even as he stared, Cassidy heard it again. Sammis was in it, going up. In a matter of seconds he'd be coming down again in the regular car.

"Halloran! Halloran!" Cassidy's voice bawled up the shaft.

Sammis called from above, "Too late, cop-

per. I slugged him again. Here's something they'll expect to find on you."

Something turned and twisted down the shaft. Cassidy whipped off his Panama, caught the thing. It tore the crown out of the hat: his service pistol.

Cassidy fumbled with it, his gestures without coordination. He heard the elevator doors clang above. The car started down. The stream of light from the third floor winked out.

Cassidy stuck his gun up, squeezed the trigger twice. The noise rocked down on him, making his ears ring so that he couldn't hear the elevator. He stopped shooting, pressed backwards against the steel screening. Donny Larson had passed out.

Suddenly the under-loop of the cable slithered into the light. Cassidy drew away from it as if it were a poisonous snake.

He heard the car wheeze, saw the cable dropping ever closer, and beyond it the hulk which would squash him. Without knowing quite what he was doing, he flopped in the bottom of the pit, lay on his side. Then as the car loomed nearer, he turned over on his back.

It was at the first floor now. Ten feet more. Cassidy's hand on his gun was burning now. Those pinpoint of light came from the holes his two shots had drilled in the elevator floor!

It did stop, though!

Afterwards, Cassidy realized that his ears hadn't even registered the "bam-bam-bam-bam" of his gun, as he poured the four remaining slugs in a pattern overhead. Then he wasn't breathing any longer. He was flattening himself against the bottom of the pit.

The cables whined. The under-loop touched Cassidy's hand. The sound of the elevator lowering went on. "Even if I killed him and he fell on the lever, the damned elevator's busted. It won't stop," he thought futilely.

It did stop, though!

He was afraid to open his eyes for long seconds. When he did, it took all the strength left in him. If he'd needed to lift his head, he couldn't have made it. He looked up, saw two bullet holes showing light—holes from the first two shots he'd fired.

But there was no light coming through his pattern of four. It could only mean that Sammis was sprawled over them.

It turned out later that three slugs had hit Sammis, the other one shattering the control lever—enough to make the car really stop.

Cassidy wasn't worrying about that. He was just lying there, learning to breath again, thinking that he wouldn't care if they put him in the hospital for a while—providing it was City Hospital and they first let him take that box of candy in to Ellen!

THEY GAVE HIM A BADGE!

By
**JOHN
CORBETT**



She hung by one of
her own stockings

ALIVE, the girl had been something to look at. In death—with no sound in the room but the heavy breathing of the staring men and the rhythmic pelting of the rain on the roof—her face was ghastly. Her smile had become a leer.

She hung by one of her own stockings. One end of the stocking had been formed into a loop. The other end was fastened to the shower rail. One well-scuffed dancing pump had fallen inside the spotless tub. Its mate, clotted with the mud that was Hunkytown's

60

When Stan Martin came home with a chestful of medals, Irontown gave him a sheriff's badge to add to his collection. But what good was it, when he had to use it to pin a murder on his girl's wildling brother?

only pavement during the rainy season, still clung to one well-turned foot. Her shapely legs were hidden by the sweeping skirt of her cheap evening gown.

His cursory examination completed, Deputy Sheriff Saltzer, a hawk-faced man with predatory eyes, wrote her obit with contempt.

"Just another cheap dance-hall trollop who got tired of being what she was."

"Then it's suicide?" a reporter asked.

"It is," Saltzer told him. He seemed to recall Sheriff Martin's presence for the first time. "You agree with me, don't you, Sheriff?"

Stan Martin looked from the dead girl's muddy pump to the spotless rim of the bathtub. A big blond youth with a square, rugged-featured face and a slight impediment in his speech, he had no illusions about his new job.

Despite all the nice things that Mayor Varney had said, despite the decorations and lieutenant's bars on his uniform, now packed away in moth balls, the war hadn't changed a thing. He was still from on the wrong side of the tracks. He was still Big Polack Joe Martin's boy. The shiny silver sheriff's badge handed him at the conclusion of Mayor Varney's welcome-home address was merely Iron-town's solution of what might have proven to be an embarrassing situation.

As Mal Hunt, the local political boss, had summed it up, "Irontown has a bad enough name as it is. And it would give us another black eye if some nosy city reporter found out that we had allowed one of the war's most decorated heroes to return to pumping gas at the White Front Filling Station. What the hell? So the Army made him a lieutenant. He's still a big dumb Folack. He'll do as he's told to do. Let's elect him Sheriff."

And they had. They had put his name on the ballot and elected him in absentee. He was Sheriff of the county. But Paul Saltzer still ran Irontown—as the machine wanted it run.

"You agree with me, don't you, Sheriff?" Saltzer repeated. His tone was thinner this time.

Martin raised his eyes to the dead girl's face. He had known her well. Her name was Sadie Wolinsky. Her father was a puddler in the same mill in which his father worked. They had gone through high-school together, he and Sadie and Jennifer Helm.

The easiest thing to do was to agree with Saltzer. The machine expected him to. Sadie had never amounted to much. She never would. Hunt had given him to understand that if he played ball he might go far. He had hinted openly that there was no limit to the height a man with his war record—backed by a powerful political machine—could travel in the reconversion period. It was a tempting picture. In time even the origin of his birth would be forgotten. He would belong on the "right side of the tracks." Helm would consider him an acceptable suitor for Jennifer's hand.

"Well?" Saltzer demanded.

The young sheriff fingered the silver badge in his pocket. The sensible thing to do was to

agree. But to stamp an obvious murder as suicide was contrary to the oath of office he had sworn.

"N-no. I don't agree," he heard his own voice saying. "That girl was m-murdered."

The reporters who had started for the door turned back.

"Don't be a fool, Martin," Saltzer said sharply.

"Sh-sheriff Martin to you," Martin said. He controlled the slight speech impediment with an effort. "Look at the rim of that bathtub. She would have had to stand on it to hang herself. If she had, she would have gotten it muddy. It's as clean as a baby's c-conscience. Somebody killed that girl and hung her to that rail after she was dead."

One of the reporters who had known her slightly wanted to know who would have wanted to kill Sadie Wolinsky.

"I d-don't know," Martin admitted. "But I d-damn well mean to find out."

"You'll be sorry," Saltzer said.

"T-that's what they told me at O.C.S.," young Martin told him grimly.

IF THERE had been any clues to Sadie Wolinsky's murder on the outside of the cottage, the rain had washed them down the drain. Saltzer, or one of his stooges, acting in the interest of some unknown party, had done as much on the inside. No one had seen the killer enter. No one had seen him leave. There was nothing to point to murder with the exception of the one mistake that the killer had made. He had failed to muddy the clean rim of a bathtub. A little thing but Martin intended it to send the murderer to the chair.

In another section of Hunkytown, he parked his car in front of the Wolinsky home and waded the mud to the porch. The dead girl's parents received the news in stolid silence. Her father was the first to speak. They had expected something like this to happen since Sadie had left home some eight months before. No. He knew of no one special man with whom she had kept company. He spat his contempt. From what he had heard there had been many men. It was well known in the district that she sang in the Blue Lantern Cafe and also danced with those of the patrons who desired it.

"She was a bad one," her father summed her up.

Back in his car, Martin sat staring across the tracks at the blaze of vari-colored neon lights that was Irontown's main business section. It was a wide-open town—always had been. The cafés and bars and gambling rooms ran twenty-four hours a day the better to entice the millworkers money out of their pockets. They could eat and drink and spend in the cafés and bars and stores. Their daugh-

ters could become hostesses, waitresses, and clerks. A few of the wiser, prettier mill girls married onto the right side of the tracks. But there, except for a favored few, the temperature of the melting pot cooled abruptly.

By weight of his military record he had become one of the favored. Perhaps he was making a mistake. He still could drop this thing. He could tell Saltzer that he had been mistaken, that it had been suicide. Girls like Sadie were better off dead. Dozens of them died, one way or another, every night. What difference did it make if she had taken her own life or not?

He allowed his eyes to travel on up the street to where the big Helm mansion stood out boldly on a hilltop overlooking the leaping flames of the mills that had founded the fabulous Helm fortune.

Mal Hunt and the machine had made him sheriff. Hunt and the machine could break him. If he attempted to buck them, they would. And for some reason of their own they wanted Sadie's death to pass as a suicide.

He considered his own future. The infantry had taught him little except how to fight. If they took his sheriff's badge away it would mean going back to an unskilled laborer's job. He would never marry Jennifer. The exchange of high school class rings, a few unsatisfying kisses, and several bundles of much-read letters would be all that there would ever be to the brief war-time romance between the mill owner's daughter and the son of Big Polack Joe Martin. Jennifer had been cool since his return. She had pleaded for time to know him better.

Martin smiled wryly into the rain. The loss of his sheriff's badge would end it. It was all very well to say that men were created free and equal. But life was merely the old Army game. If rank had its privileges, it also had its responsibilities. And a laborer in the Helm mill could no more hope to marry Jennifer than—

He broke off his reflections sharply. "T-to hell with that kind of thinking," he swore. I s-swore an oath to up-h-hold the law to the b-best of my ability. If I lose Jennifer, I lose her."

He ground his car into gear, then slipped his foot from the clutch and threw himself sideways on the seat as a bright blob of orange flame spurted from the opposite curb. Quickly as he had moved, the bullet grazed his cheek. Cursing softly, he wriggled from the far door of the car, his own gun in his hand.

For a moment he could see or hear nothing but the pelting of the rain. Then his sharp ears caught the patter of distant, running feet. Whoever his would-be killer had been, he had

fired the one shot and fled. Pursuit was useless.

His eyes thoughtful, Martin waited a moment more, then stepped back into his car and headed for the Blue Lantern. He was glad the attempt on his life had been made. It removed all cause for gratitude. If the boys wanted to toss lead, that was fine. It was the one game he really knew.

Hunt might have him removed from office. He might kiss Jennifer goodbye. "B-but by God," he swore, "while I last. Iron-town will know it has a s-sheriff!"

THE CAFÉ was thick with smoke, shrill with laughter and music. Off-shift mill-workers crowded the booths and the bar, cajoled into turning their hard-earned money into hangovers by pretty, too young girls who should have been home at that hour. As his eyes swept the café, Martin made a mental note to check into the statutes concerning minors in the morning. Kids that age had no business being in bars.

Hunt, a fat man in his early fifties, was sitting in a front booth with Sharon, the superintendent of the Helm open hearth. Bill Helm, a slim, patrician looking man in his early thirties, much the worse for drink, was standing half-way down the bar buying drinks for a crowd of equally drunken workers.

His big thumbs hooked in his belt, Martin studied the man he had hoped would some day be his brother-in-law. Good-looking, well-educated, brilliant, Bill Helm had been born with everything any man could ask for—with the exception of a backbone. He was both a heavy gambler and a heavy drinker. It was said the elder Helm had spent a fortune prying him out of jams, and his appointment as general superintendent of the mills was the last chance he was to have. He seemed bent on throwing it away. With it all, Stan Martin thought wryly, as his eyes traveled slowly over the other man, he was a gentleman from the soles of his well-polished shoes to the angle at which his twenty-dollar hat was tilted.

Thinking of Jennifer, he walked slowly up to the group and laid a hand on the other man's shoulder, asking quietly, "Don't you think you've had enough, Bill?"

Helm had difficulty in focusing his eyes, but his voice, when he spoke, was pleasant if a trifle blurred. "Oh, hello there, Stan. How's the boy sheriff tonight?"

"Not so good," Martin said frankly. He repeated his question. "How about going home, Bill?"

A trim little blonde, new to Martin, said, "How's about minding your own business, Sheriff." She emphasized the word sheriff and the crowded bar rocked with laughter.

Only Helm failed to laugh. "You may be

right, Stan," he admitted with drunken gravity. "Ver' possible I've had enough." He picked his change from the bar. "Go right' back up on the hill as soon ash I she Heriha home."

Partially supported by the blonde, he staggered from the bar. Martin crooked a finger at Jimmy Glade, the owner of the Blue Lantern. "I thought," he told him, "that there was a law in this state about selling whiskey to a drunken man."

Glade continued to pick his teeth. "Yeah. I guess there is," he admitted, "but—"

"Then observe it," Martin said curtly. "I'm not out to spoil any man's fun. But if I catch you selling Bill Helm or any other drunk a drink, I'll close you up as tight as a drum."

The bar owner stared at him but made no comment. Martin strode back to the booth where Hunt and Sharor were sitting. "Look," he demanded of the fat man. "Just who is sheriff of this town, Paul Saltzer or myself?"

Hunt seemed surprised. "Why you are. Why? What's the matter, Stan?"

The younger man considered briefly, then told him about Sadie Wolinsky. "What's more," he concluded, "I know that she was murdered."

The superintendent of the open hearth got to his feet. "And you didn't see who it was

who took the shot at you after you'd talked to her parents?"

"No," Martin admitted, "I didn't." He remembered suddenly that Sharon was also interested in Jennifer. "But just why should it interest you?"

Sharon smiled wryly. "Who knows, hero? Maybe I wish he'd gotten you."

He walked over to the bar. Martin studied his shoes with interest. The sole and heels were thick with the yellow clay that was found only in Hunkytown. "How long has he been here?" he asked Hunt.

Hunt thought a moment, said, "I wouldn't know. He was here when I came in. But surely you don't think—"

"I haven't been thinking," Martin admitted. "But I'm beginning to." He slid into the booth across from Hunt. "Look, Big Shot. I'm kicking over the traces. I'm through with being sheriff in name only. *Why did you give Paul Saltzer orders to find Sadie's death a suicide?*"

The fat man's smile was sickly. "If that's a gun you're pointing at my stomach, Stan, you're being very foolish. I had a hand in electing you sheriff, true. But if you think that I give the orders for the rough stuff that's pulled around Irontown," he waved a plump hand at the bar, "if you think I am the

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lad who is getting a rake-off for allowing these joints to run wide-open, then you'd better rub your eyes and grow up. Hell, I thought you were just putting on a dumb act for, shall we say, reasons of your own."

Stan demanded to know what he was talking about.

"You're the sheriff," Hunt told him. "Suppose you try to find out." Ignoring the younger man's gun, he heaved his bulk to his feet and joined Sharon at the bar.

FEELING very juvenile, Martin returned his gun to its holster. He wished he were smarter. It took more than a gun and the desire to be an intelligent sheriff. Something went on here that he didn't know, something that had escaped him entirely.

He started to get to his feet, saw a hostess named Cora whom he knew slightly from their school days and motioned her to the booth. "You knew Sadie Wolinsky quite well, didn't you, Cora?" he asked her.

The girl wet dry lips with her tongue. "Yeah, I knew Sadie," she admitted. "I also know she's dead because she got high one night and threatened to talk to the feds."

Martin thought that one over. It was the first time the federals had entered the picture. There seemed to be a lot of things he didn't know.

Cora continued, "But if you think I'm talking, you're crazy." She added, hotly, "I will say this much. All of Hunkytown is laughing at you. They all know that the so utterly-ut Miss Helm will throw you over like that," she snapped her fingers, "as soon as you've pulled her brother's chestnuts out of the fire."

His stomach suddenly felt sore as if she had kicked him. Martin caught at her arm. "You're lying, Cora. Bill Helm is a sot. But he had nothing to do with Sadie's death."

The girl tore her arm free. Her face was contorted with anger. "Keep your hands off me. You know as well as I do who killed Sadie. He told her too much about his business. And he was afraid she would talk."

She was gone before he could stop her. Martin leaned back in the booth. The whole world seemed suddenly rotten. If what Cora had hinted was true, it was small wonder that Hunt had advised him to grow up, that Saltzer had been so insistent that he agree with him in calling Sadie's death a suicide.

He mentally tabulated the few facts he knew. Bill Helm was a heavy drinker, a big gambler, and a ladies' man. And on the scale in which he indulged, all three vices took big money. As general manager of the mills, his was the final word on all matters concerning the town that made its living from the mills. Working through the medium of a man like Paul Saltzer, it was a natural set-up. Bill

Helm could shake down Irontown to pay for his fun and still not have to account to his father for the huge sums that he expended.

On a hunch, Martin strode to the bar and asked Glade, "W-who do you pay off to, Jimmy? And h-how much?"

The owner of the Blue Lantern studied him through heavy lidded eyes. "Coming from you that's a hell of a question, Sheriff. You know I pay my levy to Saltzer. What's the matter, your future brother-in-law holding out on you?"

There it was.

From down the bar, Hunt asked, "Beginning to grow up, Stan?" Martin walked out without answering, feeling his ears grow red. Bill Helm was a crook. The wise boys thought he was getting a share. The others thought with Cora, "*All Hunkytown is laughing at you.*" They thought that because of Jennifer he was allowing Bill to get away with murder.

The rain cool on his hot face, he stopped under a street lamp, took his badge from his pocket and stared at it. The score remained the same. He lost Jennifer. There was only one thing he could do. If Bill Helm had killed Sadie Wolinsky to close her painted mouth, he was no better than any other killer. His first move, he decided, would be to have a showdown with Saltzer.

HE DROPPED his badge back in his pocket and walked on slowly through the rain, his heels making soft, sucking sounds on the sidewalk. A tan convertible with the top up was parked under the street lamp in front of his office. As Jennifer rolled down the window and called to him, he realized for the first time that he had left his own car parked in front of the Blue Lantern. Her eyes worried, she wanted to know if he had seen her brother.

Even the sight of her hurt. It made him realize all that he was losing. That was the girl he had dreamed of in a hundred fox-holes. And a silver badge and a brother-rat were washing out that dream.

"Dad's furious and I'm frantic," she continued. "It's something about some woman and a check."

Martin wondered if she knew and was stalling. He decided her only fault was loving her brother too well. "Yes. I saw Bill. A few minutes ago," he told her. "I chased him out of the Blue Lantern."

She opened the door of the car. "Please come with me, Stan. I've got to find him and straighten him out before Dad sees him. He swore this was Bill's last chance. And he means it."

Martin hesitated briefly. He wanted the address of the little blonde Helm had been with. And before he saw Bill again, he wanted to

know just what he was guilty of and how much evidence there was against him. "Wait," he told the girl, and walked up the stairs of his office.

Saltzer was sitting at his desk working on a bottle of rye. Martin pulled him to his feet, then knocked him off them. "That's just a starter," he warned his deputy. "Who are you working for, Paul?"

The other man got to his feet, spluttering that he was working for the county. Martin knocked him down again. When he got up the second time, the other man admitted:

"Okay. Don't hit me again. I've been collecting for young Bill Helm."

"And it was Bill who killed Sadie Wolinsky?"

"I don't know," Saltzer said, shifty-eyed. "But I do know they've been plenty thick. That's why I tried to tip you." He wiped the blood from his lips. "Don't be a fool, Stan. Jennifer won't ever marry you if you send her brother up for murder."

Martin thought a minute, said, "If they were thick, why should he kill her?"

Saltzer shook his head. "I didn't say Bill did. But a few days ago he met a little blonde he liked better. And I've heard some talk in the bars that Sadie was broadcasting that unless Bill came across with plenty, she was going to turn him in to the feds."

"For what?" Martin wanted to know.

"Income tax evasion," Saltzer said succinctly. "They know this is a wide-open town. They know someone is collecting plenty. I've warned him time and again. But Bill hasn't dared to declare his take because he knew his old man would raise hell, probably disinherit him." He added virtuously, "But they haven't a thing on me. I've declared every dime of the ten percent Bill gave me for collecting."

He took a drink from the bottle and offered it to Martin. The youthful sheriff shook his head. "But you have no real proof it was Bill who killed Sadie?"

Saltzer's eyes grew shifty again. "No, no actual proof. And if I were you, Stan—"

"Y-you're not," Martin cut him short. "Now s-stop lying and s-stop trying to tell me what to do. M-maybe I'm only a dumb Polack from the w-wrong side of the tracks. But while I last, I'm sheriff." He held out a hand. "Give. What did you pick up in that cottage that proved that Bill Helm killed Sadie!"

He doubled his fist again and Saltzer handed him a crumpled, muddled scrap of paper. "I found this on the porch," he said quickly. "It must have dropped out of Bill Helm's pocket."

Martin smoothed the scrap of cheap note paper. The note was signed Sadie and read—

Dere Bill:

You can't do this to me. I no all about the new blonde. And you come around to my place tonight redy to pay off plenty or I'll tell the fedral men who it is that really runs Irontown.

"That makes it clear?" Saltzer asked.

Martin closed his eyes, remembering Sadie, seeing Bill Helm as he had seen him last in the Blue Lantern, and hearing Jennifer say, 'It's something about some woman and a check.' "Y-yes. Perfectly clear," he said quietly. It did. He had been an even bigger fool than he had realized. "You k-know this blonde's address?"

Saltzer stared at him sharply. "Yeah. Sure. Her name is Hertha Best. And she has a room at the Rand Hotel, next door to the Blue Lantern."

"T-that makes it just fine," Martin told him. He slid his gun from his holster and thumbed the safety on and off. "C-come on. Let's you and I go pick up a k-killer."

Saltzer's hawk face grew even thinner. His eyes were mere slits of suspicion. "You know, damn you!" he accused.

Martin fingered his badge with his free hand. The cold silver felt good. "That's right," he admitted. "I know." He added sharply, "Don't try it, Paul!"

But Saltzer did. His hand swept up holding a gun. A blow as from a heavy hammer pounded Martin against the wall. Then the gun in his own hand bucked. He regarded the result with satisfaction. "I w-warned you," he told Saltzer.

THE RAIN had increased, if anything, but the crowd waiting in his office overflowed down the stairs and out on to the walk. Ignoring them completely, Martin herded the drink-sodden, protesting mill superintendent and the blonde upstairs and into his office.

Having told Jennifer he was on his way to pick up Bill, he was not surprised to see the elder Helm flanked by two of his lawyers. The mill owner shook an outraged finger in his face. "You'll regret this, Martin. My boy is no more a killer than I am. I see I was right in my judgment of you. For the sake of a few dirty dollars and a silver badge—"

Jennifer held her brother's head against her, sobbing, "How could you, Stan? How could you?" He looked at her but said nothing.

One of the Helm lawyers asked, "Do we understand correctly, Sheriff? You are charging Bill Helm with the murder of one Sadie Wolinsky?"

Young Helm looked up. "I didn't," he protested. "I didn't kill anyone." He buried his head in his hands. "At least I don't remember it, if I did."

"H-how about it, Hertha?" Martin asked the blonde. "You still sticking to the story you told when I arrested you? You still claim that Bill was with you all evening?"

She wet her lips, seemingly frightened. "No. I'm not sticking my neck out for anyone. Just before we met you at the Blue Lantern, Bill stumbled into my room roaring drunk and mumbling something about he'd 'fixed her clock.'"

Hunt patted his fat belly. "Well, that would seem to be that. When you grew up, you grew up fast, Stan." He glanced around the office, as if in search of someone.

Martin said frankly, "As I got the story, Bill has been using the Helm influence to put the bite on the town. Using my deputy, Paul Saltzer, as his collection man, he chiseled enough to warrant a federal investigation for income tax evasion. And when Sadie threatened to talk, he killed her."

Bill Helm spread his hands in a futile gesture. "How can I prove anything? I was drunk."

His father tried a new tack. "You know what this will mean, Stan, as far as you and Jennifer are concerned."

Martin smiled wryly. "Sure. I go back to my own side of the tracks and the big white house on the hill is out of bounds."

Hunt cleared his throat. "Not necessarily. I'd say by what you have done tonight, by sacrificing your natural personal feelings, by showing yourself a fearless and valuable servant of the people, you've made yourself certain of re-election as long as you care to hold office." He glanced around him again, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Looking for someone, louse?" Martin asked him quietly.

"What do you mean?" the fat man asked.

"I think you know," Martin said. "And I know who you're looking for: one of your missing bird dogs who was well paid to point in the wrong direction. It's been you all the time. And it was either you or Saltzer who killed Sadie."

Hunt gasped, "You're crazy. Why—I had you elected."

"That's right," Martin admitted. "I was your final protective line. You're the lad who runs the machine. You've been running it for years, with Saltzer as your collection man. But once you learned Uncle Sam was on your tail, you had to think up something fast. I was it. I was the perfect stooge, the poor but honest hero, home from the wars."

He made a gesture of disgust. "Hell. With a yarn like that any D.A. just out of law school could have sent Bill to the chair. You merely transferred your guilt to Bill with the help of your various bird dogs."

The elder Helm stammered, "Then Bill didn't—?"

The youthful sheriff shook his head. "Hell no. All that Bill is guilty of is being a damn fool. I knew that as soon as I started to use my brains. The man who killed Sadie got mud on his shoes. Saltzer had plenty on his, but Bill's shoes were well-polished. Bill was in a check jam. And if he had been collecting the dough he was supposed to, such a thing couldn't have happened." He took the note that Saltzer had given him from his pocket. "But this is what really tipped me. Whoever wrote it had Sadie spell like she hadn't gone through third grade." Self-conscious, he stutted for the first time in minutes. "W-while as it so happened, S-Sadie and I were the best spellers in our s-senior class." He looked at Jennifer. "R-right?"

Her bright eyes white tears, she nodded.

Hunt's face was ugly. "Okay. You seem to have me, Sheriff. Everything you've said is true. I was the one Sadie threatened. And I had Saltzer kill her. But you'll never burn me." He whipped a gun from his pocket. "I'm leaving here—right now!"

Without moving from the edge of his desk, Martin shot the gun from his hand. "T-that's what you t-think."

THE FAT man stared at his shattered hand, bleated, "Paul—!"

"Paul's dead," Martin told him quietly. "He m-made the same mistake that you did. He forgot when you gave me a badge you also g-gave me a gun."

He picked Hunt's gun from the floor and motioned him back through the office. Jennifer put out a hand to stop him. "You're going where?"

Martin looked at her surprised. "W-why to lock him up. Then I'm coming back to t-take you and Bill home." He ruffled the other man's hair good-naturedly. "There's nothing the m-matter with him that a tough Polack brother-in-law can't cure."

Her face grew crimson. "You mean you're asking me to marry you?"

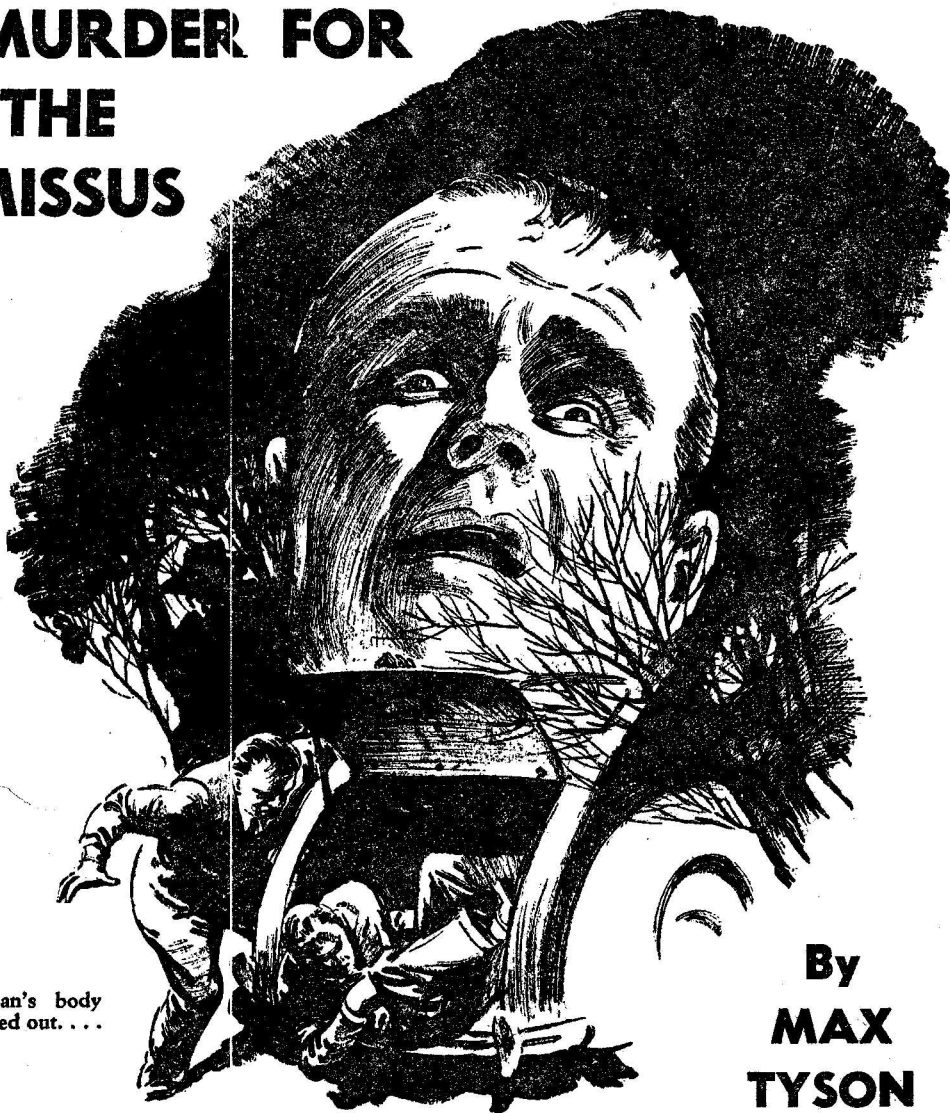
He studied his answer, shook his head. "N-no. I'm t-telling you that you're going to at n-nine o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Stan," she said meekly.

The elder Helm was abjectly apologetic. "I should have known," he admitted. He brightened. "And as a wedding present you can have any job in the mill that you want from general manager down."

"Y-you s-stay out of my life," the young sheriff told him firmly. "I've got a job." He took his shield from his pocket and polished it on his coat lapel. "What's n-more, I'm b-beginning to like it."

MURDER FOR THE MISSUS



A man's body
tumbled out. . . .

By
**MAX
TYSON**

Over beers in the corner bistro, Howie sympathized with a pal who had woman-trouble, but Howie didn't realize then that he'd soon be needing more sympathy himself—in the death house!

HOWIE KRAFT emptied his beer glass for the sixth time, rapped it on the bar defiantly; his capacity was four. Pete, the ex-pug bartender, cocked an eye. "Th' missus on your neck again, Howie?" Howie's little cupid's-bow lips screwed into a bubble. He stormed, "All through the war I worked nights at the machine shop and didn't go nowhere. Now, just because I want

to get a beer once in a while, Myrt thinks I'm wolfing."

Pete was professionally sympathetic. "Can't live with 'em and can't live without 'em, huh?"

"Sez you! Just let her go home to her old lady once, and see how I make out! I'd have the gang in every night and—"

Pete jerked a cauliflowered ear at a stocky,

black-mustached, pipe-smoking man down the bar. "Like Jake Trumbo there, you'd have the gang in," he scoffed. "His wife ran out on him today, and he's all chewed up. You'd be just the same, Howie."

"Ha," Howie snorted. His baby-blue eyes squinted at Jake Trumbo. "He's lucky."

"Not with the swell dish Vera Trumbo is. Jake don't know what to do. He's been lapping it up for three hours already, can't even get drunk. Whyn't you cheer him up, Howie?"

"Why, sure," Howie said. He moved down the bar. "Howdy, Mr. Trumbo. Can I buy a drink? I hear you got woman trouble."

Jake Trumbo stiffened. Howie drew back at the blaze of the man's dark eyes.

"Say, I'm sorry, Mr. Trumbo. I guess you want to be alone. I— Well, I'm sorry."

Trumbo removed his pipe with a square, thick hand, turned back and stared at his beer glass. Howie started to sidle back to his former place, caught himself as Trumbo said heavily, "Don't mind me, bud. I was just thinking of murdering a guy. That's all."

"Oh!" Howie clucked. "Come on, drink up."

"Naw," Trumbo said. "You look like a good little guy. You don't want to hear my troubles."

Howie expanded. "Do you good to get it off your chest. Hey, Pete, set 'em up."

Trumbo toasted Howie somberly, then told his story. It seemed that Trumbo was a traveling man who was out of town five nights a week, while his wife, Vera, was a cuddly little number some years younger than himself. And then there was this husky, dark-haired friend of the family named Ray Lang.

Tonight, Jake had come home for the week end to find a note saying that Vera didn't live there any more; she'd gone with Ray Lang.

"Stab inna back from a friend," Howie growled. "You should poke that Lang guy, Jackie."

Trumbo bit hard on his pipe.

"Y'say he lives right up here on Fifth Street," Howie pressed. "Maybe they didn't leave town yet. Look, Jackie, if you're afraid to tackle him, I'll back you up. Let's go up to his place an' work him over."

Trumbo shook his head, his mustache drooping lower and lower. Howie called for more beer. Then Jake bought. And then Pete broke his heart and put out a free one.

SUDDENLY, Howie was walking up a street, listing slightly to starboard, waiting for his corner to come around. He reached out to sling his arm over Jake's shoulder, only Jake wasn't there. Howie remembered vaguely that Jake had gone the other way, poor mug. Just imagine a guy walking in to find his wife fluffed off with some lousy wolf.

Howie held onto a lamp post and studied the street signs. He was at Vine and Fifth. He scowled. Fifth was where this wolf, Lang, lived, an apartment house right close here. Probably that stucco joint. Yeah, a rat like Lang *would* have a classy apartment. Howie bent forward a little, peering at it, until it was a question of putting a foot forward or falling on his face.

He put the foot out, and the other one just naturally followed, and the apartment house came closer. He went up the steps and peered at the mail boxes: Ray Lang 2-A.

Howie muttered something about telling that wolf off and went inside, up the stairs. He pressed Lang's doorbell, then pounded with his two fists.

"C'mon, open up yuh lousy—"

Howie stopped. The doornob had turned as he shook it. He was three steps into the apartment before he checked himself. The wash from the hall light showed a light switch. Howie weaved over to it and stabbed it. After that, he did no more weaving for a while. He just backed up against the wall and tried to push it down or out or anywhere at all, just so it got out of his way and he could run.

The woman, young, curved, dark-haired, was lying in the middle of the floor, her eyes wide open, staring. Her mouth was open, too, because her swollen tongue protruded. Howie saw the ugly discolorations on her throat and gagged. She'd been throttled.

"Eeee!" A banshee cut loose in the hall.

The scream did for Howie what his muscles had been unable to—got him moving. He skipped sideways to the door, backed through it.

"Eeee! Help! Police!"

The woman in the hall was more scared than Howie, though that didn't seem possible. She was big and fat and could have made two of him, but her eyes rolled as if she were breathing brimstone through her nostrils.

"Don't touch me-e-e-e!" she screeched.

Doors banged. Heads stuck out.

"Catch him! Police! He killed somebody in Mr. Lang's place!"

"Mother of Gawd, lady!" Howie husked.

"I didn't—"

"Hold him—I've got a gun!" shouted a man's voice.

"Kill him! He killed her!" the fat woman cried.

Howie swallowed, gulped and burped. And then he heard the pound of feet and the man's voice again: "I got my gun!"

"Geezus!" Howie choked. He stumbled toward the stairs. He hit about four treads on the way down. The rest of the time he was in the air. He'd left the foyer door ajar and this saved it from being smashed to kindling. Behind him, a shot slammed. More female

voices screeched for police and husbands and help from above. Up the block, a police whistle shrilled.

Howie turned that way, short plump legs pounding. Boy, he wanted a cop!

Then he saw the cop wrestling with his holster, down on one knee, ready to shoot and ask questions later.

"Arghh!" Howie gurgled and swung at right angles and went headlong across the street. The black maw of an alley loomed ahead and he went into it as a Police Positive roared.

A car motor kicked to life ahead of him, and a black shadow bore down. Howie flung himself aside, hit a building and tore something. He jerked a glance over his shoulder, saw the heads and shoulders of two kids in the car, a girl and boy who'd been pitching woo, scared at the sound of shots.

It was a break for him, though. He saw the copper planked in the alley mouth, gun cocked. The car brakes squealed.

By the time those two kids talked their way out of it, Howie Kraft would be home with Myrt—maybe. Come to think of it, though, if he went home like this, Myrt would grill him worse than cops. All in all, he was in a spot for fair, now!

IT WAS a little before midnight. Howie dugged his brown, too-tight topcoat around him, scuttled into a well-lighted street and slowed down. He wondered if he should go back, now that the people at Lang's apartment had cooled off somewhat, and explain just how he'd happened to be there.

But when he thought of seeing Vera Trumbo's twisted body again, he shuddered. There was still enough beer bubbling in him to convince him that things would work out okay, as far as he was concerned. Tomorrow he'd come forward and give his testimony. By that time, the cops would have everything straightened out, whereas tonight they'd probably keep him in the tank. Myrt would never forgive that.

But poor Jakie. Wait till he learned that Ray Lang hadn't run off with Vera at all, but had throttled her. That would be a helluva thing to hear from some bored cop now.

Howie shook his head. Jake would need a pal more than ever. Howie quickened his steps, turned into Jake's street, hurried to the walk-up where Jake had mentioned living. He figured he'd have one tough time getting Jake up, considering the beer, but Jake evidently hadn't been able to sleep. He opened the door at Howie's first ring and surprised spurts of smoke came from the squat pipe under his mustache.

"What the—"

Howie slid inside. He wanted to be tactful,

but his story bumbled right out. Jake's dark eyes dilated. His teeth almost bit through his pipe stem.

"You're sure it was Vera?" he grated.

Howie blinked. "Who else *could* it be?" She was dark-haired, young—"

"Dark hair?" Trumbo burst. "Vera's a blonde!" He pointed at a framed photograph. "That's Vera. Was it her?"

Howie shook his head groggily. He heard sirens whine in the neighborhood.

Trumbo shook him. "Bud, you're in a spot. You're stewed to the gills. Maybe you weren't in Lang's apartment at all. You say people saw you with the dead girl?"

"A fat woman. A cop." Howie swallowed.

"And a roly-poly little guy like you would be easy to remember," Trumbo groaned.

"But, Jakie, they can't believe—"

"Cops can't?" Trumbo challenged. "Hell they can believe anything that closes a case. You're hot, buddy! I know you tried to be my pal, but you better not hang around. They'll cover this territory in no time. They'll describe you to Pete, the bartender, and he'll identify you and say you were with me, and then they'll head straight here. You better lam."

"Where?" Howie breathed. "Where can I g-go? I never had to h-hide out before."

Trumbo's pipe erupted clouds of blue-black smoke. "I wish I'd never laid eyes on you, bud. Pete will say you were drunk, and the cops'll think you made a pass at that dead girl and she fought you—Lord, they'll cook up any kind of story about a drunk!"

Howie's lips moved but no sound came from them. He was suddenly icy cold all over.

Jake Trumbo's dark eyes hardened. "Look, if you're caught where I'm going to send you, you got to promise to keep me out of it, okay?"

Howie nodded weakly.

"Then I'll tell you where you can hide out for tonight. I got a cabin on Lake Wallis. That's where I met Vera. She comes from the little town there. It's only thirty miles from here and there's nobody much around at this time of the year. You can bunk there."

"I haven't any c-car," Howie chattered.

Trumbo cursed, fished in his pocket. He closed Howie's plump fingers around car keys. "My jalopy is out back. The green coupe. Bud, I'm never going to talk to a stranger in a barroom again."

"You aren't!" Howie burst out. "Maybe you think I am!"

IT WAS sure a cozy little dugout, Howie saw by the clear winter moonlight, when he pulled Trumbo's coupe up in front of it. A pioneer-type log cabin, two-stories high, with a rock and moss terrace in front of it and

brooding trees behind. He drove a hundred feet down the rutty road, cut under thick pine trees and parked there. He stumbled back to the cabin and found the key under an old piece of innertube beneath a front window, where Trumbo had said it would be.

There were electric lights inside, but Howie decided against them. He decided against a fire, too, though there were plenty of kindling and logs stacked by the fieldstone fireplace. He used his flashlight to go upstairs and find blankets. He intended to come back down and sit up, but when out of sheer exhaustion he sank down on a bed upstairs, it felt so good that he relaxed for just a second. . . .

Thumping noises jerked Howie awake. He clutched at the blankets, baby-blue eyes skittering about in consternation. It was daylight, but he didn't know where he was.

Then he remembered, and his plump face got chalky. The thumpings from below were repeated, louder. Howie tried to place them, realized they were coming from the door. He cringed back on the bed. *He* wasn't going to let anybody in.

A man's voice, aged and cackling, filtered up from below. "Mr. Trumbo! Ho, Mr. Trumbo—wake up. It's Jed Peters with your trunk. You hear me, Mr. Trumbo?"

Howie breathed relief. At least it wasn't cops.

"Ho, Mr. Trumbo—you hear me?" shouted the old man below.

Howie chewed on his kewpie lips. Obviously the old man knew someone was here—he'd probably seen the car last night or this morning, and thought it was Jake Trumbo. Howie tiptoed to a window, opened it and peeked out. A rickety half-ton truck was parked below. In it was a huge trunk.

Howie ducked back, in case the old buck looked up, and called, "Put it on the porch."

"D'ye think I'm a young bull?" the old man retorted. He cursed out the express company for not giving him an assistant at his age, and insisted, "I need a hand with it."

"Just shove it off," Howie yelled. "I'll bring it up myself."

He stood back from the window and watched the trunk thud to the ground. The old man tossed a newspaper on top of it and drove off.

Howie hadn't intended to go near the trunk, but if that was a morning paper, he had to see it. He wrapped his topcoat tighter, crammed his smashed hat on his thin hair and scurried downstairs and outside, snatched the paper.

The headlines said: MACHINIST RUNS AMOK! Howie's mouth hung open, his breath making jittery white clouds in the icy air as he read. Before he'd half finished the news account of what they called his exploits of last night, his teeth were chattering castanets.

The story said that on-the-spot, efficient police work had established the facts within an hour of the time a Mrs. Bascomb—that would be the fat woman in the hall—had surprised the drunken slayer of pretty young Nadine Markle. Headquarters detectives, cooperating with local patrolmen who were familiar with the neighborhood, had swiftly identified the berserk killer as Howard Kraft, a hitherto harmless, middle-aged man, who clearly had gone insane with rage and drink over marital difficulties and had rushed to the apartment of Mr. Ray Lang for some madman's reason. But Mr. Lang had vacated the apartment only that afternoon. Miss Markle, who lived on the same floor, had been unfortunate enough to step into the hall just when the killer's rage was at its height. . . .

"Lang killed her!" Howie yelled, aloud. "He was a wolf. I bet he played around with her, and when she found out he was running away with Vera Trumbo she fought with him and—"

Howie's soft lips trembled. His eyes had lighted on a short paragraph: "Mrs. Howard Kraft, spouse of the accused, said, 'Nonsense! My Howie wouldn't kill anyone!'"

Good old Myrt! Howie could have squeezed her to pieces if she'd been there, and if he could have managed to get his arms all the way around her two-hundred pounds.

The paper slipped from his fingers. He sat on the trunk, oblivious of the cold, trying to make some sort of pattern out of this crazy thing.

THE TAG on the trunk was in a woman's handwriting. It was addressed to Mrs. Jacob Trumbo, Lake Wallis. Howie frowned. Vera Trumbo hadn't been fooling when she left Jake, yesterday; she'd sent her trunk up here.

"Why would she send it here?" Howie muttered.

Then he recalled that Jake had said that Vera came from the little town across the lake, Port Wallis. Probably the old express man had pulled a boner and delivered the trunk to the cabin instead of to Vera's home. He'd bungled in shoving the trunk off the truck, too. It had landed on a corner, busting the hasp loose.

Howie lifted the lid. He expected to see Vera Trumbo's clothing. He didn't expect to see her in them—but there she was!

Howie opened his mouth in a scream that would have been heard across the lake—only his vocal chords refused to work.

There was no doubt that the woman in the trunk was Vera. Though her blonde hair straggled every which way and her eyes and tongue protruded like Nadine Markle's had done, she was the woman in the photograph

that Jake Trumbo had shown Howie. Howie made sure in one glance. Then he had that trunk lid slammed again. He sagged on it, panting.

His eyes rolled on the trunk tag again. No, the express man hadn't made a mistake; the address said Lake Wallis, not Port Wallis. In fact, the "Lake" was written more heavily than the rest, as if someone had smudged it and had then written all the heavier to make it stand out.

Howie licked his lips. Vera must have walked in on Ray Lang and caught him with Nadine Markle's body, so he'd given her the same dose.

He'd left Nadine's body there, intending to swear that he'd vacated the apartment in good order. But he couldn't leave two bodies, so he'd shipped Vera up here to dispose of later.

The cold struck Howie, now. He jiggled all over. He felt like running home to Myrt just as fast as ever he could.

He could imagine her glaring at his trunk, fat arms akimbo, and snorting, "I'm going to make some cawfee and figure this thing out!"

"Yeah, I need something hot in me," Howie quavered.

He hurried back into the cabin, built a fire in the old-fashioned kitchen stove. The coffee was stale and rancid, but the scald of the steaming brew in his mouth and throat and tummy helped him to think.

A'guy like him couldn't lam for long. He didn't know the ropes. His best bet was to go back to town and hire a lawyer. It would be mighty suspicious for him to be the one to tell of Vera's body up here, but dammit anyway, he'd never seen her or Nadine alive; how could they say he had a motive?

Just wait till he explained about Lang. The cops weren't worrying about Lang. They thought he'd run off with Vera.

Howie started to burn. He bet Lang was propped on pillows in some nice hotel this very minute, chuckling over the newspapers.

Howie gulped down the rest of his coffee, pushed away from the table.

"Take it easy now," said a man's voice behind him.

He whirled. His blue eyes goggled on the husky, pleasant-featured, dark-haired man in the door. Ray Lang wasn't in any hotel, after all—he was here!

Howie had never reacted so fast in all his life. He scooped his coffee cup off the table and flung it at Lang with an underhand motion. The man cursed, ducked. "You damn fool, Kraft—wait!"

Howie didn't reply—verbally. He caught the coffee pot and flung that, too.

He was plenty wild. Neither cup nor pot struck Lang. But scalding coffee spurting from the coffee spout splattered Lang's up-

flung hand and wrist. Lang howled, wrung his hand in the air as if trying to shake off the sizzling brew.

The next thing Howie threw was a chair. And this, being big and solid, connected. It smashed Lang's arm and wrist. Howie followed it, his plump little body tensed and hard all over. The machinist's trade doesn't make a guy's hands exactly soft, either. Howie's pumping fists drew grunts from Lang.

Lang struck back, but with only one hand. The chair had numbed the other, and he was handicapped. Or maybe the brawl was just evened up, because ordinarily Lang would have stood back, towering over Howie, and jabbed him dizzy.

He couldn't do that now. Howie was in close, fighting, punching and slapping for his life. He grabbed for Lang's throat. The husky, dark-haired man stumbled, crashed to the floor. Howie clung to him, smashed his fists into the man's face. Then he caught him by the ears and pounded the man's head on the floor. That kind of treatment usually gets results.

AFTER a bit, Howie realized that there was no longer any opposition under him. He pushed back, breathing so hard he was practically gagging. He stared at the unconscious man. At first he was a little scared at what he'd done, but then a warm glow started in his middle; and it wasn't from coffee. He'd shown this punk who was who.

There was stout twine in a kitchen drawer. Howie tied Lang but good, went out to get the car. He intended to deliver Lang to the tank personally. The raw air felt just fine, now. It looked like the sun might come out.

When he got down to the pines where he'd parked the car, Howie stared disgustingly at the right rear wheel. The tire was pancaked.

Resignedly, he hauled out the keys his pal Jake had given him and unlocked the back of the car to get at the spare and tools.

A man's body tumbled out.

If the car had been parked on the level, the body would have remained crammed where it was, but the front wheels were higher than the rear, and gravity sucked the body down.

It touched Howie's toes when it fell. He jumped back, and then he couldn't move at all. It wasn't right. It wasn't real. Why was the book being thrown at him like this?

A crashing in the underbrush whirled him around. "Jake!" he gurgled.

Jack Trumbo snatched his thick pipe from under his mustache, hissed, "Get back to the cabin. Cops are closing in."

Howie shook his head numbly. "I don't care."

Trumbo rammed his pipe back, grabbed Howie. "They'll mow you down as soon as

they spot you. Get back to the cabin. At least you can make a deal with 'em."

Trumbo pushed Howie. Otherwise, Howie wouldn't have moved. His glazed blue eyes flickered on the corpse again. The man was husky, dark-haired.

"Who's he?" Howie asked thickly.

"Ray Lang," Trumbo said. "Hurry!"

Howie started to laugh hysterically. "He's Ray Lang! That's good! That's swell! Who's the guy I beat up in the cabin, then?"

Trumbo hustled him along. "He's the private dick your wife hired, I guess. You beat him up?"

Howie didn't answer. He stumbled worse than when he'd been crooked last night. Trumbo practically heaved him onto the porch and into the cabin. He slammed the door.

"Where's this dick?" His black eyes were suddenly smouldering coals.

Howie waved toward the kitchen. Trumbo plunged for it. "Ah!" he breathed when he saw that the detective was tied hand and foot. He whipped a handkerchief from his pocket, stuffed it in the detective's mouth.

Howie gasped, "Why are you doing that?"

"So he can't squawk when the cops get close," Trumbo leered. His stocky figure crossed to a cupboard. He opened it, whipped out a shotgun and jammed shells into it.

He ran to a window, peered out. Then he rammed the shotgun through the glass, let it *whoom-m-m!*

Howie saw a uniform dive into the underbrush. "Jakie! Good Gawd, what are you doing?"

"That'll slow 'em up," Trumbo said. He turned on Howie, re-loading the shotgun. "What am I doing? Listen!"

He sidled up to the broken window, removed his pipe and bellowed, "Help! He's got me! He's holding me as hostage!"

HOWIE felt the cabin spinning around his ears. Suddenly it stopped, steadied down. *Everything* steadied down.

Howie stared at Jake Trumbo. "You, Jakie?"

Trumbo's lips under his mustache curled into a sneer. "Yeah, me, you damn little busybody!"

"I see it," Howie said, scarcely recognizing his own voice. "Ray Lang's body was in *your* car. You killed him and your wife for cheating on you, didn't you? You said when you came home last night, there was a note saying she'd run off with Lang and—"

"And there is a note, too, don't think there isn't," Trumbo snapped. "She wrote it, all right, only I got home yesterday afternoon when she was writing it. I came into my place just as she finished it. She got up and went to the telephone and called the express

company to come for her trunk, the little—"

"And you choked her and put her body in the trunk. She'd already called the express company and addressed the tag—Yeah!" Howie squeaked. "The address on the tag is in her handwriting, except that Port Wallis was smudged out and changed to 'Lake Wallis.' All you had to do was change one word and the trunk would come here instead of to her home, and you'd have lots of time to get rid of the body."

Trumbo pulled on his pipe, his dark eyes glittering.

Howie said, "But if she was supposed to have run off with Ray Lang, then he had to be missing, too. You went there and killed him and put his body in the back of your car. Why did you kill the Markle girl?"

"The little chit walked in on me when I was rolling Lang up in a rug," Trumbo said. "I had to shut her up. But that would have been okay, too. Lang had been wolfing her, and it would look like he fought with her because she was trying to stop him from running away with Vera."

A shot from outside clunked into the kitchen wall. A voice yelled, "We've got you bottled up, Kraft! If you kill Trumbo, it'll just be worse on you."

Trumbo shouted back, "He *will* kill me! He's got a shotgun!"

"Nonsense! I don't believe it!" it was a woman.

Howie gasped, "Myrt!" He started for the window. Trumbo swung the barrel of the shotgun, knocked Howie back and down. Then he upset the kitchen table.

"We're struggling, see?" he leered at Howie. "In a second I'll blast you and tell them I had to kill you in self-defense."

Myrt's voice sang out from the underbrush. "Howard, you come right out here!"

"How did s-she get here?" Howie asked. "She's a damned kibitzer, too," Trumbo snarled. "She knows you, you little worm, so she knew I was lying to the cops. But it'll stick when you're dead."

"W-what'll stick?" Howie stammered.

Trumbo laughed. "I said my wife had been playing around with *you* as well as Ray Lang! You messed up my first plan, so I sent you up here out of the way till I thought of another story for the cops. I told them *you* were the one who'd got jealous when Vera ran to Ray, that you'd got beered up and gone gunning for him. Now that the cops have Vera's and Lang's bodies, they'll put everything on you."

Howie cried, "But Lang's body was in *your* car!"

"And I reported it stolen last night," Trumbo bragged. "The only hitch was that that damn dick your wife hired in the middle of the night questioned my landlady at six

o'clock this morning and found out that the express company had picked up Vera's trunk yesterday afternoon. I knew he'd check and come here, thinking maybe Vera and Lang were here."

Trumbo grinned. "So I chased up here myself. I told the local cops I'd come up to forget things, but that when I got close to the cabin I spotted you. I got them to back me up, said I'd come ahead, try to talk to you."

Trumbo kicked a chair into the wall. "But you're too haywire to listen, you dumb dope. You put a shotgun on me, tried to kill me, too. By luck, I jumped you and turned the gun on you."

Myrt's voice sang clearly. "Howard Kraft, if you don't come right out here, I'm coming in!"

TRUMBO jerked toward the window. Howie caught a glimpse of Myrt's two hundred pounds planted in full view. He tried to yell for her to get back, but couldn't.

"I'm coming, Howard!" she warned. And she did.

"Get back, Mrs. Kraft!" Trumbo shouted. "He's a killer now! He's different! He'll even kill you!"

Myrt's snort of disdain practically sent a draft through the kitchen. She came on steadily.

Trumbo leveled the shotgun. His black mustache fairly bristled. "So I owe her something, at that, the fat, dumb kibitzer!"

"No!" Howie whimpered. "You don't have to kill her! Kill me! That's all, J-Jake!"

Myrt called, "Open that door, Howard. I'm not stopping."

Trumbo swung the shotgun on Howie, then back. "She'll swear you're just a punk, and some dumb cop is liable to believe her. She's got to go."

Trumbo lifted the shotgun. Myrt thundered, "Howard!"

"You go' damn slob!" Howie roared. He shot up from the floor and dived headlong at Trumbo. "You hurt a hair of her head and—"

The shotgun blast drowned out the rest.

Then he was on top of Trumbo, one hand grasping the barrel of the gun, the other smashing Trumbo's pipe further in under the black mustache than it ever had been before.

Under other circumstances, it might have been just a breather for Howie, but Trumbo was tough, and Howie didn't have much moxie left.

But Myrt had said she was coming in, and she certainly did. She came through the door like a half-track.

Howie felt himself pulled off of Trumbo. The floor shook suddenly. Trumbo started a bellow that cut off. Myrt had sat down on his bread basket. He couldn't move. When he tried, Myrt picked up the coffee pot from the floor and rapped him on the head.

"Be still, Jake Trumbo," she ordered. "You were a fool to think that I'd believe my Howard was running around with another man's wife. I just kid Howard like that. I know all he does is drink beer and play pinochle at Pete's place."

Myrt looked up suddenly, uncertainly. "That is all you do, isn't it, Howard?"

Howie blubbered, "Yeah, Myrt! Honest to Gawd, yeah!"

THERE'S DOUGH IN MURDER

for some and plenty of trouble for others, particularly when Nickie, that irrepressible Sherlock-in-short pants, browbeats and cajoles his way into a murder case. An exciting new chapter in the doings of your favorite juvenile sleuth by

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BLACK MASK



The two little hoods had neatly put the finger on Nick the Cop. They figured that any square who played as honest as he did couldn't live long—but they didn't remember that it's only human to tell an occasional lie!

By
**GEORGE
WILLIAM
RAE**



Frenchy froze, as Nick's voice jerked back to him. . . .

THE FINGER was on Nick Gricus, the Homicide dick. He was going to die tonight. Frenchy sat behind the wheel of the convertible and thought of Jiggy Jeronolmann waiting, crouched at a third floor window, with a chopper in his hand.

Nick Gricus came out of the bar at eleven o'clock.

Frenchy squeezed the starter, made a U-turn and pulled up beside Nick Gricus. He couldn't help admiring the nonchalance with

which Nick treated the sudden arrival of the car beside him. A lesser dick would have spun around, ducked into a doorway, or dug for his rod.

But not Nick Gricus. Nick had guts. Plenty of guts.

Frenchy leaned across the vacant seat beside him, called through the open window. "Hey, Mr. Gricus. Hey, wait!"

The detective stopped, turned cold black eyes at the car. Frenchy motioned to him.

• AFTER YOU, DEATH! •

"It's about Jiggy," Frenchy said through his teeth.

Nick Gricus was interested, as Frenchy knew he would be. Nick wanted Jiggy for putting the heat on Patrolman Paul O'Hara.

"What about him?" Nick Gricus said, lowering his face to look into the convertible.

Frenchy pushed down the door handle. "Geez, get in Mr. Gricus. If anybody saw me—"

Nick's bushy brows came together and little wrinkles appeared between them on his swarthy forehead. He eased his bulk into the car, shot a hard look at Frenchy. "Since when've you turned stool?" he asked.

"Aw, Mr. Gricus, you know I ain't no stool." Frenchy said in his whining tone. "It's the way Jiggy treats me." Frenchy said, "Like a pig. Jiggy treats me like a dirty pig."

"So you want to get even with Jiggy."

"That's right, Mr. Gricus."

"By frying him for the O'Hara job?"

"He treats me like a pig. I hate him. So, if he fries—"

Nick Gricus tone was contemptuous. "That's a hell of a lot of punishment for being mean to a guy," he said.

Frenchy felt the sweat ooze from his hatband. *Damn him, why the hell did he have to make it like that?* Frenchy thought. *Why does he have to make me out a heel?*

That was another bad point about Nick Gricus. He was square. He'd even given Jiggy, that lousy rat, a break.

Frenchy said: "Look, Mr. Gricus, I'm gonna tip you where Jiggy's hidin' out see. I'm doin' this on my own. So don't look a gift horse—"

Nick lifted a big-veined muscular hand.

"Okay, Frenchy," he said disgustedly. "Just give me the address and I'll put the clamp on him."

Frenchy felt his face flush with triumph.

"I'll take you there myself, Mr. Gricus," he said.

Nick Gricus studied him for a long minute. "How much you going to hit me for, for this, Frenchy."

"Aw, Mr. Gricus, I ain't gonna hit you for anything," Frenchy said and thought of the grand in his pocket that he had collected from Jiggy for steering Nick straight to him. "I told ya, I ain't no stool."

Nick made a wry face. "Okay, let's go." Frenchy saw him slide a big hand under his suit coat near his chest.

FRENCHY flipped the car into gear and the car roared crosstown into the hot night. Frenchy covertly studied the face of Nick Gricus, shivered inwardly as he thought about what was soon going to happen to him. It wouldn't be pretty. Still, Frenchy thought, it was an easy G-note. That was more money than he had ever made playing caser and errand-boy for Jiggy. All for taking a guy past a little area of light near a doorway....

"You better tell me what kind of a set-up this is." Nick said.

Frenchy drew a rasping breath. Then he went into his well-rehearsed spiel.

"Well, it's like this, Mr. Gricus." Frenchy said. "Jiggy is holed up in this rooming house over on East Market. He ain't figuring on anybody dropping in to visit him, see? So it should be a cinch."

Frenchy paused, as he had been told to do, waiting for the inevitable question.

"Is Jiggy heeled well?" it came.

"Yeah," Frenchy told the truth, "Jiggy is well-heeled. He spent plenty for his hide-out."

Nick grunted. Frenchy knew what he was figuring. If Jiggy was in the dough, he would have the co-operation of the owner of the place. That would make it tougher.

"The joint ain't staked out, though." Frenchy told Nick. "Jiggy don't want any attention drawn to it."

Frenchy grinned to himself. He knew that Nick Gricus wouldn't call in for help. He knew, too, that Nick Gricus would play on the level with him.

Sucker. Frenchy thought. *Too much guts—too much courage. He'll give anybody an even break. This time it's gonna cost him his life!*

They drew up to a quiet halt in a dark loft and warehouse section. Frenchy came back to the business at hand, grabbing Nick's arm in skinny fingers.

"See that third street-lamp up ahead?" Frenchy was saying. "Well, Jiggy is holed up in a roomin' house that has it's front entrance just past that light."

Nick surveyed the set-up and Frenchy could see his jaws clamp tighter.

This is the beginning of the end, thought Frenchy.

Nick reached for the door handle, pushed it down.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Gricus." Frenchy said. "Now look, Mr. Gricus," Frenchy told him, "I wanna make sure you get Jiggy, see?"

I don't want that rat to get away, see? So I gotta plan all worked out."

Nick's glance was a cold, piercing shaft. "Like what?" he asked.

"Like this," Frenchy said, "Jiggy trusts me, see? So I figure this way. I could go up there first and when I go in you follow up and you'll have a better chance of puttin' the clamp on him by surprisin' him, see?"

Nick said, "No, I don't see. That stinks."

Frenchy licked dry lips. He lifted his hat and wiped the sweat from his forehead and temples.

"Look, Mr. Gricus," Frenchy said, "I'm levelin' with you. Jiggy's gone trigger-happy since he found out that O'Hara kid died. If you go bargin' in there first, he'll cut you down sure. I know you want to take this guy alive. You'd have a better chance this way."

Nick said: "Yeah, I want Jiggy alive. I want him to burn for that cop-killing."

Frenchy swallowed. "Okay," he said, "tell you what. I go first. We sneak along the walls of the buildings—it's dark there and he'd never spot us until we get way down. There's only one bad spot and that's that third street-light. But if we can get by that, we can make it."

Nick said, "I think you got something there, Frenchy."

Frenchy drew a quiet breath of relief. "You bet, Mr. Gricus," he said, happily. "I want you to get him, see? I hate his guts. Frying is too good for the rat."

"All right, let's go." Nick eased his body out of the convertible.

Frenchy's mind ran over the plan again as he slowly alighted from the car. Jiggy would be waiting in a third floor window across the street from that third street light. Frenchy's job was to march Nick Gricus past that light so that Jiggy could get a shot at him. That was why Frenchy had to go by first, so Jiggy would have a clear field when the second figure slid by.

FRENCHY moved around the car and they plastered themselves against the blackness of the buildings.

"Lemme go first," Frenchy said again, "I'll take a little lead and then you follow. When you get through the doorway, it's the first door to the right on the second floor."

Frenchy grinned into the night. Nick Gricus would never reach that door. He'd be dead before he could try!

Jiggy would be waiting, tommy-gun trained on the feeble arc cast by the street light. What a hell of a mess he'd make of Nick.

Silently the men moved along the buildings fronting the street. No sound broke the hot,

dark quiet. Only the distant and hardly noticeable night sounds disturbed the black solitude.

The first two street lights were passed without incident. As they approached the third, Frenchy stopped and Nick came up. Frenchy's voice shook.

"Now, this is the one. Gimme a chance to make it past and then come on," he said.

Nick was studying Frenchy's eyes and the indistinct whiteness of his face. Frenchy was trying hard to control the agitated shivering of his body. He hoped that Nick wouldn't notice.

For one horrible moment Frenchy thought of how it would feel to have those slugs digging into *his* body. . . .

Nick Gricus had his rod in his fist. "Go ahead. I'll follow," he said, drilling Frenchy with his hard eyes.

"Yeah, yeah—okay," Frenchy said. "Here goes." Suddenly Nick grasped Frenchy's arm.

"Look, kid," Nick said, "I—I, well, I think you got a lot of guts to go up there first. You're a damn good sport to give me a break like this. I—I'd like to shake and wish you luck."

Frenchy almost laughed out loud! The damn fool was holding out his hand—wishing the man who was leading him to his doom luck! Frenchy shook the extended hand.

Too much courage. Too much guts, Frenchy thought, *It's costin' you your life.*

Then Frenchy turned and slid furtively away. The pool of yellow light swam closer and Frenchy chuckled. Soon it would be over and he could begin blowing that grand. . . .

Frenchy was just entering the yellow light-fringe when Nick Gricus' figure spurted past him and on into the darkness ahead.

Frenchy froze, as Nick's voice jerked back.

"I can't let you do it," Nick yelled, as he passed Frenchy. "It isn't right. I'll go first and take what's coming."

The damn fool! Frenchy's frenzied brain screamed in that terrible moment. *He's doing it to give me a break!*

But Frenchy didn't finish the thought. . . .

The concise, brittle rapping of the tommy-gun sent a flock of red-hot pokers drilling into his body. He did a crazy dance in the saffron light and slumped into the gutter like a discarded doll.

Nick Gricus, ahead in the darkness, spun around at the shot. His automatic jumped as he sent several shots to the third floor window. The tommy stopped yammering.

They found Jiggy's body later, on the floor of the vacant third floor apartment. And Nick Gricus smiled grimly down at the cop-killer.

"You always said I had too much guts, Jiggy." He whispered. "Maybe you were right!"

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By LEE and JAKOBSSON



Watch out for this gent. He's one of the few perfect wholesale murderers known to be at large in this country by latest reports!

His life story, as far as it is known, is bizarre. He came to the U.S. in the early teens of this century and promptly advertised himself as a freak looking for a job. But the best he could do was to take a job as porter in a semi-public institution in the Bronx. Before you could pronounce his name—which was either Freddie Menarick or Freddie Mors—he was running the joint; and death statistics among inmates had risen four hundred percent!

Arrested, he admitted his guilt readily. Sentenced to Matteawan, he pleaded with his keepers to be allowed to ease some of his more aged, insane fellow-inmates out of this world.

His request denied, he simply eased himself out! Nobody knows how—he just walked away. It wasn't even a spectacular escape, but he made it good. And he's around today some place. Thanks, Doc, our spinal meningitis is much better today!

A man who does well in business deserves to expand, Sam Skablow felt, and when he ran into a prospective customer, one Abraham Goldner, who was hard to sell, he proceeded to demonstrate. He took him all over town, introduced him to previously satisfied customers—and put himself across so well that Goldner offered to sell Sam's work to others, in turn.

For a while the partnership prospered. Goldner was a good agent and Sam was an excellent workman. Everyone was happy, until Goldner, too, got hold of a client he couldn't sell. Finally Goldner took the gentleman on the same tour Sam had once taken him on, introduced him to the same people and finally sold Sam—to the F.B.I.!

For the hard-to-please client was a G-man! And Sam was a professional firebug, an arsonist, one of the most skilled in the U.S. Cops had been looking for him for a half-decade, with never an inkling as to his identity—until Sam put on a selling campaign for Uncle!



Let us raise a question mark briefly at the forgotten graveside of Monk Eastman, one of the toughest and most cold-blooded gangsters that the New York of a generation ago produced. Monk took his gangster bullet-riddled carcass to World War I, performed heroic deeds. Once, wounded, he escaped from the hospital, got hold of a gun and rejoined his buddies in his hospital nightgown to lead them over the top. When he came back, Governor Al Smith restored his citizenship. Both officers and enlisted soldiers paid him homage and his erstwhile enemies, the police, got him a job.

But Monk Eastman died as he had lived. A little more than a year later he was once more a puzzle to society, but his personal life's riddle was solved by gangsters' bullets.

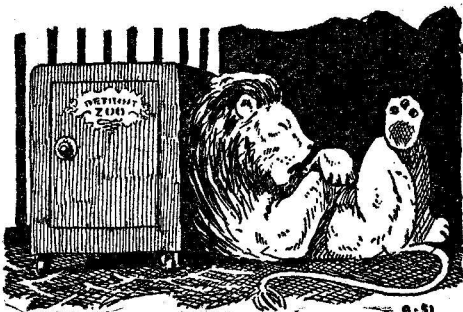
Not so long ago, in a Midwestern town, a gang of thieves familiarized themselves with the jail door lock, had themselves arrested, then nightly looted the town, with a perfect alibi, until chance caught them red-handed.

In West Virginia a colored congregation gathered one Sunday morning for the services and found only the foundations of the church standing. Someone had stolen the rest of the building during the previous night!

After burglars cracked the safe at the Detroit Zoo, the management put it in the lions' cage every night!

In Ohio, thieves stole a mile of railroad track, and sold it for scrap!

At Kutno, Polan, shortly before the war, thieves set to work on a bridge, disguised as repairmen. Under the eyes of authorities, in fact, with their unwitting blessings, they stole the whole structure!



A CORPSE

By **CYRIL PLUNKETT**

CHAPTER ONE

Vacation In Hell

WE WERE wanted—for murder—Big Six Congo and me. I read the posters myself on a sheet tacked up on a pole.

"Take it down," I whispered.

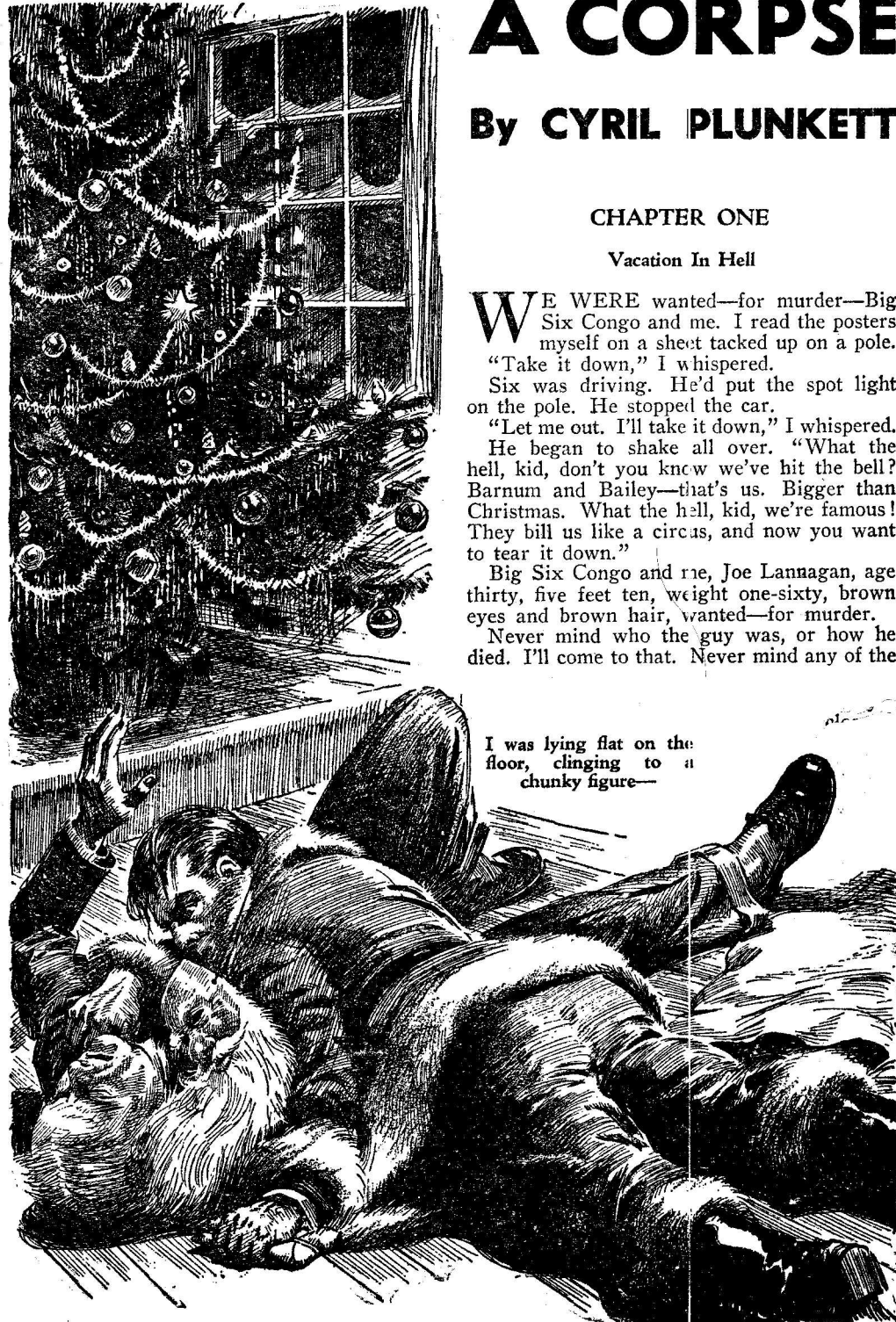
Six was driving. He'd put the spot light on the pole. He stopped the car.

"Let me out. I'll take it down," I whispered.

He began to shake all over. "What the hell, kid, don't you know we've hit the bell? Barnum and Bailey—that's us. Bigger than Christmas. What the hell, kid, we're famous! They bill us like a circus, and now you want to tear it down."

Big Six Congo and me, Joe Lannagan, age thirty, five feet ten, weight one-sixty, brown eyes and brown hair, wanted—for murder.

Never mind who the guy was, or how he died. I'll come to that. Never mind any of the

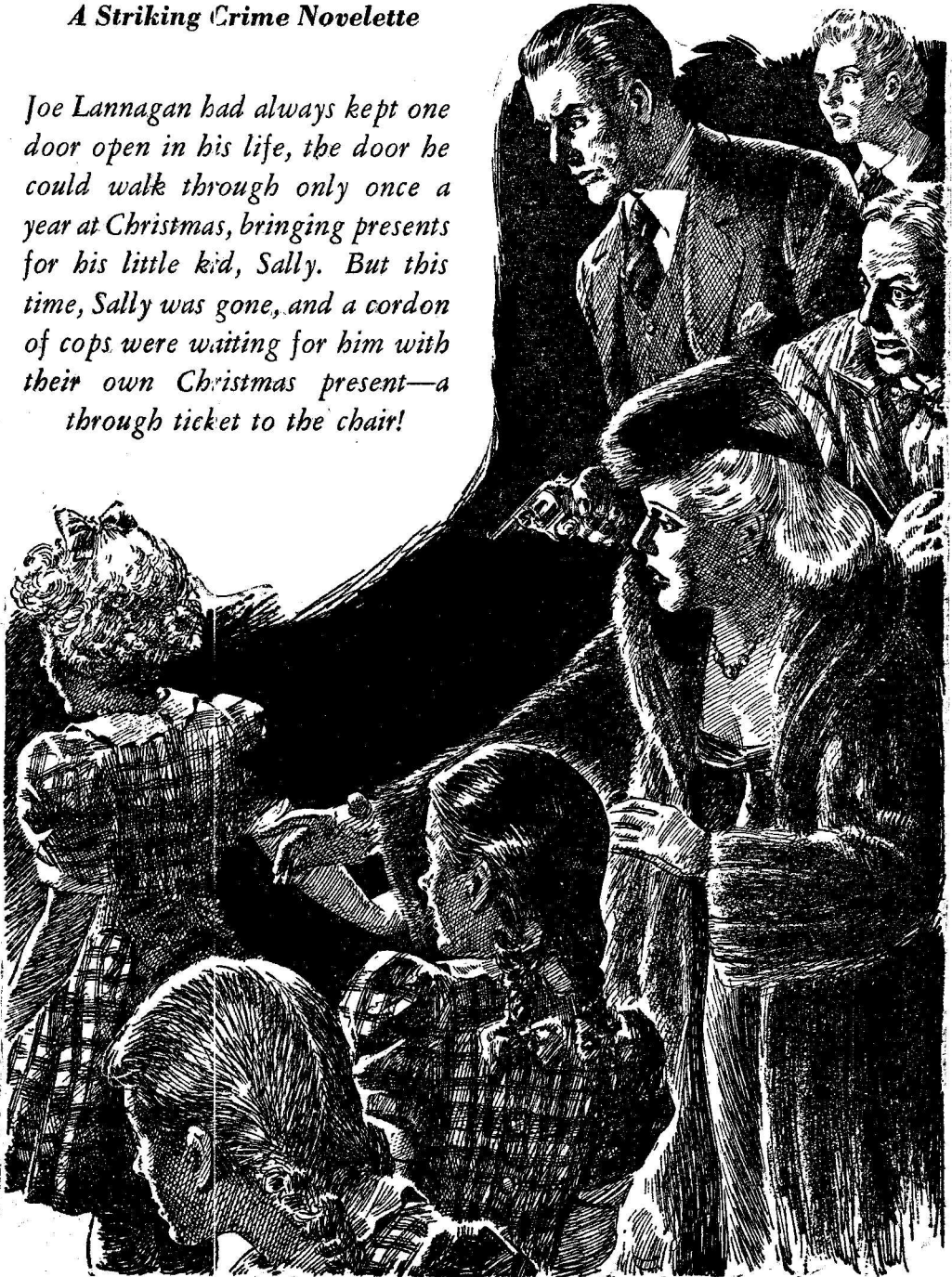


I was lying flat on the floor, clinging to a chunky figure—

FOR CHRISTMAS ★

A Striking Crime Novelette

Joe Lannagan had always kept one door open in his life, the door he could walk through only once a year at Christmas, bringing presents for his little kid, Sally. But this time, Sally was gone, and a cordon of cops were waiting for him with their own Christmas present—a through ticket to the chair!



backtrail, for a while. We had a place to hole up for the long pull. Six knew a hood named Frankie Fail. Frankie wasn't hot, so Frankie had fixed it. We had three rooms in a tank town, upstairs, over a store on the main drag. They sold hot dogs, candy and ice-cream in the store, and people would come in all day. The kids would blow in after school, at noon and three o'clock and then hang around till the doors closed, putting nickels in the juke box down there, all morning, noon and night. Rhythm came through the floor in a steady *thump-thump*. I listened to the *thump-thump* till I thought I would go crazy.

All we had to do was read, eat and sleep—and wait. Two weeks in December. Three weeks. Wait till Six decided on the next move.

She was in my mind, of course, every day and night now. I'd figured, at first, that we'd blow before Christmas. I'd figured we'd cool these three weeks, and then split, Six and me. I was full of Six by now, after two years, gagging with him. I would think, *She'll expect me. If I don't show she'll be surprised and hurt, and wonder where I am.* I got to wondering what I'd get her this year. And then how I'd get out to buy presents.

Maybe Frankie? Frankie went out every day. I could say to Frankie, "She's a cute kid. Just eight. Look, Frankie, what I want for her this year—"

But Frankie went for plaids, red ties. Frankie went for babes and bourbon. Oh no, Frankie couldn't buy the presents for *my* kid. So I read ads in the papers, listened to the *thump-thump* through the floor; and all the while the days would pop like flashbulbs in my brain. Eighteenth of December. Nineteenth. What, the twenty-third already? The clock became a time-bomb in my brain; it never stopped or ran the other way.

I had it out with Six on the twenty-third, two days before Christmas. Sunday afternoon, it was, at five o'clock.

"Look, Six," I said, "you don't understand. She means the world to me. She's just a kid, just eight, but she's everything I got—"

"Twenty-eight, you mean," Six cracked.

"No, Six, look— You got it wrong. I don't go for babes. It's no gag. It's a date, a promise, and I got to see her. It's one night in each year that I go back—home. One night that I write the past off, Six, and forget the bitterness. It's something that I feel—" I tapped my chest, "in here. Like a drink is to you, Six—like a double whiskey."

"Get away from that window," Six said sharply.

"Sure, Six, sure! All I want is the car and some dough." I reached around and pulled the window-shade. "All I want is a couple of days—"

Six said, "You want one of these hick cops to see your mug? You think because they're hicks they can't remember faces? You want to burn the three of us?" Frankie had gone out for papers and for food now.

"You stay the hell away from that window," Six said. He was lying on the cot. His lids were sullen and unwinking. His cheeks, beneath the apples, showed black with stubby beard. "So you got a brat to see? Seems like I heard a tale like that before, Joe. The way I heard it, Joe, three punks looked up in the sky and saw a star, and then, the way I heard it, they took a trip to see a kid—"

Six punched a cigarette between his lips, lit it and flipped the match at me. "What you got, Joe," he said, "is moss inside your head for brains. It's a song and dance you're trying to sell me. But I'm no fool. I know you're yellow and you're trying to rat, Joe."

He got up smoothly, took three steps across the room and grabbed me by the collar. "And you're not going to run out on Six Congo, pally. Nobody does—not if they want to live."

I felt the wall behind my head. Then his other hand came up, a fist beneath my chin. He started tapping at my chin, and each time he knocked at it, my head would jerk and slam against the wall.

"You're not going anywhere, Joe. Not until I give the word. I'm the big guy, Joe. Get it?"

"But Six, listen—!"

"Yeah, I'm the big guy, Joe, and we're giving *me* a present tomorrow afternoon. We're cracking a bank tomorrow at two-fifteen. What the hell do you think we've been laying up in this two-bit town for? Just to spend a quiet Christmas?"

"Six, you got me wrong—!" I began.

He hit me once more, hard. He let me fall and then he stood there, rocking on his feet and snarling, "What the hell you take me for—a half-wit?"

I LAY on the bed in the back room. The juke-box was playing. *Thump-thump*, like a kettle drum, the rhythm came at me, although I could never get the tune.

I looked at the ceiling. Someone crossed the floor upstairs. I'd heard the people up there, but I'd never seen them. A woman and a man, I guess. There were sounds from high heels and flat ones. I got to thinking maybe the people were young. She had a nice quick walk, as if she were tacking down little nails with her feet. The guy, maybe, had just come back from the army.

Well, *his* wife was waiting. That was where he had me. Pretty swell it must be when a guy got back from somewhere and found his wife there, waiting.

The juke-box stopped abruptly for a moment.

"Sally," I heard, "where is my new shirt?"
"Chest. Top drawer."

"Hon, got curls in your hair for tonight?"

Maybe I heard it from upstairs. Maybe I didn't hear it at all. Maybe it was only in mind. I don't know. The *thump-thump* had started again. It was jiggling like a woman walking boldly, to show you what she had beneath her dress; it was jiggling all over the darkness, around me.

I sat very still on the bed, and I could hear Six coughing in the other room. He drew in with a long, slow wheezing, like a leaky valve on a balloon. Then the cough would start, from the same place that he kept his chuckle, from way down in the massive rolls of fat around his belly. But you've heard a fat man coughing. . . .

A car came up the alley. Frankie, I thought. He was due with the papers, with potato chips, coffee, sandwiches and pie. Frankie always brought pie for Six. He would back the car into the slot beneath our bedroom window in another minute. Then he'd leave it there, keys in the lock, so that if the need arose, everything was ready.

I got up and looked out of the window. Frankie, all right. I could see him in the snow below.

He stood a moment looking up the alley. Then he plodded for the rear door and it closed on him. I heard his footsteps on the back stairs, in the hall, at the door. He kicked it open.

"Merry Christmas," he said to Six.

Six said, "What kind of pie?"

"Mince. All I could get. You should go on a diet, Six."

"When I die it's going to be with my stomach full. One pie?"

"Ain't that *enough*? How's the punk?"

Six had closed the door again; he locked it. Six, still chuckling, said, "Wise man. You know what *he* wants. You know Joe by this time."

Frankie started for the kitchen. "Got six beers. All I could get. The chump got asking questions—what did I want every day with all that beer—"

By that time I had the window up. Ten feet down, parked in the snow, was the car. I sat on the sill, got one foot across it.

"Hey," Frankie yelled, "a draft! Who opened a window?"

Six cursed. A chair fell in the other room, as he lunged from it. He charged the bedroom door, and it opened just as I jumped. I hit the turret top, slid across it and landed in the snow.

"Joe!" Six snarled, above me. "Get him, Frankie! Stop him! *Joe!*"

To hell with Frankie and with Six now. The one on my mind was *Sally*. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Dead and Gone

THERE was another slim, blonde Sally once, a few years ago. Lord, there always was a Sally. We were kids together—grew up in the same block. I used to walk on tiptoe past her house at night, just on the chance I'd see her. When we got a little older I would whistle. Finally, I got to sitting on her porch; and one day we walked down the street, our hands together and our heads held high, and from that day on she was Mrs. Joe Lannagan.

In those days I had myself a truck. Big job—trailer—my name splashed all over it in red. I grinned a lot and knew a lot and burned up the highways to get back home. Then one night two guys bumped me.

"We'll take your load," they said. "We got a place for it. You ain't on the beam," they said, "so we'll run the whole outfit in the river."

They were wise guys. The big one waved a sap at me, so I changed my mind. "Wait a minute," I said. "How much will it take?"

"Initiation fee?" The big one put the sap back in his pocket. "Now you're talking, bud. You got brains. You got a head for business. You got a hundred bucks?"

I paid it. I paid it over and over. I was glad to pay it. These boys knew their stuff. They got me loads and I made big money. Then the cops ran me off the road one day. Before the war, that was. I was hauling silk.

By that time we'd had us a brand new Sally. Pink and white, a tiny mite. Sure, I know, it's past and all over. But memories like that stick with you. Coming home, I'd yell before I hit the door, "Where's my women?" The two of them would always be there waiting with kisses.

Christmas was the big day in our house. Christmas was for giving, but I always had to start way back in November. A new something every night. Where did I get the things? "Oh," I'd say, "I got a pipe-line to Santa at the Pole."

I was hauling silk—hi-jacked silk—for a gang. Looking back I guess I hadn't thought too much about morals—not with all that money.

*"You're gone from me,
But in my memory,
We always will be—
Together. . . ."*

Remember it, that song? Well, Sally used to sing it. I'd hear it, in my mind, in the big-house, up the river. I'd hear Sally whispering, "Joe, I understand."

She might have grabbed the kid and turned

her back on me. I guess I would have understood, if she had. Joe Lannagan behind bars, wearing a number. Hell, there wasn't too much left she could be proud about. But she said, "I understand. We'll wait. The two of us, the little one and me. When you get out, we'll start all over."

So I took a new breath. I made plans about what I'd do when I got out, how I would make this up to them. The straight and narrow, brother, from here on in for me. No more short cuts. I'd work my fingers to the bone. I was lucky, I thought, to have a girl—two girls—like Sally waiting.

Did I say there was another Sally once? Uh-huh. That's right. There was. Somebody wrote me a letter. *Twelvetrees*, it was engraved across the top, *The August P. Hines Foundation*. Beneath it was a smaller black word: *Orphanage*.

Dear Sir,

You doubtless have already been informed that your wife is dead—

What was this thing, a gag? Did they think it was cute to shove a knife into my heart? Informed? Something that should have come and didn't?

I spelled the word out. D-e-a-d. I turned it upside down. The concrete floor began to shake. The bars ran together, then spun like spokes on a wheel.

They were wrong! They must be! Dead? Not my Sally. Why, she hadn't even been sick. She'd got herself a job. A good one—paid good dough. And still she'd found time, once in a blue moon, to get up to see me.

Your wife is dead—

Funny thing about a word like that. It takes thorns to make it up, not letters. It gets inside of you, draws blood, makes you sick and bitter. Sure this was my fault. All I'd had was fingers. All I'd wanted was to grab a lot of life and squeeze it. Most people got another chance though, didn't they? Take anyone who was paying off a debt—they got a break, new credit, didn't they? Most people? All except Joe Lannagan. Yeah, work his fingers to the bone—for what? Words? For a letter like this. *Sally lives with us now, in the Orphanage.*

I got to talking one day with a guy named Six Congo. "There's a cushion waiting for you when we get out, Joe, if you want it," he said.

We were getting out that year, two years ago, for Christmas.

"I'll meet you the night of the twenty-fifth," I said.

He laughed. "You got to go to midnight mass first?"

"I'll meet you late," I said. And I went

around, the day I was sprung, the twenty-fourth, to see this place called *Twelvetrees*.

THERE were twelve trees, all right—silver birches on a winding drive and fine buildings made of sandstone, with lighted windows like jewels through the trees. I looked at it a long time, from the outside, before I went in.

There was thick red carpet in the hall. A small room off the hall for waiting. On the wall was a plaque that read: *Our benefactor*. Uh-huh, nice old gent, August P. Hines. Too much money, too much tax? Maybe he liked kids. But I should argue with his angle. I stood looking at him, and a chunky man came in, the Superintendent, Anderson.

He disapproved of me. Who wouldn't? "Legally the child can be removed, of course," he said. He cleared his throat. "Your wife was employed by Mr. Hines, you know." Uh-huh. *He'd felt sorry for her*. "I'm sure you must realize the opportunity for your child, and that she is better off here."

As though I didn't know that. Did he think I would want my Sally with what I had to offer?

I met the Matron, a Miss Canning. Understand, all I wanted was to see the kid. But Miss Canning hemmed and hawed. She dropped words around me like a disinfectant. "Please wait," she said coldly. So I looked at old man Hines' picture again.

Why the frown, Hines? It's all right. You don't need to worry. She won't get smallpox just looking at me, will she?

A voice said from the doorway, "Good evening, sir."

I turned around. Sir, she'd said. To me! I looked at her. She was six then—blonde like her mother. I was glad she didn't look like me.

I cleared my throat and said, "It took me a long time, hon—" *Colly, don't you know me? I'm your dad. You know, Sally—Joe. Not much to look at, maybe, but—*

Words jumped around in my head. They stuck in my throat.

"I'm very glad you've come," she said.

Where were all the bubbles? Were all girls of six like this—shy, embarrassed, frightened and so serious?

"You see, I got work that takes me far away," I said. I clenched both my hands. "Doing work for the war. You know, Sally, all over the world. But I didn't forget you. Not when it rolls around to this time of year, Christmas."

Sentiment, that's what, I thought. You're full of it. You've got to blow the whistle, let off steam like this—once a year.

"Yes, sir," I said, "this year I dropped everything for Christmas. And next year I'll be back too, hon—for Christmas. Now I—"

I waited, hoped she'd speak; she didn't. I wanted her to speak. "So now I brought you these two boxes—"

Yeah, and there were two dimes left in my pockets that year, two years ago. Two doughnuts and coffee for my Christmas dinner. Okay, Big Six Congo was waiting, the cushion was waiting; then there were jobs to do, dough to get—who the hell cared how I got it? Life wouldn't sock *me* in the chin! Once I'd stuck it out, but not again. Tough guy. Nuts to life. That was going to be my cue. Little Joe was going to stack the cards from here on in.

One day in each year for the past—just for luck. Like a headstone for Sally. One day for the kid and all that might have been. One day I'd pay interest, but the rest of the year, the world owed *me* a living!

I didn't count on murder. . . .

NOW, this year, the evening of the twenty-third, I jumped the car and got it on the street. I had nine bucks and a tankful of gas. I had two hundred miles to go—and twenty-four hours. But Six knew where I was going and might snag a car and try to stop me. Funny. I worried more about Six than I did about the cops.

The motor sounded sweet, the purr of it like music. You're on your way now, Joe, it seemed to sing. Happy Holidays! Holly in your hair! It got into me, the soothing, even whine, the whiteress all around, the steady glare ahead.

I'd drive it all tonight and hole up in the morning in a flop house. Two bits for breakfast. I'd clean up and get shaved, and then slip out to buy presents for the kid. Then I'd go out to *Twelvetrees*. In the car? Why not? It wasn't hot.

Hi, Mr. Anderson! Hi, Miss Canning! It's Little Joe—remember? The bad penny again.

People like that had no bones to pick with crime. They never read the wanted posters. So pull the whistle, Lannagan—it's the big day coming up! Christmas!

The first few miles went fine. Lots of snow. Piles of it like waves along the road, and more coming down in excited little flakes that chased each other on my windshield. Golly, I would think, she's eight now. Eight years since—but take it easy, brother, slippery! A nice mess it would be to pile up in the ditch.

Little towns flew past, lights in all the windows. Holly wreaths and stars. White candles and blue ones. People inside, trimming trees. I'd catch a stop-light and just sit there, miss the flash of green just looking. Hell, I'd had it once. The smiles, the laughter, the tinsel and a tree. The only difference was they still had it—every day, all year.

There was something ahead suddenly. A

car in the ditch. I saw a man scramble from it, waving frenziedly. He stumbled toward me as I stopped the car.

"My boy—" he sobbed. "My boy's pinned in the seat!"

Until that moment, I'd been holding aces. But you sip this heady stuff and it's like whiskey—sure to get you. I could hear the muffled cries the boy made, I could picture the blood and the pain. Sure I'd help him get the boy out, but come on, guy! Don't stand there looking at me!

"Let's have your coat," I yelled at him impatiently.

"My c-coat?" He grabbed his coat, reached in his inside pocket. Maybe he had money in that pocket. "W-why?"

Broken glass, you fool, that's why. I laced my own coat around the broken window. Nice kid, about seven or eight. He had a broken arm, blood on his head, but he was calmer now that I talked his fright away. We were fighting Japs, I told him. Smack, he'd banged right into a land mine. I told him he might get the purple heart. Sure we got him out. And then the man just sat beside me into town, saying yes and no and not much else, until we neared the hospital.

"What do I owe you?" he muttered as I pulled up in the drive.

"Me?" I helped him with the kid, I laughed at him. "Nothing but your good will, mister. Don't you know it's Christmas?"

"No, I owe you something," he insisted stiffly.

He gave it to me all right. He had the Christmas spirit. Just what a guy like that would give—the louse. A cordon of cops when I hit the other side of town! Now I knew why he'd looked at me so queerly. Posters. Joe Lannagan wanted—for murder.

The cops threw their spots. There were cruisers planted at a bridge, one on either side of the intersection. They tried to pinch me off. I swung the wheel, skidded in the snow and climbed the curb—behind them. The car slammed into a building, shivered, turned half around, and stopped sideways at the entrance to an alley.

They were blocked for a minute, at least. They couldn't get into the alley.

Never mind the twisting and the turns I made. Never mind the ups and downs that night, the run I made. It's important only that I got away. It was simple, once I got going. I saw a railroad track and hopped a train. Rolled into town in style, next day.

When we hit the yards I knew, at dawn, my clothes were like rags, dirty, wet and black with coal dust. My feet were half frozen. But the people who were up just plodded by, foggy still with gin or sleep. No one bothered to look twice at me.

CHAPTER THREE

On the Eve of Death

I BOUGHT a ring later in the day. The little storekeeper had glasses on his forehead. "Gold?" I said.

He said, "What you want for two bucks, diamonds?"

He had a dumpy drugstore, filled with knock-knacks. I looked around and found a mirror. Suppose I took the chance and went out there tonight and said, "Merry Christmas, Sally!" She might say I'm glad to see you and I'm very happy. But what would she *think* when she saw the wrinkled clothes, the coal dust?

"Is that all?" the little man said.

I pointed down the counter. "Some perfume."

Not much money left. Three eighty-five I'd spent now. "You got dolls?" I said.

"Four dollars."

Okay, I'd have a few cents left. For a movie, where it would be dark and warm, where I could doze out the day. For food, a shave—but what difference would a shave make? The louse who'd wised the cops had spoiled it. People in a place like *Twelvetrees* might not read the wanted posters, but they'd read the papers. LANNAGAN SIGHTED. That brush downstate last night would make big news.

I cut into *Twelvetrees* from the side—no up the drive, but through a little woods. I started off across the snow, head down in the wind, a new plan in my mind—

There was a man standing off to one side in the darkness. He yelled and ran for me. I beat it for the woods again. His flashlight, and then other lights, began to stab the night. So they'd been on the lookout for me. Someone in the place had figured I might try to see my kid. I ran down the line fence, just inside the woods. It took time, but I made it, and cut back in from the rear. The kids would have some sort of Christmas party. There would be a tree, songs, presents and some kind of doings. I could see Sally, at least, through a window maybe.

There were drawn blinds on all the windows on the lower floor. I crouched in the shadows. One day in each year, the one link I'd kept to the past—broken. Sure I knew *she* wouldn't care too much. What was I to her? The man who turned up with a "Hi," and a quick "Goodbye," who popped into her life and always out again—no child could thrill to that kind of affection. *She* wouldn't care, but. . .

I started cautiously on around to the front, intending to leave the package, the presents I'd brought. Then a car rolled up the drive and parked. A man and girl got out of it.

"Of course we had a date," this guy was saying. I could smell him for a copper a mile off. "But at least you'll get a story. Damn it, hon, I couldn't help it. The Skipper calls me in and says, 'Lew, I could send McGuire or McGinty, but they got kids, and it's Christmas Eve.' What was I to do? Say oh no, not tonight, kid. Tonight the Babe and I are going to hang from chandeliers. Can I help it, Georgia, if some sap picks Christmas Eve to prow around the orphanage?"

He slammed the car door, and she laughed. She wore fur. She was blonde and her heels were very high. She swayed against him as he said, "Don't worry, they'll go for a reporter—you're with me. But see you keep a straight face."

"Why, Moran," she said. "I'm sprouting wings! I'll even sing for them! You know what I'll sing, Moran?"

"Yeah," he growled, "I know the kind of carols *you'd* sing. Frankie and Johnny."

They laughed as they came across the drive and marched up to the door. "Look," the dick was saying at the door. "An hour, that's all. Over in an hour, they said. Then we'll beat it for Luke's and a few quick ones—"

The door opened on an old man in shirt-sleeves—Hines, whose picture I'd seen on the wall in the waiting room. The funny thing was, he had a false face hanging from his neck and a red coat on his arm; and in his hands he held a music box that tinkled brightly as he stood there.

"Welcome!" he said. "You're prompt, Officer. Welcome! Merry Christmas!"

Then the girl and the dick went in, and the door was closed again.

I listened to the wind, whispering and sighed. Faintly, the clear high voices of children came singing *Glory in the Highest, Glory, Glory*. . . . And then an obligato to this, a new tune from the bells of a carillon up above. They chimed eight o'clock.

A moment passed. The echo had not died away when the bells began to play *Silent Night*; and I shivered in the wind. I damned the blinds on all the windows. Come this far and then not even see her—not know if Sally was okay. Still I stuck around, another fifteen-twenty minutes.

There was an areaway, inky black, a basement window that I found unlocked—and quickly opened. Now the carols, though muted, sounded louder. I was halfway through the window when a light flashed and a voice said harshly, "Hold it."

I saw the black tip of a gun, and behind the gun the outline of a broad, big figure.

"Keep your hands in sight and get up."

The voice belonged to the dick, the guy who'd arrived with the girl. I said, "You win, Mister."

"Turn around. Keep your hands up."

Sure. Anything he wanted—right now. He frisked me, took the package that I had and said, "All right, sucker. Walk."

"No chance to talk?"

"I know the score," he answered grimly.

But he didn't say "Lannagan." "Orphanage, isn't it?" I said. "You think I'm nuts enough to try to crack a place like this for dough? Look, I'm just a guy. It's Christmas Eve, and I hear the kids in there, singing—"

"I said *walk*."

"Okay. But all I wanted was to—"

"Pally," he interrupted softly, "you can't talk your way out of murder!"

THE THING was, I never had got wise. Insulation, that's what I'd been after. Joe Lannagan wasn't going to get hurt, not ever again. Seal the heart, keep it cold and bitter. Well, Six was right, I guess. Moss inside my head instead of brains. I'd built my shell, shut out all but one day in each year—and left that one door open.

I walked before Moran, along the building. The next few steps, I thought. Then I'll make a try for it. When we turn the corner. He was a smart cop. He stayed ten feet behind me. Maybe that was what he wanted, to finish the pinch with a bullet? We went around the corner, and by that time I could see it was the payoff. What I couldn't figure out, though, was how he'd known me. I mean he'd only got a flash, and he hadn't called me Lannagan; and yet right away he'd popped off the charge, "murder."

We went inside. There were four tense people down the hall ways. I looked at them. There was Anderson, the Superintendent. Though he'd only met me once, his fatty lids widened with quick recognition. I looked aside, and the Matron, Miss Canning, said, "I know this man! It's Lannagan!" I looked at the dick's girl, this Georgia What's-her-name. Rouged lips, green lacquer on her nails, green and narrowed eyes. The fourth person was a gray man in a gray suit.

"I ran around the building," Moran said. "Hunch, but it played out. I heard a squeal from a window. I flashed a light and there he was, just coming from the basement."

Coming out? Hey, he had it wrong! It made small difference that I could see, but I was going in. There was a room off to the side, the door standing open. I looked in—and suddenly couldn't breathe, couldn't pull my gaze away from it. The carols sounded shrill and wailing.

A man's body lay on the floor of the room, before a window. One arm was outflung, the gold of the watch on his wrist glinting softly. The arm didn't move. The man was dead. There was a pillow tied crazily around his

middle, and a red coat that lay forlornly by his side, and a mask, half hiding his face—Santa's red cheeks and white whiskers.

Hey, but listen, Moran! The words remained locked in my throat. I knew who this was. It was Hines. His neck was bruised and twisted. A chatter of fear shot through me, and now my eyes began to move; no chance to make the door. Moran still had his gun on me. The window in the room? Closed. The catch was fastened. No one had come in that way, and I couldn't go out. I saw the music box that Hines had carried with him to the door tonight. It sat on the radiator. And just below it were two bags, jammed with parcels, presents wrapped with gay Christmas paper.

Do you get the picture? Hines, intending to play Santa?

"Copper, listen—!" I began abruptly, wildly.

Moran said to the gray man, "Close the door, Formot. Lock it, please, and give me the key."

Somehow I got it, who Formot was—secretary to Hines. All four people began talking. "I did this . . . I did that . . . I was this . . . I knew that. . ." They talked the way leaves rustle, their words came too fast, and were too many. I stood like a crow on a single bare limb, cawing my hoarse, "Copper listen—!"

Moran took the key from Formot. "The four of you wait here," he said. With his gun, he motioned me toward the front room, added, "Come along."

A YEAR ago I'd stood in this very room, with my child still saying "Sir" to me. With Hines, in the picture on the wall, watching me and frowning. With no belief in myself, in life—but with the hope to squeeze and get all I could from it. Now I knew that life had done the squeezing.

"Lannagan, eh?" Moran began. He was bleak, his blue eyes bright and hard. He was like the girl he'd brought along with him tonight. Like sound from muted trumpets. "Joe Lannagan?"

I shrugged. "You win, copper. That's it." He'd closed the waiting-room door and stood leaning against it. "Hot, aren't you?"

I tried to get hold of myself, get rid of the chatter. It was very still and tense in the room. "You're thinking about Six," I said.

"I'm thinking about murder."

"Sure," I said, and my voice cracked, "about Six. We've been together a couple of years now, Six and me. But one night a while back he was out alone. He came back with a car he'd snagged. All I know, he had this car and said I should take the wheel. So I got behind the wheel and five miles in the country Six said stop, he had a package to dump over. It was the guy who owned the car. Six had

him in the trunk. Six had slugged him hard, I guess, and killed him when he snagged the car."

"Oh," Moran sneered, "so that's the way you explain that murder."

"That's the way I explain it," I said. "I never knew until—until out there in the country that murder had been committed. I want nothing to do with murder."

"But you cut in on the take." No question, a flat statement.

"Me?" I laughed. I didn't feel like laughing and it jarred me. "You don't know Six Congo. I never saw a dime from that job. Anyway, I told you. I'm no plaster saint. I've been on the make, but I want nothing to do with murder."

"Yet here you're in it again."

"Yes," I said, and shivered. "It looks like I'm in it again."

He stood still a minute. Funny guy. Thirty-five, about. Black hair brushed straight back. I couldn't make him. His brows were like his hair, coal black, like clouds that almost hid the blue behind them. His eyes were way off, like blue sky, remote. They searched me, and then looked down at the package, the stuff I'd bought for Sally, in his hand. "Where did you get this?" he said.

"There's a little drugstore in town—"

"Oh no, Lannagan." He was shaking his head at me coolly. "This package came from one of those bags in the other room. It's one of the presents Hines intended distributing tonight."

"Nuts!" I tried to keep my breathing level. "Do you think I'm crazy? I would break into this joint and kill a guy for that stuff? Open it, copper. You'll see I know what I'm talking about. I bought the stuff. It's a doll, some perfume and a ring—"

"Why?"

I looked at him. Seconds ticked away. "Why?"

"That's what I said," he snapped.

"Why, damn it, it's Christmas! I—" The word caution shot across my mind. Sally was eight, old enough to understand and remember if she heard or saw any of this. I bit my lip. But it was too late. I couldn't keep her out of it. The Matron and Anderson had already identified me. I wet my lips. "I guess you win again, copper. I've got a kid, a little girl in here."

"An inmate?"

"That's it. That's why I'm here."

He shook his head a little. He opened the package. He blinked.

"Look here, Lannagan," he said suddenly. "This kid angle—maybe so. I'm inclined to believe it. I believe you *started* to bring your child some presents. But you read a newspaper on the way, and got ideas. Because you

didn't *leave* these presents. You had 'em with you when you *left* the building. Better give, Lannagan. I want that money."

"What money?" I said.

His lips curled, enough to show his teeth. "Oh, then you didn't read the papers?"

He was a funny one, all right. Deadpan and remote, the stuff that made him tick stuck way down somewhere, where you couldn't see it. He took a newspaper from his pocket, folded it carefully, then showed a piece of it to me. *Hines to play Santa Claus, I read. My eyes skipped to a figure. Twelve trees to get additional grant of \$100,000.*

I looked up, feeling like a fly on sticky paper. "Cash?"

"That's right, Lannagan. Hard-Cash Hines. He liked to do business that way. He was getting old. He was laying out a hundred grand in bills tonight. This joint was his pet, the apple of his eye. Well, someone saw a prowler around and phoned the cops. I came out to see it all came off okay. It didn't. Hines was killed. Then I found you. But we haven't found the money."

Six Congo knew where I had gone. He'd followed me. He'd read this piece in the paper and then made the play. I knew now it was Six. I knew Six, somehow, had got here first and had left the empty bag for me. I began to say, "Six pulled this job—"

Moran interrupted softly. "Oh, going to try to blame this one on Six Congo too, Lannagan?"

I stood there thinking how Six would laugh—shake all over, cough and wheeze.

Moran had opened the door. He called out to the others, over his shoulder, "Will the four of you step in here, please?"

CHAPTER FOUR

A Wise Man There Was

COPS always fall back on the phone. Routine. Like a doc looking at your tongue or feeling your pulse. They'd call in and then Homicide would roll, the big boys, the men who unfolded all the detail. This dick Moran was just fifty bucks a week, and I knew that. The others knew it, too.

He didn't use the phone. And the girl began yelping she was a reporter, she should call her paper. "Moran," she said, "you've pulled the pin on a grenade. You can't hang on to it like this. What's the big idea?"

Anderson, Canning, Formot—all of them were yelping, "What do you want with us? What are we to do with the children? This is Christmas Eve. Mr. Hines would not have wished the children to suffer. The children must be got off to bed, but first—first the presents should be given. We can't spoil their

Christmas. Mr. Hines would want it to go off as we'd planned."

"Sure we will," Moran said. "Sure, I wouldn't spoil their Christmas." He stood aside until they'd filed into the room. Then he said quietly, "Sorry. But first I've got some questions—"

"Questions!" Formot almost shouted. "Good heavens, man, what more do you want? You've got the killer. The case is over!"

Moran said, "No, the money is still missing, Mr. Formot. And I've got ideas about that money. We've got to find it, and I've got a plan. I want to know everything about that money. So let's start back when it was seen last."

"Mr. Hines had it." Formot clenched his fists to stem his annoyance. "Obviously. I'd wrapped it in Christmas paper and gave it to him just before you and Miss—Miss. . ." But no one volunteered the girl's last name, and Formot went on quickly, . . . "just before you folks arrived. The last I saw of it, he'd put it in his pocket."

"Pants pocket?"

"That's right. He had removed his coat."

"Okay," Moran rumbled. "Now I want to establish when the killing happened, and who was with him last."

"I was—at eight precisely," Formot said again, promptly. "I can be definite about the time, because the carillon had just begun chiming the hour. Then, too, time was always singularly important to Mr. Hines, and I, in my capacity as his personal secretary, have been trained to respect it."

He stopped, floundered a moment before he said, "Mr. Hines had asked us to proceed to the assembly hall and wait with the children. As the rest of you started down the hall I stepped inside Hines' door a moment to—"

"No," Miss Canning interrupted suddenly, frowning, "I distinctly remember that Mr. Anderson turned back also."

"Come to think of it," Anderson agreed, "I did. It was about the assembly-hall lights. Yes, when the carillon was playing, just as Mr. Formot left. I asked Mr. Hines if he wished all the lights turned out, except those on the tree. He did. So I thanked him and re-joined the rest of you just as—let's see, just as you reached the assembly-room doors, wasn't it? Didn't one of you remark that Mr. Hines would be pleased all was going so nicely, to the minute?"

"Okay," Moran said. "I remember that too. I remember everything, in fact, but I want to be *sure*. I remember you said Hines was a stickler for time. I remember something else—that while we waited, Miss Canning left the assembly."

She gasped. "Why, yes, I—I did! I looked up the hall for him."

Moran said queerly, "Looked? Oh no. You were gone longer than that."

She bit her lip before she said, "Well, actually, I went up the hall. About eight-fifteen that was. Mr. Anderson thought I should see what was keeping Mr. Hines. It wasn't like him to be late for anything, you know, and the Santa party was scheduled to take place at eight-fifteen, exactly."

"How far did you go? All the way to Hines's door?"

"Yes, I did." She drew herself up and added tartly, "Apparently you already knew that. Apparently you were watching."

Moran's eyes smiled a little grimly. "Then what?"

"The door was closed."

"So you rapped?"

"I did not."

"Why not?"

Her eyes flashed as she said, "Because I would not dream of annoying Mr. Hines, of reminding him he was off schedule. He's—he was so touchy about schedules. He would have been furious. I inferred he was about ready anyway. I mean—just as I reached the door the music box began playing."

"Oh?" Some of the tenseness seemed suddenly to go out of Moran's big figure. He looked around. "Maybe now we're getting somewhere. Wasn't it a bit strange for a man of Hines's position to be fooling around with a thing like that, a toy music box?"

"Oh, you didn't know him—" Formot began.

Anderson said, shaking his head, "He was sentimental about the Christmas music."

"Yes," Miss Canning broke in, "and he manufactured toys, you know. He was almost childishly delighted with mechanical novelties, anything that ran. Wasn't it last year, Mr. Anderson, that he gave each child a—"

"Never mind," said Moran. He nodded, rubbed his chin. "I get it. What I'd like to know now, who gave the box to him?"

"Gave?" Miss Canning repeated. "But these toys were his presents to the children! He sent them by truck. They arrived only this afternoon."

"Look," said Moran patiently. "Gave. How did he come to have that particular toy tonight? Who put it in his hand?"

"Why," Anderson said vaguely, "we can presume, I think, that he picked it up from the bag of presents."

Moran turned to Formot. "That your idea, too?"

Formot answered stiffly, "It seems like the only reasonable one, doesn't it? Anyway, I fail to see the importance you seem to attach to these questions."

"Never mind," Moran said again. He swung back to Miss Canning. "So the box

DETECTIVE TALES

started playing just at that moment, just as you reached the door?"

"Well—approximately. I might have stood there, undecided, a few seconds."

"But you're quite certain it wasn't playing before?"

"Good heavens, officer—!"

"To the best of your knowledge it wasn't playing before?"

"It was not!"

Moran became aware of his gun. He stared at it, but kept it in his hand. "So then you returned to assembly?"

"You know very well that I did! I spoke to you at the door. You said, 'Is he ready?' And I said, 'I think he's coming now,' and then we waited a few more minutes, and finally Mr. Formot—"

"Wait." Moran scowled. "All the time you people want to lug the ball. I got reasons for these questions. I want certain facts to be established. Was the music box playing when you reached the door, Mr. Formot?"

"No, I—I'm sure it was not," Formot answered slowly.

"So what did you do?"

"I called out to Mr. Hines. He didn't answer. I was puzzled. After a moment I opened the door."

"Did you go in?"

"Certainly not! You know I didn't. You can't say I conspired or touched anything in that room. You were watching from the assembly-room door all the time."

Formot paused, as though aware he'd jumped the track somewhere, looked around as though to find the words he'd meant to say first. "Hines was lying on the floor. I—I was shocked, stood stock-still a moment. By that time, barely seconds, I heard you coming up the hall. You called to me, 'What's the matter?' I thought he had fainted. We found he was dead. You ordered me to return to assembly for Anderson and Miss Canning, which I did. Then, while we waited in the hall, the three of us and your fiancée, you raced up the hall to the front door, unlocked it and ran outside."

Moran's eyes shimmered. "So Hines was alive when Miss Canning came up the hall, and dead three to five minutes later. That's what we make of it, don't we?"

Miss Canning sniffed. "It seems to be quite obvious."

"Okay." Moran seemed, at last, to remember me. He looked hard at me. Then he said, "We got the kids to remember. We got one more step, and it's important that we keep the kids in mind, so I want to go through with it. Okay, Lannagan, you're going to play Santa Claus for us tonight."

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DETECTIVE TALES

I BEGAN to get ideas. Nothing to it. Moran's eyes were blue and remote all right. You see nothing looking at the sky, except space. So his head was filled with it, with space. This dick was a sap. He had his blonde around and he was showing off what a cute guy he could be. He was ham, playing to the bleachers.

The rest of it, his so-called last step, was nothing but a trap. All he'd have to do, he thought, was give me enough rope. Moran wanted me to make a break for it. Moran figured I would lead him to the money.

Funny. Joe Lannagan in a red suit and white whiskers. I laughed inside. Live by the sword and you die by it? I could write a new one. Carry one soft spot in your heart and you were cooked.

"Ready?" Moran said. He had a new, tight note in his voice. It jarred on me. "Ready?" Moran said.

And all the while the others took their cracks at him. "Outrageous and fantastic!" Anderson exclaimed. "The children are my responsibility, and I warn you, Moran, you're courting a grave danger. Distribute the presents, yes, by all means. Miss Canning and I will do that. But this—this lunacy!"

"Ready?" Moran said. I swung the bag of presents to my shoulder. "Maybe Six will send you New Year greetings," I said. "I gave it to you. You had it in your hands, copper, and you muffed it."

He stuck out his chin. "Or maybe, way down in your heart," I said, "you're a killer-diller. Maybe you think this one's going in the books, something for the bulls to talk about, when they sit around the House and toast their brogans—"

Moran had put the gun in his pocket; he kept his hand on it. "Turn around, Lannagan."

"Sure! You're the cute one. Anything you say."

"Walk straight down the corridor, to the assembly-room doors."

"I get it. Moran's soft. Got kids on his mind, the orphans."

He was tough. I'll say this for him, he could take the jibes and still stick out his chin. He motioned to the others, and we started, and the chills began to run my spine. Why chills, when already I had lost the chips? When now nothing I could do could change things? It was like it used to be, that's why. Like nights when I'd come home from a truck run. It was like marching up the walk, across the porch, to the door, my door—to Sally.

I wet my lips, hung back at the double doors. Moran shoved me, and then I stumbled through and stood there as the sound went up,

A CORPSE FOR CHRISTMAS

the cheers. Oh no, not for me. For the red coat and white whiskers. I looked at all the bright eyes, the bright faces, and my legs began to shake; and now the lights were out—you know, all the big white ones. The room was almost dark, except for the red and green and soft blue bulbs on the tree. "Santa! Santa!" the kids screamed, and I thought, *Moran, you fool, now you've gone and done it. Just when I needed front and guts, you've cracked my shell and taken it away.* Because this was what I wanted. Not Christmas as a word. Not the tinsel. Not the blue lights on a tree. You know what I'd always wanted—kids and love and warmth and gladness.

"Merry Christmas!" I said. My voice cracked on it. "Merry Christmas!" I said. My eyes began to blur, and I kicked an extension cord to one side and set the bags down, near the tree. Questions to be answered? Sure it's cold up at the North Pole. Sure I came down chimneys. I was shaking from the ice, and sweating blood and sick with all of it as I began handing out the presents, reading names from each package. Johnny This and Mary That. Toy guns, ball bats, dolls.

Well, at least I could be near her. With my head up—yeah, because I wore a mask. I could look at her, look right into her eyes this one last time. Sure I knew her. My kid? She stood off a little to one side, and she smiled at Santa's face and whiskers; but her eyes were big, too big, so I began to worry. There was something in the blue of them, something she was holding back. She was tense. She was looking into space and listening.

She remembered what I'd said one, two years ago? That I'd come back at this time? She was waiting for me, and I meant something to her after all, a father.

"Sally," I read on a package. I shivered and pulled in a deep breath. "This box is for a little girl named Sally Lannagan!"

She started, almost as though she had recognized my voice—the tremble in it maybe. She took a doubtful, shy step toward me, and I put my hand out, on her blonde head, on her shoulder. What I wished that I could do was kneel down, sweep her in my arms. What I wished that I could do was say, "*It was a mistake, hon, all of it—the bitterness, the road I took.*"

I thought, Moran, you big ape, you louse, to show it to me like this when the verdict's in and the show's all over.

Sally took her present and murmured, "Thank you." She didn't step right back. Stars were in her eyes, a question—I turned away before she could ask it. I pulled another package from the bag.

The lights on the tree went out. . .

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DETECTIVE TALES

CHAPTER FIVE

Design for Dying

A SCREAM rose from the darkness, from the kids. At first I thought it was the darkness and the shock of sound alone that froze me. I tried to swing around. I tried to lunge for Sally, to push her off out of the way, for now the screams were far off, whirling and strange with strange danger. They were pounding at my temples, in my brain. I shook myself, tried to keep my feet, but the pounding kept right on, and suddenly I knew why this moment had become momentous.

It was a monumental effort, just to raise one arm. Now. Just to clutch the straining, twisting figure slashing at me. No matter what he did now—just to hang on, hold him. "Moran!" I tried to cry out. The call was but a squeak. I cursed my spinning senses and the strength already failing.

Then white lights blazed from the ceiling. I was lying flat on the floor, clinging to a chunky figure—Anderson. Moran was standing up there too, between me and the ceiling with his gun out. Moran's voice was harsh now as he said, "Get him in the hall. Get him out of here, quick!"

The thin package, the last present I'd dug from the bag, was still in my hand. It was torn at one corner, and inside were sheets of smooth, crisp green. "Moran!" I'd yelled in that first moment of darkness. Okay. Even saps can have hope, can try to have the last word. Who *would* find the missing money but the fall guy, the guy who'd never had a real break—Joe Lannagan.

Now Homicide would come, the big guys. Now Moran could loosen up, be happy. See the cute guy I am? he could say. Here, Skipper, he could tell the top man, is your tough guy. Lannagan, the killer. And here, Skipper, is the dough, all of it. Lannagan had it. I figured I would find it if I used my head.

He could say, too, to that girl of his, go on, call your paper. Now you got a story. And she, slick-chick Georgia What's-her-name, could be happy, too, with her cute guy and her story.

We stood in the front room once again, the six of us. And Miss Canning dripped new honeyed words. "Masterful!" she said, to Moran. Yeah, knife him when he's down and coo the minute everything looked rosy. They were all like that. I expected Lew Moran to beam.

He didn't. He was scowling.

"I saw Lannagan kick the extension cord to the tree," Anderson was saying, mused

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A CORPSE FOR CHRISTMAS

and still panting. "That was when we went in, and I thought then that he might try to jerk the plug out, plunge the room in darkness and try for a getaway in the confusion. Of course I didn't guess the place he had chosen to hide the money, but—"

"But why would Lannagan hide the money with the presents?" Formot interrupted, frowning. "Once he left the building he must have known he couldn't expect ever to get back in again."

"That's it. Lannagan didn't hide the money in the bag," Moran said.

I looked at him. My knees began to tremble a little, and I had to reach out and grab a chair.

"Lannagan didn't jerk the light plug. The killer did, in a last desperate try for the money. Lannagan never was the man I wanted."

They gasped, all of them. "What!" Anderson cried. His eyes bugged out. He took a step toward Moran, his chunky body shaking. "You—you fool! With the murder solved and the killer in your hands, you've got the nerve, the utter stupidity to insinuate—"

"Don't worry," said Moran. "I'll make it clear. The murder was complicated; therefore it was planned. And circumstance, not too unexpectedly, conspired to make the plan seem perfect. The police were to jump to a conclusion. Who turned up for a visit every year? A man the police wanted, Joe Lannagan. The killer got his green light when a prowler was actually reported on the grounds. Let's go back to the beginning. You, Anderson, turned to talk to Hines a few seconds while the rest of us were walking down the corridor, to the assembly hall."

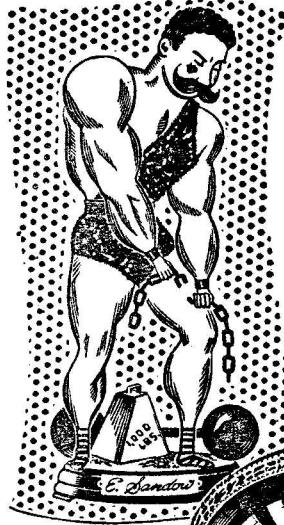
"That's right," Anderson nodded.

Moran smiled then, thinly. "You needed only those few seconds to attack and strangle him."

"What!" Anderson shouted.

Moran went right on, unperturbed. "And only seconds more, you thought, to grab the money before it could be presented to you publicly and thereby become your responsibility. But you didn't find the money in Hines's pocket. Hines had done the obvious thing. About to put on the red coat, he'd transferred the packet of bills to one of the bags, with the other presents. And while you could guess what he'd done with it, as I did, time was your great hazard. You had to rejoin us in the hall immediately. The risk was too great that one of us might turn back if you delayed so much as moments. You didn't have time to paw through the presents, to search—"

Anderson, purpling, cried, "This man is



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DETECTIVE TALES

mad!" He looked around him wildly. "Hines was alive long after I'd left him. I was in the assembly hall when he died, as Miss Canning has proved!"

"Oh no," Moran said. "Miss Canning only proved the toy music box was playing at approximately eight-fifteen. She *inferred* Hines was alive then, and had wound it. Actually, you wound the spring immediately after the murder. Then you wedged a small piece of candle wax in the spring, to prevent it from unwinding. Finally, you set the box on the hot radiator, knowing the wax would melt and within a certain time limit permit the box to play. Apparently you knew how long this would take, for it was you who urged Miss Canning to investigate. The discovery, later, of candle wax on the box would not have seemed particularly suspicious at a time like this, at Christmas."

"Mr. Hines was dead when I—when I paused at his door?" Miss Canning broke in, whispering. "But what if I had opened the door then?"

"That was a chance Anderson had to take, a relatively small one, however. Mr. Hines made a fetish of time. He was also held in awe, here at *Twelvetrees*. Miss Canning has already said she would not have dreamed of reminding him he was late. Moreover, Hines was in the act of dressing, as Miss Canning knew, and while she might have rapped, she would scarcely have opened the door."

"No!" Anderson yelled, flinging his arms.

"Anderson expected to give out the presents. When I shoved Lannagan into that role, he planned a new attack, a last desperate one using confusion and darkness to get at the money. Lannagan was to seem to have tried for escape—"

"You can't prove any of this!" Anderson shouted.

"Oh?" Moran said softly. "But Hines had not dressed."

"Time was Hines' God, and had he died at eight-fifteen he would surely have been dressed and ready for the party. But Hines had only *begun* dressing." Moran went on grimly. "And if that isn't enough to time the murder, remember the carillon? It began to play just as we had started down the hall. Eight that was, exactly, for Hines had planned it that way. What was Hines doing, Anderson, when you returned to the room and attacked him? His back was turned, obviously. He was preoccupied, obviously. Wasn't he looking at his wrist?"

"Anderson, his watch was either too fast or too slow. He was reacting as Hines naturally would—he was in the act of setting it. He'd

A CORPSE FOR CHRISTMAS

lled out the stem. It's still out, and the hands stand at eight—the very moment, by your own admission that you were with him."

The purple went out of Anderson's face. He was very white now. He just stood there; and then he wet his lips, but no words came. He swayed and seemed to sag, and at last he nodded dumbly.

FUNNY. Eyes like the thin blue sky, Moran's as he looked at me later in the hall. There he was—with me, a wanted hood he'd nabbed, Hines' killing all wrapped up, and a dame like this Georgia what's-her-name proud of him and phoning from the office, "Moran's the one! Play him up! Lew Moran broke the case!"—well, in his shoes anyone would have been elated. I'd figured he would strut, thumbs hooked in the arm holes of his vest, that he would chuckle, sneer at me.

He looked like Sally, like he couldn't quite let go. He looked serious, strained.

He gnawed his lip and then said gruffly, "You're a sucker for the low ones, Lannagan. But even a sucker wouldn't have tried to pin a killing on a man who was dead."

"Dead?" I said.

He said, "I knew you hadn't read the evening papers. I know you hadn't read about Hines' dough. Hell, you'd have seen the piece about your pal, Six Congo. Six and Frankie Pail were burned down this afternoon, Lannagan—killed. It was in the evening papers. It happened downstate, when they tried to rob a bank."

I just looked at him, and he seemed to read my thoughts.

Yeah, funny guy, this dick, Moran. No cheers for himself, no glow. Rough and tough, the way he went on. "I got presents, too, to give out tonight. One thing I've got to give is belief that a guy with shame and love in him, has some honor maybe left in him, too. Well, I'll swing a lot of weight tonight. Look here, Lannagan, you want to come back tomorrow and spend Christmas with your kid?"

I stared at him. Finally I said, "Copper, you're crazy."

"Maybe that's it," he admitted.

"Copper, you—" I couldn't help it. I had to wipe my eyes. I stood there for another moment, till I saw him holding out his hand. He had a five spct in his hand, for me.

"Till tomorrow night. I'm going to book you tomorrow night, Lannagan."

"Sure, I—I know."

"And you're going back to prison, Lannagan. From there on in, it's up to you—the future's up to you. It always has been."

It should end like that, I guess. With stars



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that filled the sky, and the cold clean night around me. I don't know though. I had hooks around my heart. *The red meek's just a front,* I thought. *Like mine. He's full of it—full of sentiment.* And I felt sorry for Moran, because this gal he had, this Georgia, was a smooth babe if there ever was one. It was just like me teaming up with Six. He was going to get hurt.

The cops were coming up the drive, so I dodged off in the darkness. And soon Moran came out with his Georgia, and I watched them as they walked down to their car. He stopped, to light a cigarette, and I heard him say to her, "It's got to be tonight. Maybe it was seeing just what kindness and warmth can do for people. Maybe it was seeing all those kids. . . . Well, what's for us? A life of bars and cocktails?"

She answered in a queer voice, "What are you saying, Moran?"

He looked down at his cigaret. "I've been someone else. Tough guy—that's what I've been, for you. But it's phoney, it won't jell, not for life, it won't. From here on in it's up to me. That's what I said tonight, to Lannagan, and it's good advice for anyone to take. So what am I saying?" He flipped the cigarette away. "A home, and kids growing in it, that's what I want. All that goes with it—not bars and glitter and sophistication."

She put her head back and laughed, but it sounded like a sob; and then she reached out for his coat and clung to him.

"Gun swinging from his hip," she said, "Swagger in his walk, and grim deeds. *You,* Moran. The tough guy—that's what I thought. Oh darling, it's so simple. I love you. I was the kind of girl I thought you wanted."

She clung to him, and then she said, "It's not how people look. It's not a hairdo, or lacquer on the nails. It's not always words that count, Moran."

Moran chuckled. It sounded good. It rumbled up from way down deep inside of him. It had been there, all the time.

"Fine," he said. "Let's go."

I heard the children, singing; and one voice seemed higher, sweeter than the rest to me. One voice seemed like—Sally's. But like way back, years back, when I'd tiptoed past Sally's house at night, just to hear her voice and look in through her window. . . .

THE END



QUEEN OF HELL

(Continued from page 8)

revenge was called for. He was a man of great honor and to him the mere death of Tacagni was not enough. He must also take for himself the red-haired girl whose charms had killed poor Fleurus.

Accordingly, a picked group of the Toulon bandits went to nearby Marseille, where Tacagni and Albertina had fled. They met their quarry on the quay of the Old Port. Five men leaped from ambush; guns roared, and Tacagni fell. Albertina, screaming, was thrust into a cab and hurried back to Toulon.

Safe in the gang's waterfront stronghold, Albertina was at first full of indignation. Before long, however, her normal good spirits returned, and the leader's arguments had their effect. It was a practical way he had of looking at things, and Albertina liked that. And, after all, Fleurus' successor was a very charming man.

She had scarcely had time to become fond of him, unfortunately, before she was kidnaped again—this time by the new overlord of the Marseille bandits, whose reasoning ran exactly parallel to the Toulon leader's. So Fleurus' successor died bloodily—the third to fall before the Irish girl's deadly charm. And Albertina changed masters again!

The result was inevitable. The Toulonaise again raided Marseille, killed the gang's leader and took Albertina back. Shortly afterward, the newly-chosen leader of the Marseille gang attacked his rival's stronghold, murdered the Toulon boss and recaptured Albertina.

As time went by, the process began to seem perfectly natural to Albertina; she accepted the idea that she belonged to any man strong enough to claim her.

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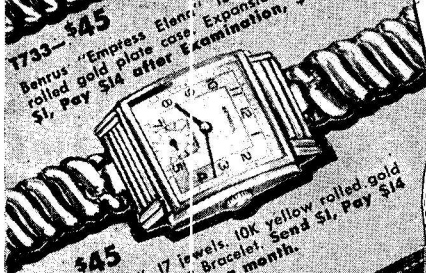
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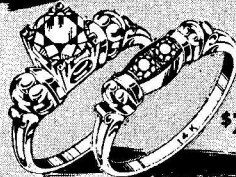
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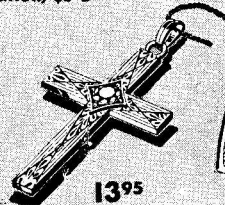
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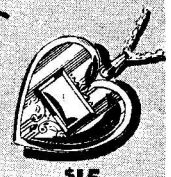
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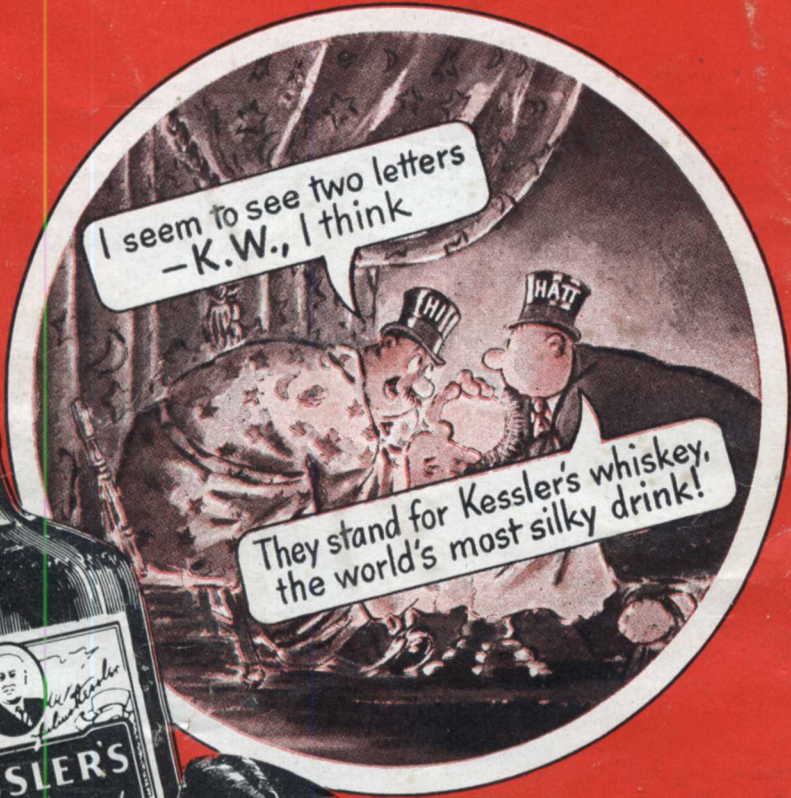
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