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TWELVE STORIES!



# DETECTIVE

12  
STORIES

# TALES

15  
CENTS



SHERIFF  
LOVATT'S  
DEATH-  
WATCH

AN EXCITING  
NOVELETTE  
by HENRY W.  
NORTON

THERE'S MURDER IN THE AIR!

A CRIME-MYSTERY NOVEL

by W. T. BALLARD

CHAMPION • COX • BONNER • AND OTHERS





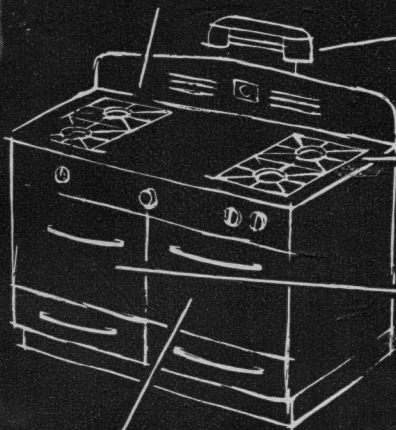
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LOTS OF ROOM  
FOR POTS AND PANS

LIGHT MUST  
COVER ENTIRE  
TOP

NO CRACKS  
OR  
CREVICES  
TO CATCH  
DIRT

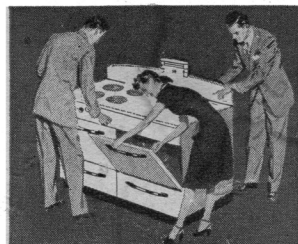
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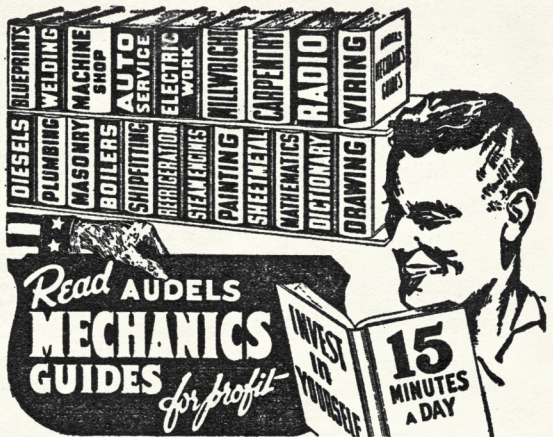
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# DETECTIVE

## TALES

**12** STORIES **15** CENTS

VOL. THIRTY-THREE

MAY, 1946

NUMBER TWO

### Fast-Paced Crime-Mystery Novel

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—Tony McHale found—when he got that hubba-hubba feeling for as slick a chick as ever baited a death trap!

### Two Unusual Detective Novelettes

2. **THE DARK ONE**.....*Ken Lewis* 8  
—is the clutch pitch, which sometimes gets a hurler out of a hole—or puts him in one . . . six feet deep!
3. **SHERIFF LOVATT'S DEATH-WATCH**.....*Henry Norton* 80  
—was an introduction to a killer who'd be shunned by any self-respecting murderer!

### Six Dramatic Short Stories

4. **CRUSH-OUT!**.....*D. L. Champion* 23  
—pal, and make your kill! Then see how *slowly* Justice works . . .
5. **ON THE ICE**.....*Stanley Vickers* 28  
—was definitely the wrong place to park the body!
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—to turn Doc's little carnival into a three-ring murder-go-round!
7. **THE WAITING TRAP**.....*Richard Brister* 64  
—beckoned to Willis, who believed crime waits for no one . . .
8. **THE CLOCK READS DEATH**.....*Parker Bonner* 67  
—for Hymie the hackie—unless he can bring his fare back from Hell!
9. **CASH ON THE COFFIN!**.....*John D. MacDonald* 74  
—Dugan figured, can't be spent in the grave!

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10. **THE CRIME CLINIC**.....*A Department* 6  
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—in the turbulent Twenties, liquor was often spiked—with lead!
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—reveal how one woman made a heaven out of hell . . .

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION

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# How to Fight the Menace of FIRE

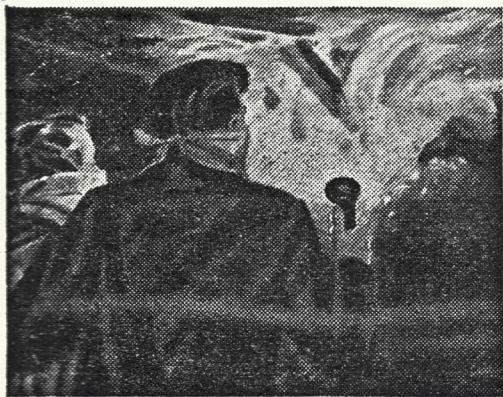
**...A Wet Towel and a Flashlight may save your life!  
—says the National Safety Council**



**1** Fire is always dangerous—especially dangerous at night, when you may be asleep. And most fires *do* occur at night! If you smell smoke, reach for your “Eveready” flashlight *first*. *Feel doors before opening them*, for a single breath of fiery air can kill you! If a door is *hot*, don’t open it!



**2** Wet a towel or cloth; cover your face and arms. Close doors to reduce drafts that may fan the flames. If heat is severe, remember that heat rises—*crawl*! If trapped on upper floor, make a rope of bedclothes. As a last resort only, throw out a mattress and jump down onto it.



**3** To avoid danger, you have to *see* it—so keep your flashlight with you until you’re safe! Watch for collapsing ceilings... But the best way to avoid fire is to *prevent* it! Your flashlight—with fresh “Eveready” Batteries—gives a much *better* light than matches or a candle, and it’s much *safer* too!



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**A**LMOST everyone who reads the type of fiction presented in these pages harbors a desire to play detective at one time or another. Which is only natural. But, we wonder, do most of us realize that however exciting the world of the detective may be, it is not one into which we can step by merely buying a dime-store badge and talking in clipped sentences. Just as there are necessary requisites and periods of long training to qualify a man as a pilot, or an architect or a lawyer, so too are there a multitude of requirements to be met before anyone can proclaim himself a detective.

The extent of these requirements are varied, of course, and go far beyond a general, or even specific, knowledge of the law. A man who investigates crimes of theft—of jewelry and precious metals—finds it very convenient indeed to be a better-than-average connoisseur in this field, or at least a person thoroughly familiar with all kinds of precious and semi-precious jewels. A man who wants to specialize as an insurance investigator, say, for agencies which feature fire-insurance, would necessarily have to know a great deal about fire, about combustible materials and their peculiar properties; he would have to be a chemist of sorts and something of a physicist, too.

It doesn't follow that a detective who works with murder need be a murderer! But as a profitable business-hobby, a good detective will include on his reading list case histories of bygone murders and murderers, and books on psychology and human behavior, to aid him in the job of determining one of the most important factors in any murder case—motivation. Not everyone will react in the same way to a given set of circumstances, and the wise

detective, knowing this, can thus select the most likely suspect on the basis of character analyses which he has made.

Quite a number of tomes on psychology have been turned out and are readily available to any determined reader. But quite a number of them are as dry and as uninteresting and as hard to follow as anything we've seen in print. Which is why we were so pleased the other day when we heard from Frank A. Taylor, a detective acquaintance of ours, who hails from Oregon way. And since all of us are interested in this detective business, we asked Frank a few questions on the subject.

Frank writes:

My work as a special agent was mostly concerned with railroads, but another phase of it was insurance investigations. I was employed through a Chicago agency that represented various firms, gathering data on suicides, murders and so-called accidents—such as drunks falling down-stairs and breaking their necks. I didn't figure much in trials, because of reasons that are obvious in this kind of work; the material I gathered, either by snooping around or by actually living under a murder roof, was usually enough for the attorneys to break the case.

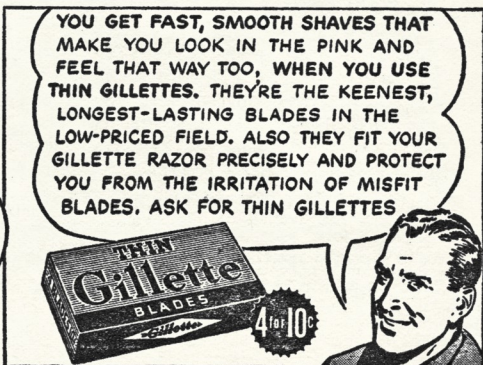
My jobs took me into all kinds of hovels, holes and swanky places. Sometimes all I'd have to do was sit in a hotel lobby and wait for someone to show up. Other times I was in spots where I couldn't go to sleep for fear of what might happen. . . .

I'm retired now and spend some of my time writing articles about detective work.

(Continued on page 92)



# ILL WIND FOR MATT, UNTIL...





# THE DARK ONE

*Startlingly Different Crime Novelette*

By **KEN LEWIS**

A great wave of sound shattered the darkness of the infield.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Highball Hurler

**T**HERE is a dream that I often have on these hot summer nights, after I've been out to some tank town ball park watching some kid who is all elbows and big grin make chumps out of the opposing batsmen.

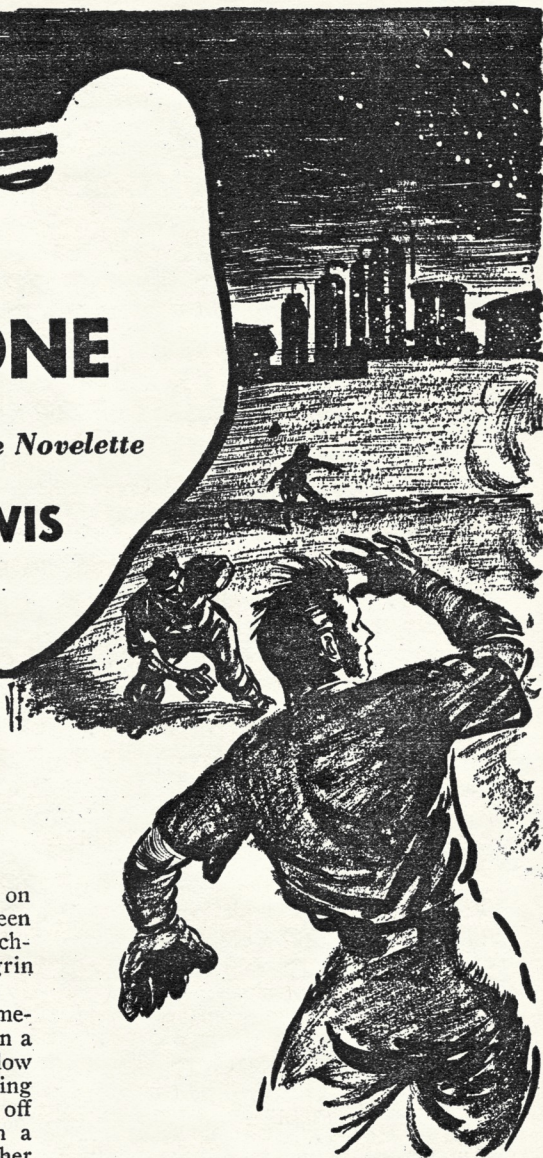
The dream has many beginnings. Sometimes I'm sitting under a handful of stars on a quiet hill, kissing a girl in a bright yellow dress. And sometimes it starts with me sitting on the same hill, alone, waiting to be paid off after a killing. Sometimes it begins with a little drowsy-eyed kid asking me to sing her doll to sleep; or it's the look of pain and defeat which crosses Lefty Maddox's face as he watches his fast ball sail over the left field fence.

But always, during this dream, there is a certain smell in the air—the rich, heavy odor of oil that hangs over a little refinery town when the moon is full and the air is hot and there is no breeze to make it move along. The dream always ends the same way, with the arc lights dark, the stands hushed, and a spot focused on the flagpole in right field while the band plays the "Star Spangled Banner."

Then there is the flash and roar of a great explosion in the darkness beyond home plate,

the lights go on again, and a shudder ripples through the crowd as they see the broken, bloody thing lying out there on the mound. Just before I wake, the brown flat face of Jesse Andres—this hick town chief of police—is bending over me again, saying, "All right, Patrick. All right, Mister Eddie Patrick! Suppose you tell us all about it!"

As you can see, it's quite a dream; and every time I have it I swear I'll give up hunting ivory for the Birds and get into some good solid money-making business, like running a soft drink concession, or selling programs. I should have picked out some nice







*First rung on the ladder of fame for the young . . . last stop on the road to obscurity for the old—that's a mine-run bushleague team. Except, with the Oilers, there was that blonde with both daisies and death in her eyes, and a guy strictly on the homicidal side, who was out to sign all contracts . . . in blood!*



safe girl, like a librarian or a school teacher to fall in love with, instead of the girl in the yellow dress.

But the next time you hear of some bright young chucker setting them down in order for a rinky-dink outfit in the bushes, you'll probably find me right there in the front row, a blank contract in one hand and an option check in the other. I guess that's because baseball is the kind of thing you never quite get over if you're exposed to it too young. And the same's true of a girl like Annette Jackson.

**T**HE first time I saw her she was standing at the edge of a rickety dugout, watching a lanky right-hander burn them into a warmup mitt in the bullpen. She had on a short, tight-waisted yellow dress with big red flowers in it, and a red ribbon binding her yellow hair. Her legs were bare to well above her knees, and the ballpark dust had sifted above her sandal-tops, making her ankles dirty.

But even in the yellow dress, which they tell me a blonde should never wear, she looked like something you dream about.

It was right after I got back from the Pacific. A fragmentation tear in my throwing arm ended my career as a backstop; and the Birds, partly because they're a good outfit to work for and partly because I'd been weaned on baseball, had given me this job as a scout.

I'd driven down to Arrowville—a refinery town of maybe 4,000 on the Kansas-Oklahoma border—to look over a short stop who'd piled up a flashy fielding record in the Arkansas loop before the war, and who now was playing with the local semi-pro team, the Oilers.

It didn't take me long to write him off—he couldn't have hit the barn floor with his hat against big-time pitching—and after that I settled down to watch the Oiler moundsman work.

He was a stocky, bald little comic with a tobacco cud big enough to choke a cow and a slightly muscle-bound throwing arm. Still, he was plainly an old campaigner, and before long I remembered him as Lefty Maddox, who had blanked the Birds in a Series game back when I was still a kid.

It didn't surprise me to find him here. You come across a lot of these old Batesies in the semi-pro circuits, still flinging for ten, fifteen bucks a game, or maybe a twenty-five dollar job with the sponsor's firm. He had a good head and lots of control, and with pretty fair country support from the kids and oldtimers patrolling the garden, he managed to get by okay till the seventh.

Then his fast ball began to lose its zip, and the visiting yokels jumped on it hard. With bases loaded and one away, the Oiler manager, a thick-set, rosy-cheeked character in a busi-

ness suit, called a halt and sent in the rangy, blue-eyed kid from the bullpen.

Maddox shuffled off the mound, not much like an ex-World Series great but just like any other tired, beaten old man; and the manager, a country doc named Nettleton with a baseball hobby, picked up a battered megaphone and announced: "Winnie Jackson now pitching."

The kid on the hill gave his belt a hitch, pulled his cap down over one eye, flashed the crowd a big cocky grin, and cut loose.

I stopped yawning.

The ball started out like any straight fast one, hot, shoulder-high and inside. But a foot or two in front of the plate it broke sharp and seemed to drop three feet in the few inches it took to cross the platter. The batter took a prodigious cut, missed it by at least two of those three feet, and stood there gaping.

Before this happened three times in a row, I was down behind home plate, where I could get a better view of the kid's slants. From there they looked even better. The pitch was an outcurve as well as a drop. With half as much speed it would have been a routine sandlot roundhouse. But that extra speed made all the difference in the world.

**I** HOT-FOOTED back to the dugout and began to throw questions at Doc Nettleton. I could feel him freezing up. "I thought you were interested in the short stop."

"Okay, so I'm fickle. Now I'm interested in the chucker."

He shook his head, his steely gray eyes boring into mine. "That's a mistake. He hasn't gone the route more than five times this year. When he's right, nothing can stop him. Sure! And today he's right. But yesterday—or tomorrow . . ." He held his nose.

I grinned. He wasn't fooling me any. With the state tournament coming up next week, and the National Semi-Pro Tourney after that, he wanted to keep this Jackson in the fold, and under wraps as much as possible.

"Just the same," I said, "I'm sticking around till the ball game's over."

It was then that the blonde, who had been lounging at the edge of the dugout, seemed to notice me for the first time. She ran her big hazel eyes over me, and seemed to like what she saw.

"I thought you were too nice and young-looking to be much of a big league scout." She had a soft clear voice which made you like what she said, even when you knew she was needling you. "Take a look at Winnie's record."

She reached behind her, without taking her eyes off my face, handed me the book from the scorer's table.

I leafed through the pages which carried the Oilers' previous games. Jackson had started



eight times and won four. Three of the wins were shutouts, and one was a no-hitter.

The losses were something else. Three times he'd walked in runs in the first inning, and the other time he'd been belted out of the box in the second. His good and bad days seemed to alternate.

I shrugged. "Jitters come natural to a green kid. A year or so in the minors will take that out of him."

Her lips quirked. Even when they were being bitter and disillusioned, they were still the loveliest lips I've ever seen.

"You don't seem to understand. Winnie never had buck fever in his life. But he still wouldn't last three weeks in the minors, or anywhere else—"

I guess I was still a little sore about that crack she'd made concerning my experience.

"You're right in there pulling for him, aren't you, sister? What'd he ever do to you?"

Her lips tightened, and tiny spots of red began to burn high on her cheeks. That should have warned me. But I was already getting a little blind, where she was concerned.

The game ended then. Jackson himself came over and hooked a thumb in Doc Nettleton's lapel. Up close, I could see he wasn't as much of a kid as he'd looked out there on the mound. There were little lines around his mouth, and crowsfeet at the corners of his eyes.

"Look, Doc," he said, making no effort to keep his voice down. "Don't you think it's about time to call in Grandpa Maddox' suit? I'm getting tired of pulling this club out of the holes he digs. Sacks full and one away—hell!"

The Doc's gray eyes didn't flicker. He just stood there, looking the big boy over.

"You know what that would do to Lefty's job," he said levelly. "The refinery wouldn't keep him on a minute, if they thought he wasn't needed on their team."

Jackson shrugged. "Can I help it if he's all washed up? I'm warning you, Doc. If you want me to keep on being a good boy, you gotta give me a chance to show something for it."

I turned to the girl. "I think I'm beginning to see what you meant a minute ago. What say we continue the conversation across a couple of steaks at the local hotel?"

She gave me a tired smile. "If you eat at the Arrow House, you'll probably see me there. Waiting tables. I don't get off till the dining room closes at ten."

She moved off toward the gate, and my heart began to thump. That was okay by me. I could kill time till ten o'clock.

Doc Nettleton had brushed off Jackson and was hurrying across the diamond. I caught up with him at the gate.

"How come a flinger with that much stuff on the ball loses half his games?" I demanded.

He eyed me wryly. "Out here they call it Kickapoo Joy Juice," he said. "He's just another bottle baby who never got over it."

"Is that what he meant by 'being good'?"

"Yeah. I've made him promise not to take a drink on the night before a game, till after the national tournament. He may keep the promise, for reasons of his own. But after that—poof! Forget him. He had a try with the Western Association a year or so back. He lasted a month before they kicked him out for a three-day bender."

I nodded. There's no place for that kind in the big-time. Still, I decided to hang around a few days and give this Jackson the benefit of the doubt.

Or maybe I was thinking of the blonde.

I WAS waiting at the hotel service entrance when she came out a few minutes past ten. She had a flower in her hair, a rose from one of the tables inside. It looked a lot better in her hair.

I expected her to act surprised or something at finding me there. But she didn't. She smiled and got into my coupe. I asked her if she was hungry, and she said no. Or thirsty, and she said no.

I drove around a little and pretty soon we were out of town, on a dirt road that led up to a little rise overlooking the refinery. There was the faintest hint of a breeze up there so the smell of oil wasn't quite so strong; and a lot of stars, so that the refinery lights below looked like the sky's reflection in a mirror.

We sat a few minutes, not saying anything, just breathing; and after a while I put my arm across her shoulders. That seemed to be okay, but she had a way of blocking any serious passes. Afterwards it didn't seem like anything had even happened. I got the funniest feeling that she wasn't really there with me at all—her mind, I mean—but somewhere a long ways off, wrestling with a lot bigger problem than just my passes.

At last I decided that somebody ought to say something. "It's funny, but I don't even know your name."

"I know yours. Doc Nettleton told me."

"Well, I still don't know yours."

She turned so that she could see my face. "Eddie—I—guess it's only fair to warn you. You won't have much of a reputation around town when this gets out."

"What kind of reputation am I supposed to have?"

"No—listen. Remember this afternoon when you asked me what Winnie Jackson had ever done to me?"

"Forget Winnie Jackson."

"He's terribly jealous."



"So what? I don't see any strings on you."

She looked away. "No, they aren't visible. Sometimes I can hardly believe in them myself. But just the same, I've got a piece of paper at home that says I'm his wife."

I was suddenly conscious of my arm around her shoulders. I started to pull it in, but she said, "It's all right. Leave it there. I guess you deserve that much. This is the first time in two years anyone's been nice enough to take me for a ride in the moonlight."

"I don't want to come between a man and his wife."

"You won't. We had it all out last month. That's why I took the job at the hotel—to get enough money for a divorce. He won't give me one, uncontested . . . Not that he loves me—or ever did, I guess. It's just that his ego can't stand the idea of any woman running out on him."

I had visions of being named corespondent in a counter-suit. Of being hung up in some hick court for God knows how long, as a witness or something. I couldn't afford that.

"Why did you come here with me in the first place?"

"I—I don't know. At first, when you showed up at the dugout and Doc Nettleton told me who you were, I was scared. I wanted to shoo you off right away. I didn't want you to start up that dream again—the dream of Winnie making good in the majors. I'd been all through that two years ago . . . Then, when I saw you were—interested—I thought if I went out with you, and let you get the wrong idea about me, maybe I could get you to give Winnie a contract, after all. And maybe he would make good this time, for his own reasons . . . But I can see now it wouldn't work out that way. You can drop me off, anywhere . . ."

Sure! my mind said. Drop her, right now! Take her back to town and let her off on some dark street, and forget all about her! A thing like this can only lead to bloodshed . . .

Instead, I grabbed her. "Okay," my voice said hoarsely. "So I got the wrong idea!" I shoved my mouth against hers, hard.

I wasn't expecting what happened. One minute her lips were cold and limp, the next they were alive and soft and clinging, as hot as mine. The lights went out in the sky and down in the valley, and my heart came up and tried to choke me and I didn't even care.

I don't know how long it was till she pushed me away. You don't time a thing like that. All I know is that presently she was way over in her corner of the seat, rubbing her mouth with the back of her hand. "I wish that hadn't happened! I didn't want it to happen!"

"Look," I said harshly. "Half of what happened was your own doing! You know that, don't you?"

"I know. That's what I mean. . . . I've got to get home now."

My hand found the ignition. "Okay, baby. That's okay by me!"

I wondered if it sounded convincing.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Kiss Me Once . . .

NEITHER of us said anything during the ride back to town. Since the blow-off with her husband, she'd been sharing a girl friend's apartment a block or so from the business district, and I drove her right to the door, figuring that was the best way to keep down suspicion if anyone had seen us together.

I didn't see Jackson till he stepped from a tree just as she got out the door. His eyes had a mean little glitter and his breath smelled like a brewery. He tried to grab her shoulder.

"Just couldn't wait, could you, Annette? Remember, you haven't got that divorce yet!"

I didn't like the tone of his voice. I didn't like the idea of his hanging around, spying on her, after she'd given him the brush-off. I didn't like the cold bitter smile she turned on us both before she slouched up the apartment house steps and slammed the door. But mostly, I didn't like the lie I was going to tell him:

"Wait a minute, buddy. Let's get this straight. My business with your wife was strictly that—business! I was trying to locate you. Doc Nettleton wouldn't give me your address, when he found out I was a scout for the Birds. Then I saw her coming out of the hotel where I'm staying—I'd met her at the dugout this afternoon—and I figured by giving her a lift she might lead me to you."

That made him feel better. He gave me the cocky grin. "Oh. So you liked my sinker, huh? Well listen, brother—if you got any business with me, transact it with me. You can make me an offer, and I'll keep it in mind. But I'm not signing anything till after the national tournament. And by then you can look for plenty of competition!"

That from a guy who had won only four games all year against sandlot competition!

"I haven't made up my mind yet." I stalled. "If you come through in the state meet, it might be worth a few fish to me to get you to listen to my offer first."

His grin widened. "Thanks, pal. I'll remember that—when I need the fish."

He was standing in the lighted apartment house foyer, pushing her bell, when I drove off. From where I sat, he didn't seem to be getting much action.

There was no reason why that should have made me so happy.



LEFTY MADDOX was waiting for me in the lobby, killing time over a collection of war souvenirs in the front window. He put down the grenade he'd been studying and hurried over.

"Mr. Patrick?" He had a wide, somehow painful grin which showed how long it had been since he'd been to a dentist. "I seen you in the dugout today, but I didn't know you was huntin' ivory for the Birds."

I took the paw he held out, wondering if he was going to ask me for a comeback chance. I hoped not. It's no fun, kicking these old has-beens in the face when they're down.

"I understand you got your eye on Winnie?" he said eagerly. "Winnie'll make the Birds a good man—you can take it from me."

"There seems to be a little difference of opinion around town on that."

"Aw, don't you listen to them gossips! He's just been havin' growin' pains, that's all. But he's over 'em now. You could see that today!"

I waited.

"Say, how about a drink? The state's bone-dry. But I know a place."

I decided I could use a drink.

He took me to a tier of two-story business buildings across the street, and ushered me through a narrow door between shop fronts. Faded gilt letters on the door said, "L.B.B. Clubrooms—Members Only." I knew that the L.B.B. stood for Loyal Brotherhood of Bears.

A few feet inside the street door was another door, locked, with a buzzer and speaking tube on the left wall. Lefty pressed the button and a voice rasped, "Who's there?" through the tube.

"Brother Maddox, with a guest."

The lock clicked in the door ahead. I produced a card which showed me to be a member of the city chapter, L.B.B., in good standing, and Lefty thumped me on the back and gave me the handclasp, tickled as a kid, before we pushed through the door and up the dark narrow stairs to the clubrooms.

A couple of brothers were playing snooker on a table at the front, and four or five more had a penny-ante game going in one corner. We ordered at the bar, then slid into a booth against the wall.

"Every right guy in town belongs to the club," Lefty said proudly. "It's the only place you can get a decent drink for a decent price, and not have to worry about bein' raided. 'Course we do a lot o' benevolence work, too, like sendin' out poor-baskets every Christmas and carryin' on projects for civic betterment. I'm president right now, and Doc Nettleton's secretary-treasurer."

I nodded and tried my drink. It wasn't bad, for bootleg.

"You owe Winnie Jackson something?"

He shook his head. "Naw. It ain't nothin' like that. It's just that I taught him a lot of what he knows, and if he goes on up now and makes good, it'll be kinda like a little part of me goin' up there again, too, see? Or maybe you can't understand that? I never had no kid of my own," he finished sadly.

I studied the bald spot on his crown, and thought of another reason why he might go to bat for Winnie. If Winnie went up to the majors, Lefty would be the mainstay of the Oilers' mound staff again; and I remembered what Doc Nettleton had said about Lefty's job at the refinery depending on his standing as a baseball player.

"My mind's still open," I said. "I'm willing to watch him work a few more times. But I'm making no promises."

BETWEEN thinking about the terrific potentialities of Winnie Jackson's drop, and the look of bleak uncertainty on Lefty's face when I left him at the club, and the way Annette Jackson had kissed me, I didn't get much sleep that night. I guess it was the kiss that bothered me most.

I was waiting at the service entrance when she got off work the next night. She tried to walk past me down the alley, but I fell into step beside her.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Look, lady—you really got me going. I want to talk over what happened last night."

"There's nothing to discuss. Go away. Somebody'll see us."

"So what? You're getting a divorce, aren't you?"

"There's another reason."

"Well, if you don't want me beside you when we step out into the street, you'll have to promise to be in the alley, behind your apartment when I drive down it in fifteen minutes."

"Please go away."

We were only a step or two from the alley's mouth now.

"Be there?"

She nodded. I dropped back and let her turn the lighted corner alone. I wondered how she was at keeping promises.

She kept this one okay. When I stopped the coupe behind the apartment house a few minutes later, she stepped from the shadows of the back fence. Her eyes were cold and blank, her face and voice expressionless.

"What do you want explained?"

I grinned. "The kiss. It just doesn't fit with anything else you said. I couldn't sleep last night, thinking about it."

"I told you the whole thing was a mistake. I'm sorry if I misled you, Mr. Patrick."

"You didn't. Not with the kiss. Be honest—you liked it too."



Her eyelids flickered. "Even if I had, it would be all the more reason for not seeing you again."

"Afraid of me—or yourself?"

She sighed. "Look, Mr. Patrick. I can't afford to get mixed up with any more baseball players. They make poor husbands. And a future husband is the only kind of man I can afford to get interested in now."

My grin widened. "I guess that's supposed to scare me off."

"That, and the fact I have a daughter."

I blinked.

"She's been staying with her grandmother since Winnie and I broke up. Kathy will be four in November."

This gets better and better! You just can't get enough of it, can you, pal—you love punishment!

I tried to figure out some way to convince her that baseball guys didn't always make such bad husbands.

"You see, Mr. Patrick?" she was saying, with that little touch of irony back in her eyes. "You don't think so much of that, do you? Good-by."

"Wait!" I blurted. "Okay! So we'll forget the kiss. You're lonesome, aren't you? We'll put it down to that."

Her eyes softened a little. "I've been lonesome, as you call it, for a long time. I'm used to it."

"But you don't find me too hard to take."

"You might be all right, for somebody else," she said.

"You don't trust yourself alone with me!"

The smile was gone now. Her eyes flashed. "Don't be silly!"

I grinned again. "Then what possible harm can there be," I said gently, "in letting me take you over to Madisonville for a late show?"

Her smile came back slowly, a little at a time. At last, she shrugged.

"All right. You win. But straight over to Madisonville, and straight back. No more parking on moonlit hilltops. People might get the wrong idea."

"People like me?" I grinned. "Okay, lady. You win."

**T**O REALLY understand the next three weeks, you should live in a sleepy little tank town that was a winning baseball team. The state tournament started the next day, and though it was held 75 miles away in Wichita, half the population of Arrowville drove up there every time their team played.

The Oilers were strictly a dark-horse aggregation, and there were plenty of wise-money boys in the city willing to give long odds against them. Well, there's always ample betting dough in an oil town, and it wasn't

long till a lot of the local sports were strutting around town in new suits and buying their girls diamond rings.

Doc Nettleton played his cards well, using Lefty for the pushovers and saving Winnie till the chips were down. And Winnie came through. The night he beat the Topeka fire laddies for the title, there was more than one big-time talent scout in the stands.

I kept busy in Wichita every day, signing young hopefuls for the Birds' farm chain. But somehow my business always seemed to wind up in time for me to reach Arrowville by ten p. m. And somehow Annette Jackson always seemed to be waiting, with a flower or a ribbon in her hair and that tired little smile in her eyes.

She still insisted on meeting me secretly, and driving to some nearby town where we wouldn't be so likely to be spotted. She still hadn't let me meet her kid yet. There hadn't been any more moonlight parking.

But things were coming along. She was meeting me, wasn't she? We always had a good time, just being together, didn't we? The night before the state tournament ended I broke down and asked her to marry me, kid and all.

She looked away. I reached over and kissed her. The reaction was just like that other time—only more so.

"You see, honey?" I said hoarsely, "we've got it, and there's nothing we can do about it!"

She eyed me almost bitterly. "You wouldn't be trying to rush things, Eddie, would you?"

"Winnie'll be coming back tomorrow—" He'd been staying in Wichita with the team during the tournament—"and I'm sick of sneaking around like we were doing something underhanded when we're not. You're divorcing him, and I want you to marry me. Is that anything to be ashamed of?"

"No, Eddie."

"Then why not come out in the open about it?"

She studied me a long moment. "He's been doing pretty well in the tournament, hasn't he?"

"Damn well!"

"Hasn't been drinking?"

I shook my head.

"I'd say he's earned some kind of a break, wouldn't you?"

"What kind of a break?"

She sighed. "You don't know him, Eddie. He's high-strung and temperamental—a supreme egotist. He can't help it, I guess; that's just how he is. I don't think he's really accepted the fact that I actually intend to divorce him. If he finds out about us now, it'll tear that ego of his to pieces. He'll start drinking again—with the national tournament only three days off."



"Putting it off won't make it any easier for him."

"No, but the news will come at a better time. I think we owe him that much, Eddie."

I didn't see it that way, and said so. But her eyes begged me, so finally I agreed.

I had to spend the next four nights in Wichita, interviewing prospects and arguing over options. The fourth night Winnie came in to see me.

"I'm ready to start remembering what you said about seeing you before I signed anything." He grinned. "If those fish you mentioned are still available."

I slipped him a C-note and wished him luck—and I meant it. The sooner he was on the high road to fame and fortune, the quicker my troubles with Annette would be over.

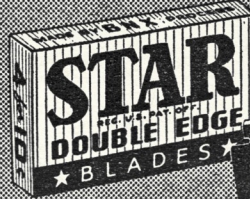
When I got back to Arrowville the next night, she wasn't on duty in the dining room. I decided to risk calling her apartment.

Her girl friend answered the phone: "Annette? Oh, she moved out this afternoon. Didn't she tell you? She's going back to Winnie. . . ."

Have you ever had an anti-tank shell explode in your face? That's exactly what it was like. As a guy named Dave Bennett said

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in a book I read once, if you want to find out how much you care for a woman, just get the idea she's been playing you for a sucker.

I went over to the little four-room house Winnie owned, but the place was dark and I couldn't raise anybody, even when I damn near broke down the door. I thought some of driving to her apartment and forcing her girl friend to talk, but even in the state I was in then, I could see how silly that would be.

Finally I went up to the Bears Club and got soused. It didn't help any. I woke up the next morning on a pool table, feeling stiff and sore and ugly inside and out.

I spent most of the day just walking around, with the crazy hope that I might run into her somewhere. Along about dusk it finally came to me where she'd be: At her mother's, with the kid!

I'd never been there, but I remembered the name—Thorne—and found the address in the city directory. It was a little white house at the edge of town, not more than three rooms at most; but the lot had a whitewashed picket fence and a lot of flowers, and it looked like home.

Annette answered my knock. Her yellow hair was drawn back from her ears, coiled on top of her head, and her face was the palest and thinnest I'd ever seen it. There were big blue shadows under her eyes, as though she'd been sick or something, and her eyelids were pink as if she'd been crying. But her eyes themselves were dry and tired, with no emotion left in them.

I expected her to be either mad or embarrassed, but she just looked at me with no color at all coming into her cheeks.

"Come in, Eddie. I'm glad you came. I tried to call you in Wichita, but I couldn't locate you.

At sight of her, all the blind fury and pain and hate of the past day came again, so that for a minute I just stood there, feeling my temples pound and my ears burn. Before I could say anything, she turned to a little old lady across the room.

"Mother, this is Mr. Patrick, a—friend of Winnie's."

The old lady put down her knitting and got up. There was something about the way she smiled and took my hand, though I could see she'd never heard of me before, that sort of knocked all the fight out of me for a minute.

"It's so nice to have you, Mr. Patrick. Won't you sit down? I'll go into the kitchen and start some tea."

"No," I said. "Never mind."

I saw the faint reproach in Annette's eyes and sat down stiffly.

"Annette—Mrs. Jackson—I've got to see you," I said.

"All right, Eddie. But first, I want you to meet Kathy. She's getting ready for bed now, but I expect she's almost finished . . . Ka-thy! Come here a minute."

A muffled sound came from behind the partition. A little thing that might have come almost to my belt buckle appeared in the bedroom doorway. She had a mop of yellow curls like her mother, so light they were almost like cotton in the lamplight, and big blue eyes that matched her sleepers.

"Kathy," Annette said, "this is Mr. Patrick."

She stood there studying me solemnly for a moment, then her face broke into a tiny little smile that showed her dimples. Something caught in me again as I realized how much she looked like Annette, and how proud any guy would be to be her old man.

She padded across the room, and looked up at my face. "You came just in time," she said seriously. "I want you to help me sing Raggedy to sleep."

Well, Raggedy was a big floppy doll almost her size; and Kathy climbed up in my lap, the doll in her arms, and began to croon in a tuneless treble, looking up at me as though she expected me to join in, too.

Annette laughed and said, "Not now, Kathy. Grannie will help you put Raggedy to bed. Mama and Mr. Patrick have things to talk over."

Kathy looked disappointed. Her lips began to pucker. But she got down obediently and toddled back toward the bedroom. At the door she turned and said, "Come see me again soon," partly like that was what she'd been taught to say, but partly like she might have meant it, too.

Annette pulled a jacket around her shoulders and said, "I'll only be gone a short while, mother," and the old lady said, "All right, dear. But you don't have to hurry on my account."

## CHAPTER THREE

### Bomb Ball

I DROVE up to that hill where we'd parked the first night. God knows why. It was the worst spot I could have chosen.

"Your room-mate said you were going back to Winnie."

Her eyes were tired and dead in the half light, her face drawn and haggard. "I'm glad you came out to Mother's tonight, Eddie. I'm glad you met her and Kathy. Maybe that will help you understand . . . I've been through hell the past three days. I've been sick—physically sick—trying to decide what was right. But now I know . . . We'll be hurt, Eddie; terribly hurt—at least I will. You



don't know what it meant to me, when you asked me to marry you, the dreams I had . . . But it goes beyond just us two."

I could feel her shoulders quiver as my fingers sank into them and turned her toward me. For a minute I thought she was going to faint. I didn't want that. I wanted her to stay conscious, to feel some of the hell she'd put me through during the past twenty-four hours.

"Are you going back to Winnie—or aren't you?"

She shook her head as though to clear it. "I never told you about my father, Eddie. He was a baseball player, too, an outfielder. He played two years with Kansas City, and half a season with St. Louis. He was just beginning to make a little money when he was hit in the head with a pitched ball. His eyes went bad. . . . He finally ended up here, managing the town team. He barely made enough to pay the rent, but baseball was in his blood, like malaria, and he just couldn't seem to do anything else. When he died he left Mother that lot and a few hundred dollars in insurance. The money ran out completely the year Winnie asked me to marry him, and I made him promise to take care of her before I consented—"

"Wait a minute!" I said harshly. "I told you we'd keep the child, when I asked you to marry me! I guess you can count your mother in, too, if that's what's bothering you!"

She shook her head. "That's how you feel about it now, Eddie. I know you'd do your best. We'd probably get along all right for a while. But I know what scouts make—they're at the bottom of every club's salary list. And if anything should happen to your job . . .

"Do you know what it's like, having to wear other girls' cast-off dresses to school? Never getting invited anywhere, because the parents of the other children know you'd never be able to pay them back with a return invitation? Not getting to graduate from high school, because the summer before your last semester you have to take a full-time job waiting tables, in order to have enough to eat? Do you know what it's like, having to marry the first man that asks you, and jumping at the chance, because you can't make enough on your own to support both yourself and your sick mother?"

"I don't want that for Kathy. I want her to have nice things, and parties, and friends, and not have to worry about a thing. I want her to be able to wait till a nice guy like you comes along, and she really falls in love, like I have. The kind of security I want for her and Mom is the kind that's guaranteed."

It was like groping in a fog. I couldn't believe what she was saying. "And you think that temperamental prima donna you're mar-

ried to can guarantee them that kind of security?"

She nodded. "I know he can, Eddie," she said softly. "With your help. He came to see me the day after the state tournament ended. He said he thought the Birds would go as high as \$25,000 for him, with the offers he'd received from other clubs to build them up. He promised to turn that money over to me, outright, as a trust fund for Mother and Kathy, if I'd come back to him. I made him take out a \$5,000 insurance policy when Kathy was born, and he promised to increase that to \$10,000 and pay for it out of his salary . . . I told him I'd have to think it over. This morning, just before the team left for Wichita again, I gave him his answer."

I laughed. The laugh had a nasty, tearing sound.

"Don't get me wrong, Eddie," she said. "I'm not asking for any favors. I don't expect the Birds to pay him a cent more than he'd be worth to them, even if you'd never met me."

"So this whole thing—the last two weeks—was just a buildup to hook a fat contract out of me for that lousy, no-good bum you're married to!"

"Eddie! You can't believe that—"

"Sorry, sister. It was a nice try. I'll give you credit for that. You took me for the longest ride I've ever had. But this is where I get off. I wouldn't recommend a penny for Winnie Jackson, if he could give the Birds the World's Series in a bag!"

She didn't try to plead or beg or bribe me by being nice. And she must have known that a kiss or two, even then, could probably get me to change my mind.

She just said quietly, "That's what I'd have expected from anyone else. But not you, Eddie."

"Sure!" I said raggedly. "For the first time, I'm not reacting just exactly the way you planned. The trouble with you is, you can't take it, baby!"

Her shoulders twitched and for a minute I thought she was going to cry. But her eyes and voice were firm again when she spoke.

"It doesn't matter. My mind's made up. He can probably sign for a little less with one of the others."

What made it even worse was, she was right!

**B**Y THE time I got back to the hotel, some of the hate and fury was already starting to drain out of me. I was beginning to feel just the least little bit like a heel. I told myself it was always a mistake to let personalities interfere with business judgment.

Then I'd think of the raw deal she'd handed me, and start to shake all over again. I'd remember how she'd met me every night, and



those damned kisses of hers, and I'd lay down on the bed and bury my face in the pillow so the people in the next room couldn't hear me cuss.

But after awhile I thought of the kid and the old lady, and how nobody but a stinker would give them a lousy shake, just to get back at *her*. I told myself that I was the one who had talked her into going out with me, and that the kisses had been my idea, not hers; and after all, she hadn't really let me make love to her.

And no matter how I tried to get around it, it always came back to the same thing. In spite of everything I was still crazy about her and wanted her to get the breaks.

Doc Nettleton came up to see me about noon the next day. His gray eyes looked bleak and beaten, and his cheeks seemed thinner and not so rosy.

"Well," he said, as though he didn't know just how to begin. "We got chiseled out of the National's last night."

"I read about it."

Chiseled was about right. Even the Wichita papers were griping about a ground-rules decision which had allowed a fly caught at the edge of some temporary seats in left field to be counted as a two-bagger, scoring the winning run.

"I guess Winnie's washed up as a big-league prospect, too," Doc said glumly.

I grinned. During the beef that followed the fly-ball decision, Winnie had lost his head and socked an ump. That had got him ruled out of semi-pro tournament play for good.

"Those other ivory-chasers didn't think so much of him, after he socked the blind man, huh?"

"No. They seemed to think he might do it again, after they'd laid out good money for him, and get himself kicked out of organized ball, too."

"I guess you dropped some dough on last night's game. Tough luck, Doc."

He grinned wryly. "Who in this town didn't? You got the Indian sign on Winnie, too, Ed?"

I shrugged. "On account of what happened last night? No, I just never have been able to make up my mind whether he was worth the gamble."

His eyes brightened. "A flip-a-coin decisions?"

"About that."

"Then listen, Ed, maybe I've got a way to help you decide! This hotel team we lost to got beat out of the tournament, too, this morning. I just came from there. I think I can arrange a return tilt on our diamond, night after tomorrow. It would be a natural! We can pack the stands at a buck a head! A swell chance to try out those arc lights we

had installed last week, and to pay off the balance we owe on 'em."

"Where do I come in?"

He grinned. "I wasn't very happy about it till I found out how you felt about Winnie. If he thinks he's lost his chance at the majors, well, you know what'll happen. But if I can promise him that the deal with you is still on—provided he wins—it'll be a cinch to keep him in line! And maybe some of the boys around town'll have a chance to win back part of the dough they dropped last night. Okay?"

I thought about it awhile. I'd about decided to call Annette and tell her the deal was still on, anyway. But this way I wouldn't seem so much like a chump. Let her sweat a few days! It was little enough compared to the trouble she'd given me.

I nodded. "You can tell him a win, night after tomorrow, will be worth twenty-five grand to him."

I hadn't meant to say that. The Birds could probably have got him for a fourth of that much now, but I guess being a sucker just came natural, after all the practice I'd had the past two weeks.

**D**OC lost no time getting out the good word, before he returned to Wichita to complete arrangements with the other team. Posters appeared in every store front, and a sound truck cruised the streets, announcing the game. Whatever it had done to his standing in semi-pro ball, Winnie's poke at the guesser had certainly made him the fair-haired lad of the local fans. His coming chance at the big-time was the topic on every tongue.

The whole thing made me sick. I had a hunk in my heart, and it was beginning to fester. I spent most of my time in my room, reading the Wichita papers and ignoring wires from the Bird's Old Man who wanted to know why I wasn't copping off more talent from the teams still left in the Nationals.

The night before the game, Lefty Maddox came up to see me. The worried lines had left his face and his big dull eyes actually glowed.

"I always knew you was a good guy, Pal," he said. "Come on—you gotta let me buy you a drink!"

I tried to shake him off but he hung on, so finally I shrugged and pulled on my coat.

The Bears Club was hot, airless and jammed. It smelled like an old sock with all the smoke, sweat and whisky breaths mingling. We hadn't been there five minutes till there was a commotion at the head of the stairs, and Winnie Jackson shoved up to the bar beside us. You could have distilled his breath and sold it across the bar.

"Surprised?" He grinned, rolling his eyes at me. "Surprised to find li'l Winnie here?"



You thought I'd be home in bed by nine o'clock, didn't you? You thought I'd jump through hoops for your lousy contract. You even thought it bought you the right to play around with my wife! Hell, I'm not so dumb. Other people got eyes, and I got ears. I owe you something for that, bud—and this is it!"

He uncorked a wild swinging haymaker, which caught somebody behind me on the ear. I stepped back, kept my fists down.

He blinked. "Yellow, too, huh?"

That should have made me mad enough to cut loose and really take him apart. But it didn't. I didn't feel a thing. I was all done emoting. I'd been emoting now for four straight days, and there was nothing left for me to get mad with.

I turned to Lefty. He was slumped dully against the bar, with all the tired, beaten creases back in his face. And something else. A kind of bleak, wondering, desperation.

"I'm getting out of here," I said.

He didn't seem to hear me at first. "Huh? Oh—you'll have to pardon me, pal. I think I need another drink."

I left him there, staring at his glass as though he'd just witnessed a preview of the end of the world.

There was really no point in going to the game. Yet everybody was there—even those who knew what the outcome would be before it started. The big new arc lights overhead worked swell, the sound truck had been brought into use as a public address system, and the town band showed up in full, bright-colored uniform.

I watched Winnie warm up in the bullpen. His eyes were jumpy, there was too much sweat on his face, and two or three times when he tried the sinker, the kid warming him up had to throw the mitt at it, to keep it from hurting somebody.

Annette stood just inside the fence near the dugout. She had a big leather handbag clutched in one hand, and a dark livid bruise on one cheek, which makeup couldn't hide.

She kept staring at Winnie with a heart-breaking intentness that did something to me.

Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. When he walked out to the mound to start the game, I crossed over and fumbled for her hand.

"Annette—I . . ."

"It's all right, Eddie. I know you tried to give him his chance, and he's thrown it away. I know he's facing his last batter tonight. Even Doc won't put up with him, after this. I—I don't want to talk about it any more."

She turned away. I moved off numbly. I was half way to the dugout when the overhead lights went off, plunging the field in darkness, and a spot began to play over the pole in right field, for the flag-raising ceremony. The crowd stood up, quiet, and a couple Boy Scouts began to raise the colors slowly while the band played The Star Spangled Banner.

They'd just reached the part about "bombs bursting in air" when a great wave of sound and impact shattered the darkness of the infield, and all hell broke loose. I was already crossing the baseline, jostling someone who later turned out to be Doc Nettleton, when the overhead lights came on again.

Someone screamed, and the scream gathered force and terror as other throats took it up. A great convulsive shudder seemed to spread through the crowd.

It was Winnie, all right, and he was dead—a small crater in the dirt near his body, and half his insides blown away.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Dark One

THE COPS came around to see me the next afternoon. Just checking the stories of those who reached the body first, they said. But I knew it went deeper than that. Jesse Andres, the chief, was a dark, dapper black-eyed guy who might have been Spanish or maybe French, but certainly wasn't

**TOPS  
FOR  
QUALITY!**





dumb. And neither was his assistant, a big, red-faced country-style lad who answered to the name of Luke.

They'd already borrowed a bomb expert from Wichita, who had decided from fragments found in the body that the murder instrument was an Army-type hand grenade; and they'd learned that the grenade from the souvenir collection in the hotel lobby was missing.

"Evans, the hotel manager, said he just supposed the thing was empty when he got it from a GI," Andres said. "But he wouldn't know about such things."

I nodded, thinking about the first time Lefty Maddox came to see me, when I found him studying that grenade in the lobby. And I was thinking, too, about the expression in Annette's eyes just before the lights went out, and the big handbag she'd been carrying that could easily have hidden a grenade, and the thing she'd said about Winnie facing his last batter that night. . . .

"You'd know about such things, being a vet," Luke put in, looking at me. "And living here would make it easy for you to smuggle that bomb out of the lobby when no one was looking."

I grinned. "Half the population of Arrowville could have lifted that pineapple," I told him. "It was in plain sight, in a public place. Why pick on me? What reason would I have for heaving the thing?"

"Maybe you found out about that other contract."

"What other contract? What are you talking about?"

"The one Winnie signed with the Browns, the morning before the day of the game. The one that called for him to get \$20,000 as soon as he reported at St. Louis. You might have figured he was double-crossing you or something."

So that was why Winnie could afford to get drunk the night before the big game! He didn't *have* to win it. He already had a contract. He'd been willing to sacrifice five grand of the money Annette would get anyway, just for the privilege of telling me off.

"Who else knew about this contract?" I asked.

"Nobody, the Brown scout says. Winnie made him promise to keep it quiet, because he didn't want his wife to know about it yet. But there might have been a leak. It's entirely possible."

I shrugged. The existence of the second contract didn't alter the suspects any, then. Both Lefty and Annette had thought Winnie was through as a major loop prospect, just before he died.

"Revenge is a pretty weak motive," I pointed out. "Even if Winnie had double-

crossed me, killing him wouldn't do me any good. Why don't you look around for somebody who had something more positive to gain?"

"Such as?"

"Well, such as Lefty Maddox, for instance. I'm not saying he did it, any more than I did. I'm just pointing out that any number of people might have had a better motive than I did. For instance, Lefty's job was at stake, if Winnie stayed on here to pitch for the Oilers."

Andres shook his head. "We already checked on Lefty. He was standing between two utility men outside the dugout, all the time the lights were out. He couldn't have tossed the grenade without one of them noticing."

Luke's big face was smug. "You mentioned something positive to gain," he said softly. "Would a woman count? Would a woman like Annette Jackson be worth killing for? We talked to that Gladys Parker, the dame she stayed with when she was thinking about getting a divorce. Gladys told us how you sounded over the phone, when you found out that Winnie's wife was going to go back to him."

I could feel myself freezing up inside. I tried to keep it out of my face. If they'd talked to Gladys Parker, then they'd been checking up on Annette, too. I made myself grin.

"You boys sure go in for gossip, don't you? Am I under arrest?"

Andres shook his head. "Sometimes Luke here talks too much. We're just trying out all the possible angles."

"If I think of any, I'll make sure I let you know," I said.

"Thanks. We hoped maybe you would, under the circumstances."

**A**FTER they left, I lay on the bed till dinner-time, twisting and turning. Of course, I could see the whole thing now. I knew that sooner or later they'd find out about the insurance Annette had mentioned. And the insurance company would be on their side, too—with five grand at stake. Me and my big tal about looking for someone with something to gain!

Because I knew that, basically, I was just as much to blame for Winnie's death as she was. If I'd called her up that morning after our row, when I first made up my mind, and told her I was giving Winnie the contract regardless, she wouldn't have gone half crazy when he got drunk the night before the game, and she thought everything was lost. She wouldn't have considered the insurance as her only possible hope for her mother and her kid.



But no—I had to listen to Doc Nettleton; let him talk me into allowing my decision to depend on the outcome of the game! I had to torture her a few days longer! And Winnie, probably figuring some way to chisel her out of the cash he'd promised her, hadn't told her about the Brown contract, either.

It was all over but the crying. Oh, they might not be able to make it stick, unless she broke down and confessed. There were a lot of things they'd have to prove in court, first. But no matter what happened at the trial, the thing would follow her and Kathy now the rest of their lives. She'd never come back to me now—not with a thing like that hanging over her.

And I had nothing but my own pig-headedness to blame.

I went down to the hotel dining room around dusk, not really hungry, just sick of being cooped up with my thoughts. Evans, the fat little manager, was babbling to a couple avid customers at the counter:

"Yeah, they picked her up half an hour ago. Of course I had to tell 'em, when they asked. She come in for her check yesterday morning—it hadn't been ready the night she quit. I saw her go out through the lobby, where that bomb was. But Lord, I never dreamed—"

"You should have made sure that thing was empty."

"Yeah, I sure should have, I guess."

After that, I even considered making a phony confession. That looks good in the movies, but of course it's pretty silly in actual life. Especially if the gal's really guilty, and if she's worth a damn, like Annette was. She'd

see too clearly what life would be like afterwards, with the death of an innocent man added to everything else on her conscience. Still, there was the kid and the old lady to keep her still. . . .

I went up to the Bears Club for a drink while I thought it over.

A couple of the brothers in the booth behind mine were discussing a mutual acquaintance. I didn't pay much attention at first; I was too busy with my own troubles. But finally a couple of their phrases stuck in my ear.

"Naw, he still had the other half on him when they braced him. He was just gonna use it to get the first half back, see? He was all broken up about the whole thing—swore he'd put it all back as soon as he could, if we'd only give him a break."

"Just the same, I don't think we oughtta re-elect him."

"Well, maybe not. A thing like that could look bad, if it got around."

I got up and headed for the police station, my mind spinning like a foul tip.

Andres wouldn't even listen to me, at first. He said it was too fantastic to consider; and besides I was probably so crazy about Annette that I'd dream up anything to spring her.

But I used his own weapons against him—motive, means and opportunity. I talked like I'd never talked before. In the end, he consented to at least let me make a call on his office phone, while his secretary took down my end of the conversation:

"Eddie Patrick speaking. Just called up to say goodbye. But before I left, I wanted you

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to know that I got no beef with the guy that finally threw Winnie Jackson the old dark one.

"Huh? Oh, sure—I saw the whole thing. He was between me and that spotlight in right field, and the angle just happened to be right for me to identify him. No, I couldn't be wrong. . . . I thought maybe he might want to give me a little going-away present, in appreciation for my keeping my mouth shut. . . .

"Oh, a couple grand, I guess. I hadn't thought much about it. . . . Okay, okay! I'm not greedy! Make it five-hundred, then. . . . No—that's the absolute bottom. He ought to be able to get his hands on that much right away. . . .

"No, I'm checking out of here right away. I want to get out of town before my conscience gets the best of me. You never can tell what an honest man's conscience might make him do. . . . Remember that clump of trees on that dirt road half way up that little hill south of town? I might drive up there for a last look at the refinery lights, on my way. . . . Oh, in about an hour, I guess. That's as soon as I can wind things up in town. . . . Yeah, sure.

"Be seeing you."

IT WAS dark on the little road beneath the trees, and hot and still. The breeze and the stars were gone, and the smell of oil lay like a pall across the hill. I stood by the coupe's running board, grinding my third cigarette into the dust and listening to the scuff of tires coming up the rise behind me; tires with no lighted headlamps above them.

The fender of the second car stopped beside me.

"Got that present?" I said.

"Yeah, it's all here. But first, how about a drink to bind the bargain?"

"Sure, after you."

I heard the other car door open, followed by a sound like a bag being unzipped. Against the faint glow of the refinery lights below, I made out the vague outline of a man tilting a bottle to his lips. I tried to see if the mouth of the bottle was between his lips or merely pressed against them. I couldn't tell, but I didn't hear any sound of swallowing, either.

"Okay, pal, the rest is all yours." He held it out.

I gripped the bottle by the neck, swung it behind me.

"Now," I called.

Footsteps pounded from the trees to the right.

A hoarse cry rang out at my elbow, and frantic fingers tore at my arm. I brought a knee up sharply, felt it thud against flesh.

There was a groan, and the fingers fell away from my arm.

Then Jesse Andres' flashlight was beaming into the frenzied gray eyes of the man on the ground.

"I figured you'd try something like this, Doc," I said. "You didn't have enough left to pay blackmail with. You wanted it to look like suicide, didn't you? Like I realized the net was closing in, and decided to take that way out rather than stand trial for Winnie's murder."

I turned to Luke, who had been hidden in the trees with Andres. "Okay?"

"Yeah. I checked your hunch that he'd been embezzling Bears Club funds, as secretary-treasurer, to bet on the Oilers. He dropped a big wad on that game that put them out of the Nationals—"

"—and figured to win it back on the return game here in town," I said. "Then, when he found out too late that Winnie was in no condition to pitch, he had to stop the game somehow, or be completely wiped out. And what better way than to have one of the players murdered on the field just as the tilt was about to begin? That would break up any man's ball game. He picked Winnie as his victim, because it was Winnie's getting drunk that had busted up all of his plans in the first place."

Andres nodded. "Well, the poison in that bottle, coupled with your end of the phone call we recorded, ought to clinch it."

After they turned Annette loose, I had a heck of a time trying to keep myself from going to see her. But I knew it wouldn't do any good. I knew that after those things I'd said to her, I wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance.

Just the same, I went.

I've been seeing quite a lot of her ever since. She still breaks all the rules by wearing that yellow dress now and then. But she's a swell cook; and if she still feels that baseball guys make lousy husbands, she manages to keep it to herself. I haven't heard a word of complaint out of her. . . .

Of course we haven't got any twenty-five grand in the bank. But so far I've managed to meet the payments on the house okay; and Kathy had three new dresses to start kindergarten in this spring.

Last week Annette got out all of Kathy's old diapers and started washing them up and ironing them, even though they already looked clean to me. She said maybe it was a month or so early, but there's always so many other things that have to be done at the last minute.

I can see right now that Eddie Junior's going to be a plenty lucky kid!

THE END



# CRUSH-OUT!

*Kirally decided to oil the wheels of Justice. He found that Destiny—however slow—can be just as deadly as a barking .38!*



●  
**By**

**D. L. CHAMPION**

●

*He used the gun as a club.*

SOMEWHERE in his distant youth, Kirally had read that freedom was a hard-bought thing, a precious commodity of tremendous price. Since these were abstractions, Kirally had paid them no attention. He was a practical, material man.

On this particular day, however, Kirally realized what an expensive item freedom was. He had just made a down payment, in cash, of twenty-five thousand dollars for what might prove to be a mere ten minutes of it. At best, he didn't expect that he had bought very much time.

He paced his cell impatiently, two bitter emotions striving within him for dominance. First, he was terribly aware—and had been

aware for six weeks—of a murderous desire for revenge. That, however, was no new sensation for Kirally. Second, he felt a tremendous and burning sense of injustice for the only time in all his life. He was serving a life term for a murder which Ficco had committed.

It is true that Kirally in his career had been the instrument which had caused the deaths of a score of men, had been the means of ruining others and engendering great misery to a hundred more. But he had never committed what he considered the only crime in the book. *He had never been caught.* He had never been indicted. He had never even paid a traffic fine.

Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this



fact, Kirally felt now a distinct sense of outrage. He had played the game according to the only rule he recognized: Don't get caught. Then he had taken a rap for something he had never done.

No innocent man wrongly convicted ever felt as strongly as Kirally. It was as if Hitler had been accused of bombing Pearl Harbor and had become incensed at the inaccuracy of this charge, completely overlooking the even more awful chaos he had wrought.

But, at the moment, this theorizing was not important to Kirally. He had laid the cash, smuggled into him, on the line. And in return he would get enough freedom, at least, to settle his debt with Ficco.

A bell clanged throughout the prison. A moment later the cell doors opened and a host of gray, shuffling figures moved toward the mess hall. As Kirally entered the vast room, he caught the eye of a guard. Kirally lifted his eyebrows inquiringly. The guard nodded almost imperceptibly.

Kirally did not eat. In two hours he would bite into the best steak in the city; it was useless to waste his appetite on this prison slum. He sat stiffly on the wooden bench, staring straight ahead. His hard black eyes showed no expression. His thin, high cheek-boned face was impassive.

The clatter of dishes suddenly ceased. Again a bell clanged. The gray sea surged upward and moved forward, like a weary tide. Outside it was winter, and dusk. The light changed swiftly from crepuscular to darkness.

As he marched across the prison yard, a trusty moved near him. He spoke in Kirally's ear without moving his lips. "The truck's around the corner of the laundry."

Kirally's faint nod acknowledged the information. As he reached the corner of the laundry building, he slid like a wraith out of the dejected line. For a moment, he flattened himself against the wall and drew a deep breath.

Peering through the darkness, he saw the ugly outline of the garbage truck. He ran toward it on silent feet, threw himself over the tailboard. He squatted in the stinking interior and waited.

Now, he timed himself carefully. He waited until the shuffling line had moved out of the prison yard, yet not until each segment of it had reached its own cell. He sprang from the truck. He raced to the far end of the laundry.

A figure emerged from the darkness and thrust something cold and metallic and familiar into Kirally's hand. A tense whisper reached his ear. "Hurry. The warden's at the gate now."

Kirally held the gun close to his chest. He raced over the concrete yard toward the impregnable main gate. There were actually

two of them, one an impressive portal of iron which opened on its hinges, the other a porticulis never lifted until the outer gate was closed.

As Kirally gained the inner gate, he saw the warden's car half-way through the opened, outer one. He was at the side of the porticulis keeper before the latter was aware of it. Kirally raised his gun and used it as a club. He intended to fire no shot unless absolutely necessary.

The guard dropped soundlessly. Kirally tugged at the lever which forced the grilled gates upward. Then he sprang forward into the steel foyer ahead.

The warden's coupe braked quickly. The warden sprang from the car. "Kirally!" he yelled. "Kirally—"

Kirally's gun butt took him behind the ear. Kirally raced to the outer gate and through it. At that instant, a smaller coupe drove up the gravelled driveway. Kirally tensed his muscles. This car was unexpected, not in the program.

He turned and levelled his gun. The coupe stopped. A little man stuck his head out the window and stared at Kirally.

"Say," he began. Kirally wrenched the door open, dragged the little man to the road by the scruff of his neck. In one hand the little man held a heavy white envelope.

"Say," he said again, "you're Kirally, aren't you?"

Kirally's reply was a pile-driving fist to the point of the little man's jaw. The little man fell, his hand outstretched, and his envelope fluttered to the gravel. As Kirally sped forward into the night, the heavy sole of his prison boot stepped on its whiteness, leaving a smudged and dusty print.

Kirally ran off the road into the underbrush. He fought his way through the scrub until he reached the dirt road, some three hundred yards away. There he found the sedan. As he climbed into it he heard the banshee wail of the prison siren sobbing through the night.

He sprang into the car and his foot found the starter. In two hours he was in the city.

**B**URNHAM was a lawyer. Once he had been infinitely more than that. He had been an idealist and a philosopher. He had believed back in those brave days as an undergraduate that justice and law were synonymous. He believed that virtue had never lost a battle, and the forces of evil had never won. He did not believe it now.

On the evening of Kirally's escape, Burnham sat in his richly furnished apartment, before an open fire, staring into the flames. He sat with a glass in his hand, a detail which was becoming increasingly characteristic of him.

His long, prematurely aged face was grave.



There was a strange expression in his gray eyes. His wife came out of the bedroom—a tall, imperious woman, dark and supremely graceful.

She crossed the room and ran her slim fingers through his hair.

"What's the matter, darling? That old melancholia got you again?"

Burnham looked up. He smiled very faintly.

"Maybe," he said. "I guess I'm just in the wrong profession."

"The wrong profession? I doubt it. Our bank balance doubts it, too. You're doing all right, darling."

"Financially," said Burnham, "I'm doing wonderfully."

She regarded him oddly. These moods were coming upon him more frequently of late. She said challengingly, "What's wrong with being a lawyer?"

"Principally," said Burnham, "the clients I get."

She shrugged a pair of shapely shoulders. "They pay, don't they?"

"They pay cash," said Burnham, "to me. They seldom pay a greater debt—one which they owe to society."

Ruth Burnham sighed. "Darling, you're getting too profound for me."

Burnham refilled his glass. He swung around in his chair. "Look," he said, "I'll try to tell you what I mean. Take this Kirally. I'm his lawyer. He's a killer. He's killed a dozen men. I know it, the coppers know it, the police reporters know it. I've been his lawyer for six years. I've made one hell of a lot of money out of it."

"So what? Have you done anything illegal to keep him out of jail?"

"No."

"Or anything unethical? Anything you could be disbarred for?"

"Well—no."

"Then in heaven's name, what's bothering you?"

"The fact that I've helped him. I've aided a guy who should be put away forever. A guy who's a menace to society."

"But if you quit Kirally, wouldn't some other lawyer take his fees?"

"Naturally."

"Then what on earth are you worrying about?"

Burnham sighed. He turned from his wife and gave his full attention to the glass in his hand.

Of course, in a sense, she was right. What was he worrying about? What was it to him what Kirally did, provided he paid his fees and didn't ask his lawyer to break the law or the rusty tenets laid down by the Bar Associations?

But as he drained his glass, Burnham knew it wasn't as easy as that. Kirally should be punished. So, for that matter, should his principal rival in crime, Ficco. As long as the majesty of the law quailed before these two, how could an intellectually honest man ever respect his own profession?

For a time, when Kirally had been convicted, he had thought that justice, delayed, had at last been done. But tonight he doubted it all over again.

Long after his wife had said good-night, Burnham remained in his chair, drinking steadily, staring into the fire.

AT THREE o'clock in the morning, the doorbell rang. Burnham started out of his reverie, wondering who would call on him at this hour. He put down his glass, stood up and made his way down the thickly-carpeted corridor.

Kirally pushed past him into the hall. He was wrapped up in a cheap overcoat with a high collar in which he hid most of his face. Kirally asked hoarsely, "Are you all alone, Burnham?"

"Sure. Come in."

Burnham led the way back to the living room. He poured two drinks, handed one to

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Kirally and sat down. Kirally emptied the glass before taking off his coat.

"Well," he said, "I guess you're surprised to see me, eh?"

Burnham shook his head slowly. "Not very much."

Mild astonishment flickered in Kirally's eyes. It vanished as he said boastfully, "I get it. You knew no clink could hold Kirally, eh? Well, it cost me a hell of a lot of dough, but here I am."

Burnham looked at him curiously. "You mean to say that you crushed your way out of jail?"

"How the hell do you think I got out? With a pass from the warden? I got out with a gun and the help of four screws I managed to babe."

"A gun?" said Burnham. "Did you shoot anyone?"

Kirally shook his head. "I slugged three guys. A guard, the warden, himself, and a little guy in a blue sedan right at the prison gate."

Burnham furrowed his brow in thought. "A little guy," he repeated. "A little guy with a toothbrush moustache and a little red face like an apple?"

"I guess so. I didn't notice. Why? Know him?"

"I think so. It sounds like Hammond. He works for the State Department of Correction."

"Well, never mind that," said Kirally. "I've got to work fast. Before they pick me up. Where is he?"

"Where's who?"

"Ficco. You don't think I'm going to let him get away with this? He framed me on that rap, framed me so he could take over every racket in three states. Well, they may let me rot in jail but Ficco won't be alive to enjoy it. Maybe Ficco don't know it yet, but he's gonna get what's coming to him."

A peculiar expression had come over the lawyer's face. He said in a whisper—an almost incredulous whisper, "Kirally, are you telling me that you slugged three guys and crushed out of jail in order that you can kill Ficco?"

"That's what I'm telling you. I don't care if they burn me, I'm going to get that rat. I spent the past five hours looking for him. He's not in any of the joints where he usually hangs out. Do you know where I can find him?"

Burnham nodded. "Yes," he said, "I know where you can find him."

Hate and hope blazed in Kirally's eyes. "Where?"

Burnham did not answer. Instead he filled his glass and took a deep breath. What had just been vouchsafed to him had been given

to few other men. For a single instant he felt almost God-like.

It was, at the moment, in his hands to dispense justice, arbitrary, abstract justice, beyond all possibility of interference of man-made law.

"Well," said Kirally impatiently, "where is he?"

"In Mercy Hospital," said Burnham. "And you're going to have trouble. There's a copper on his door."

"How come the john parked on his doorstep?" Kirally asked.

"He got in a jam. There was a warrant out for him. He slugged the cop who went to get him and the cop shot him. He was taken to the hospital. But he's under arrest and there's a cop posted on the door of his room."

Kirally looked thoughtful. He stood up and poured himself a stiff drink, downed it with a quick motion.

"That shouldn't be too hard. I'll call one of my boys. I'll tell him to phone the hospital at exactly the time I arrive. He can say he's headquarters and he's got to talk to the copper on the door. That'll give me chance to get in the room. I only need thirty seconds to take care of Ficco. Thirty seconds will be plenty of time!"

"The room's on the top floor," said Burnham. "You'll never get out of that hospital, Kirally."

"I don't expect to get out of the hospital. Am I dumb? I can't keep out forever. There'll be coppers in forty-eight states looking for me. I didn't come out to stay out. I came out to kill Ficco. After I've done that I'll wait for the copper to come back and he can take me in."

"They'll burn you this time, Kirally," Burnham said.

"So what? Is that worse than rotting in concrete and steel until I die? What room is he in?"

"418."

Kirally took his .38 from his coat pocket and examined it. He put it back again with grim satisfaction.

Burnham shook his head slightly. There was the flicker of a smile on his lips. He said, "Kirally, I don't suppose you have a sense of irony?"

Kirally regarded him suspiciously. "What the hell is that?"

"Nothing. Except it's something you're going to need."

"All I'm going to need," said Kirally, "is something a little less than an even break, and I can watch Ficco die."

He picked up his coat, struggled into it and strode from the apartment. Burnham took one more drink.



He went to bed, still with that ghostly smile on his lips. He was asleep in twenty minutes and even then the smile had not disappeared.

**K**IRALLY peered down the long, white hospital corridor. He noted with satisfaction that there was no copper before the door of 418.

He moved swiftly down the hall, put a cold hand on the door knob, then he was inside the room.

Ficco lay on his back and the whiteness of his face was greater than the whiteness of the pillow.

Kirally inhaled slowly. He took the gun from his pocket. He levelled the barrel at Ficco's temple.

Ficco moved his head slightly. He blinked. He said in a strained faraway voice, "Kirally, my God, already. I'm glad you came Kirally, I—"

"Glad?" said Kirally. He laughed without mirth.

"Sure," said Ficco, "I been wanting to talk to you—"

"You can finish talking in hell," said Kirally and his fingers tightened convulsively on the trigger.

The pillow was suddenly crimson. Ficco's body moved for a single reflexive moment, then was still.

Kirally, tight-lipped, stood over him and uttered a requiem in curses.

Behind him the door was flung open. A gun muzzle pressed into his back. A voice said, "Drop that gun and put up your hands, Kirally."

Kirally did both.

The voice said, "Turn around slowly—and do't try anything foolish."

Kirally turned to meet the astonished eyes of the policeman. They started at each other

for a full ten seconds before the policeman said, "My God, Kirally!"

Kirally said savagely, "Yes, Kirally. And I've killed Ficco!"

The policeman blinked. He said again, "My God!" Then he added, "You shouldn't have—"

"Can that stuff! He framed me and I killed him."

"Good Lord," said the policeman. "Didn't you know, Kirally? Didn't you know what's happened?"

"Know what?"

"Ficco was dying. He wouldn't have lasted the night. He made a death-bed confession, which completely cleared you. He took his own rap for that murder when he knew he couldn't live. That's the reason you were pardoned."

"Pardoned?" said Kirally. "Me—pardoned!"

"Sure. The Governor went into action immediately as a favor to Burnham. He issued the pardon yesterday afternoon. He sent it down to the prison with Harry Hammond of the Correction Department."

Kirally stared with glazed eyes. "I've got to see Burnham, do you hear? he said. "Right away."

He turned and made a movement toward the door.

The policeman's gun stopped him. The policeman's voice was hard as he spoke.

"Not now, Kirally. You're coming down to Headquarters with me. It's murder *now*, Kirally. You've killed Ficco. This time they'll burn you, Kirally. Come along."

\* \* \*

On the upper east side Burnham stirred in his sleep. His lips still wore that odd ghostly smile which he had taken to bed with him. . . .

THE END

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He glanced up the lake. Art was nearing the shanty.

THE car turned off the state road at the crest of a hill and stopped. "Pretty, isn't it?" Ben Leland grunted.

Art Proctor, dressed like Ben in the blue uniform and brown sheepskin coat of a state game protector, nodded and raised binoculars to his eyes.

The morning was incredibly clear. Below them, the flat, snow-blanketed expanse of the lake stretched to the north, its glistening whiteness marred only by the occasional pinpoints of black which were ice-fishing shanties.

Ben shifted gears and headed the car down through the two ruts in the meadow. They

reached the lake bank, then rolled out onto the three inches snow covering the ice. Sucked dry by the almost-zero cold, the snow crunched noisily; the freezing ice cracked and sang like rifle fire beneath the wheels of the car.

They were almost in the middle of the lake when Ben, after eyeing the shore on both sides, braked the car to a skidding stop. He grinned at the younger man. "We're right over Rouse's Bar, here. Used to be a dandy place for wall-eyes in the winter."

"Wouldn't hurt to pick up a couple of fish."

The two men got out of the car and began hauling out the ice fishing equipment from



# ON THE ICE

## By STANLEY VICKERS

*It looked to Ben like a fishy case from the start, but  
he didn't look for the wall-eyed pike to solve it!*

the back trunk compartment. Art Proctor took the heavy ice chisel and began cutting out the round hole through the sixteen inches of ice, while Ben arranged his line and examined his bait bucket to see that the minnows were still alive.

When Art had the hole cut out he was sweating in spite of the cold. Ben sounded with a sinker to get the depth, then hooked the minnow expertly through the fleshy part of its upper back and dropped it into the water. Then he took the wooden tip-up contraption and fastened the line to it so that when a fish took the bait the force of the pull would yank a red flag into an upright position.

He clambered back into the car with Art and spread his hands before the heater.

Art lit a cigarette and sat smoking awhile, then he pointed through the windshield up the lake. "Isn't that Hank Jeffrey's shanty?" he asked.

Ben nodded. "Often wondered how anyone as mean as Hank could like fishing so well." he remarked.

Art studied the shanty. It was a good half mile farther up the lake. A thin column of smoke drifted up from it. "Think I'll walk up there," he said. "After you get your fish you can pick me up."

Ben watched Art trudging up the lake. The boy would do well as game protector.

After fifteen years on the beat, Ben was being moved to Albany as a district supervisor and, according to department policy, he was spending a week with Art Proctor, breaking him in. In this case it was strictly a formality because Art Proctor had lived here twenty-seven years, except for a few years spent touring the world for Uncle Sam. Art not only knew the territory but, more important, he knew the people in it. He knew the ones to watch—the fellows who would take deer out of season and break the conservation law every chance they got.

Hank Jeffrey was one of those. He was in a class by himself—cussed, mean-for-mean-ness sake. . . .

Ben interrupted his thoughts to climb out of the car and go to the round hole where the tip-up poised. He took a long-handled scoop with him. After breaking the thin coating of ice in the hole with the toe of his leather boot, he scooped out the glass-like pieces of new ice. Glancing up the lake and saw Art Proctor

still walking toward Jeffrey's little shanty.

Hank Jeffrey didn't have a friend in town Ben knew about. He'd been thrown off the local village police force for taking money from rum-running during the bootlegging era. He'd opened a diner and worked his wife to death in it. Now, he had his step-daughter Mary working there—which was the only reason anyone went in the place. Art Proctor probably knew Hank better than anyone else. Art had run the diner for Hank before being called off to war.

Ben studied the motionless tip-up disgustedly and walked over to examine it again. He found the line frozen solid. When he kicked out the ice, the line jerked and the flag bobbed up. Ben grabbed the line and jerked it. He pulled up a small perch, unhooked it and tossed it back.

He glanced up the lake, saw Art Proctor nearing the shanty. Then he went to the car and got another minnow from the pail. Art wouldn't be getting impatient to be picked up for a little while and Ben still had a hankering for a wall-eye.

He was lowering the fresh bait into the hole when he heard the shot.

Ben looked up the lake toward the Jeffrey shanty. He got his tip-up set again, lit a pipeful of tobacco and stood beside the hole, stamping his feet, speculating about the shot. It might have been somebody hunting partridge out of season along the edge of the lake, or it might have been someone taking a legitimate shot at a fox. The sharpness of the shot's bark made him think he had heard a rifle rather than a shotgun. Nevertheless, he'd about decided to investigate when he saw a figure beside the Jeffrey shanty, waving something in the air. Then he realized that Art Proctor must have fired that shot because he wanted him up there.

Ben pulled up the line and the tip-up, threw them in the car and started driving to the shanty. When he got there Art was still holding his regulation automatic.

Ben got out of the car. Art had a funny look on his face.

"You fire that shot?" Ben asked.

Art nodded, pointing to the far side of the shanty where Ben saw the legs outstretched in the snow. . . .

It was Hank Jeffrey, lying face down, one hand loosely clutched around the butt of a



revolver. Ben knelt gingerly beside the figure. There was blood on the snow, and the way the hair was all matted on the side of Hank's head it was easy to see where the blood had come from.

Ben glanced around him. The shanty was a quarter of a mile from the nearest shore and there was a well-packed trail in the snow where Hank had been walking back and forth each day.

Ben looked up at Art. "Suicide is a little bit out of our line."

"We'd better get the state police right away," Art said. "I don't think they'd want us to touch anything."

"You didn't see anybody else on the lake when you were walking up here?" Ben asked. "Nobody," Art answered.

They stood without speaking. Ben saw one of Jeffrey's tip-ups bob into the air, and he walked toward it mechanically. When he got to the hole the taut line was being pulled in slow circles around the circumference of the hole. That meant it was a wall-eye. Ben waited until the circling stopped, then started again. He pulled the line and flopped a five pound wall-eye onto the ice. He smiled grimly at Art. "I got my wall-eye," he said.

**B**EN drove the car back down the lake, then back onto the road. It was twelve miles to the village and the state police sub-station. "What time is it?" he asked Art.

"Nine-twenty," Art answered.

"Funny a guy would get up so early and go so far on a cold morning just to shoot himself," Ben wondered aloud. "Not that I'm especially sorry, considering who it was."

They said nothing more until Ben reached the outskirts of the village near the house where Art boarded. Then Art suggested suddenly: "Why don't you drop me off here so I can get my car."

Ben turned to him questioningly and slowed down.

"I'm thinking about Mary," Art said. "She shouldn't miss that hound too badly either, but it's going to be a shock all the same. I figure maybe I could drive over and break the news to her while you're getting the state police back to the shanty."

"Good idea," Ben braked the car to a stop in front of Art's place, then drove to the sub-station. Within fifteen minutes he had told his story and was on his way back to the shanty with two troopers and Dr. Grant, the county coroner.

At the shanty, Ben waited around, then he decided he could be of some use by taking up Jeffrey's tip-ups. It wasn't an easy job because there was a good inch and a half of ice in the holes. He finally got them all re-wound and stacked inside the shanty.

One of the troopers laughed. "Can't you forget you're a game protector?" he asked.

It was an infraction of the conservation law to leave tip-ups in overnight or unattended. "Jeffrey's gonna have enough black marks against him up there," Ben said. "I don't want an ice fishing fine piled on top of them."

The coroner was putting his stuff back in his satchel. He looked very cold. He walked over to where Ben was standing with the troopers. "What time was the body discovered?" he asked.

Ben thought a minute. "Art must have found Jeffrey at about nine o'clock, 'cause I remember it was nine-twenty when we started driving back to the village."

Dr. Grant pondered. "Jeffrey must have died just before you fellows came down on the lake then," he said. "His temperature isn't more than two and a half degrees below normal now. I'd say he couldn't be dead much more than an hour lying on that ice in this cold."

"Look like suicide to you, Doc?" one of the troopers asked.

"Could be, very easily," the coroner replied. "I'm not ready to make an official verdict yet though. Powder burns don't show up like they should for suicide, but that isn't necessarily conclusive."

"His gun has one shell fired," the trooper said. "Funny thing though, there were two coffee cups laid out on the table inside the shanty and a couple of plates. Almost like Ben expected company."

They padlocked the shanty and returned to the village with Ben sitting uncomfortably close to Jeffrey's slumped body in the back seat. They dumped the body at the sub-station because the troopers intended to make routine searches for hair under the fingernails and any other evidences of a struggle. Ben didn't hang around for that. But before he got in his own car to leave he saw Police Lieutenant Anderson set out for Jeffrey's little apartment behind the diner, and he was glad that Art Proctor would already be there making it easy for Mary.

Mary stayed on Ben's mind. Most everybody in town knew and liked the girl and felt sorry for her because she'd had to put up with Jeffrey, who wasn't even her real father. Some folks said that when Mary passed her seventeenth birthday the previous fall, she'd tried to leave the diner for a secretarial job out of town. Rumor had it that Jeffrey had whipped her out of the idea.

The Jeffrey diner was closed, and Ben didn't pick up any news at the restaurant where he did eat. He drove to see Art Proctor, and found him getting ready for bed.

"Mary took it pretty well," Art said. Half undressed, he slumped to a chair. "Look Ben, if I tell you something will you keep it quiet?"



"Sure," Ben said.

"Well I got a hunch, from listening to Lt. Anderson question Mary this morning, that they're going to try and make a case against her."

"What?"

"Well, supposin' they're not satisfied it's suicide," Art said. "Hell, everybody knows Mary wasn't happy living with Jeffrey—she never felt like he was her father. If they start digging into the thing they'll find out he made life hell for her, and gave her plenty of excuses for wanting to kill him."

"But how could she have killed him?" Ben snorted. "She wasn't out at the shanty this morning?"

"No, she wasn't," Art said slowly. "She was home in bed until just before I got there. But Lt. Anderson has already got a next-door neighbor saying that when Jeffrey left to go fishing at eight o'clock, she thought she heard Mary go out to the car with him. To make things worse, the same neighbor—Mrs. Snell—knocked at Jeffrey's back door about eight-thirty and got no answer. Mary heard her all right, but she'd seen who it was out the window and didn't answer. She didn't feel like visiting."

Ben thought a moment. "Mrs. Snell couldn't have been very sure about hearing Mary go out with Jeffrey," he pointed out comfortingly, "or else she would have known nobody was home."

"Did Dr. Grant fix the time of death?" Art asked.

"He didn't think it could have been much before nine o'clock—just before we drove down onto the lake."

Art didn't say anything for a minute. When he did speak his voice was low and intense. "When I got to Mary's this morning I found her covered with bruises from the beating Jeffrey gave her before he left to go fishing. That's another thing that's got Anderson wondering."

"What the devil did Jeffrey beat her for?"

"Because she'd told him that I'd asked her to marry me and she'd accepted," Art answered bitterly. "Because it meant he was going to lose his low-priced coolie labor girl for his damn diner."

**A**FTER Ben had time to get over his surprise about Art Proctor and Mary, the whole thing seemed natural. He wondered why nobody had ever tumbled to the fact before. Art had been around Mary while he was working at the diner before going into the Army.

Nobody had ever considered Mary to be an especially beautiful girl. She'd always looked too sad and timid. But she had plenty of charm in a thin, fragile sort of way that made her everybody's little sister. Ben liked the idea of a good, level-headed fellow like Art Proctor getting her.

A couple of days after Jeffrey's death, all kinds of rumors were making the rounds, the predominant one that Mary had murdered her step-father. No one blamed her; it would have been impossible to convict her before a village-picked jury.

It was then that Ben got a call from Lt. Anderson to come to the sub-station. When he got there he found Art Proctor, Dr. Grant and the two troopers.

Lt. Anderson was holding a kind of informal inquest.

"I'm going to speak frankly with you fellows," he told the two game protectors. "We'd like to wrap up this Jeffrey thing in a neat package labelled suicide and forget it. But there are a few disturbing circumstances, and we think you can help us get things straightened out."

"I'll be frank with you too, Lieutenant," Art spoke up. "I know you think that if Jeffrey was murdered his step-daughter did it. Well, I'm convinced she's innocent! I'm not what you'd call a disinterested witness!"

The announcement was plainly a surprise to Anderson. But he went on blandly enough,

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"Do you know anything about the beating Jeffrey gave her?"

Art nodded. "Jeffrey didn't want her to marry anybody. She wouldn't tell you why she got the beating because she wouldn't implicate me in the thing."

Anderson shuffled some papers on his desk, then he looked up again. "We've been convinced right along that Mary Jeffrey was at the shanty the morning Hank Jeffrey died. There were signs of a struggle at the shanty and none at the Jeffrey apartment, which indicated the beating took place out on the lake. For another thing, the bullet wound in Jeffrey's head and the absence of powder burns indicated murder—without necessarily ruling out suicide. On the other hand, we can't figure how the girl could have walked back to the village from the lake without being seen. We combed that territory and couldn't find a footprint in the snow. If she'd walked back along the road she would surely have been seen—there were milk trucks, a rural mail car and a few other parties up and down that road between eight and nine o'clock."

Ben shifted uneasily and Anderson looked at him. "You weren't with Proctor when he discovered the body?"

"No," Ben answered. "Art left me fishing about a quarter of a mile down the lake."

"Exactly what happened after he left you?"

"I kept fishing for awhile," Ben said. "After Art had disappeared from sight around the corner of the shanty, I heard a shot. Then Art was waving for me to come on up."

"Was there any time lapse between the sound of the shot and the moment when you saw him wave?"

There had been a few seconds lapse but Ben didn't want to thrust in any more complications. "Doesn't seem to me that there was," he said.

Art Proctor strode forward to the lieutenant's desk. "According to Dr. Grant," he said, "Jeffrey was killed after eight-thirty. Right?"

"That's correct," Dr. Grant answered.

"How fast do you figure Mary Jeffrey could have walked home?"

Anderson thought a minute. "It's almost thirteen miles," he said. "A couple of hours would be pretty good traveling."

"Right!" Art exclaimed triumphantly. "And I got to Mary's house that morning to break the news to her at a few minutes after ten o'clock. I can produce witnesses who saw me turn in the driveway of the diner and drive around to the back door. I stayed with her until you fellows showed up. So she couldn't have murdered Jeffrey and walked home unless he'd been killed long before eight-thirty!"

"That's right," Anderson admitted. "And

if she got a ride back from the lake, I'll be damned if we can discover who gave it to her." He grinned at Art. "I'm ready to call it suicide," he said.

Dr. Grant stifled a yawn. "I'm ready too."

Art flushed happily, and everybody felt a wave of relief.

**B**EN was busy the next few days getting ready to leave for Albany. He heard that Art and Mary had got a license and everybody was mighty happy for the two of them. The night before Ben was to hand over his territory to Art, he drove over to the boarding house to say good-by.

He wished afterwards he'd left town without ever seeing Art.

When he went out to his car that night he lugged a suitcase, to stick in the back compartment of the coupe. He lifted the compartment lid and noticed something like a block of wood lying on the compartment floor. It was the wall-eyed pike he'd pulled up on Hank Jeffrey's tip-up. The pike was still frozen solid.

Ben looked at it, and suddenly he remembered something. "Well I'll be damned! Wait'll I tell Art this!"

He took the pike, stuffed it in a garbage can near the garage. He had some pretty good news to spill, even if it was rather late and unnecessary!

If Ben had thought a little deeper, then, he would have kept driving straight to Albany.

Art was reading when Ben got there. "Just wanted to say good-by," Ben said.

Art pumped Ben's hand, took his coat and steered him to a chair. "I hope you're going to like it down there in an office," he said. "You've sure been swell to me. I appreciate it."

Ben grinned. "From what I hear you're going to be happy up here." He added solemnly: "I want to wish you and Mary loads of luck, Art. You both deserve it."

"Thanks, Ben," Art said.

Ben accepted a cigar and leaned back in a leather rocker. "Guess what I found in the back of the car just now?"

Art raised his eyebrows.

"I found that wall-eye I yanked out the lake on one of Hank Jeffrey's tip-ups that morning. Remember?"

Art smiled. "Yeah, I remember. Always thought it was funny—you walking over and grabbing that tip-up right after seein' Hank dead and all."

"Just a reflex," Ben explained. "I did it automatically, like picking up a receiver when the phone rings. I'd step out of my own funeral procession to run to a sprung tip-up. But Art," he went on, leaning forward, "wasn't there anything peculiar that struck



you about that tip-up going up in the air while we stood there?"

Art shook his head slowly, puzzled.

"Don't you see!" Ben exclaimed. "That tip-up couldn't have budged if there'd been a twelve pound northern on it—unless somebody scooped the ice out of the hole not more than fifteen minutes before! It was zero that morning, and I know how fast the holes were freezing up because I'd just been fishing myself." He paused. "If Mary had killed Hank Jeffrey, she would have had to do it while you were walking up to the shanty. She would have had to leave the shanty when both you and me could have seen her crossing the lake to the shore! Because Hank Jeffrey *had to be* fishing right up to nine o'clock!"

He finished and Art Proctor sat across the room from him and even through the haze of their two cigars Ben could see that his revelation hadn't produced the result he'd anticipated. Then Ben froze in his chair as the terrible implication of what he had said took shape in his mind.

"That's interesting, Ben," Art said levelly. There was a long silence. "Then if Jeffrey was murdered, who could have killed him? And if he committed suicide, how come you heard only one shot when I said I fired my gun once after finding Hank, to get your attention?"

Ben wished he were some place else, or dead. He leaned back in the rocker, and he put his hands over his eyes and he let his head drop back against the chair. After awhile, he heard what he was afraid he was going to hear. He wished he had strength enough to get up and hurry out of the room.

Art began to speak in the same quiet, level voice: "Mary was at the shanty that morning, Ben. Hank took her with him because he said he wanted her to fix his breakfast out there on the lake. But it was really because

he wanted a place to beat her where the neighbors couldn't hear him. When I got near that shanty I heard him beating her. And I knew what it was all about. I'd left you to walk up there because I'd wanted to talk to Hank alone and see if I couldn't reason with him about Mary marrying me."

There was a long pause. Ben didn't move or lift his hand from his eyes.

"No, Ben, I didn't kill Jeffrey," the monotone continued. "Hank heard me coming. He rushed out of the shanty with blood in his eye and an ice chisel in his hands. He was a madman! I saw him then for what he really was. And in those few seconds, as he came rushing toward me, I knew what it's like to look at death—he was going to kill me! I grabbed for my gun—I would have shot him then, but Mary came out of the shanty with Hank's gun. She shot him before I could get my gun free.

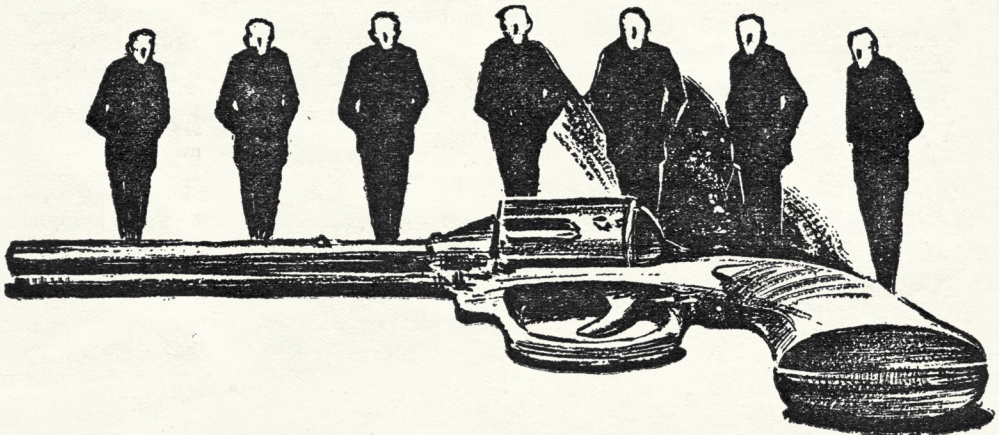
"I shoved her inside the shanty, told her what to do, wiped Hank's gun and laid it near him and waved to you. When you left me out at my house, I drove back to the lake and picked up Mary on the highway and then took her home. It worked out pretty nicely—except for your remembering that pike you caught, Ben."

There was another silence. Then Art added bitterly, "I couldn't see Jeffrey ruining Mary's life any more than he already had, just to satisfy a technical point of justice."

The voice stopped. Ben remained motionless for a long time. He took his hand from his eyes and met Art Proctor's steady gaze. He stood up and went to the door.

"I'm sorry, Art," Ben said. "I must have dozed off in that chair. I didn't hear a word you said. I've even forgotten what we were talking about when I went to sleep."

He thrust out his hand. "Good luck to you and Mary," he said.





# • • THERE'S MURDER

## CHAPTER ONE

### Death Drops In

**I**T RAINED the night of February sixteenth—a cold, driving, blinding rain which fitted right into my mood. The world may have been my oyster, but if so it was out of season, for everything had been going sour all day.

I pulled into a drive-in, told the blonde to bring me a hamburger and a bottle of beer, and looked at my watch. It was a quarter to twelve.

The cars flashed by on Wilshire with swish-

ing sound, their tires humming on the wet pavement. It made a kind of background music and I was sitting there, half sorry for myself, when she opened the door and got in at my side.

At first I thought it was one of the car hops, playing tricks, then I saw the fur jacket and little fur hat. Even with the tips that were being hurled around, car-hops weren't wearing that kind of furs this season. Not by a long shot.

"What gives?"

She said, "Please, pretend I'm with you.



Order me a sandwich. I'll pay you for it."

I grinned at that. I was low, but I could still buy a gal a sandwich. I hadn't got a good look at her, but her voice was nice. I touched the horn. When the blonde came, I ordered another hot bun and some more beer.

She looked at the girl beside me as if she thought it was done with mirrors. I couldn't blame her. After all, when she'd taken the initial order I'd been alone in the car.

When she moved away I looked at my com-



# IN THE AIR! • • • •

*A Fast-Paced Detective Novel*

*Carmen was the kind of cutie, I thought, who'd keep Cupid doing a land office business. But what I didn't know was that Cupid's arrows were destined to become red-hot slugs. For Carmen's past—and my future were both tied up with murder!*



**By W. T. BALLARD**

*I reached out and caught the gun with my left hand.*



panion. "Okay, sister, give us the patter. What is it? Boy friend get strong-armed with ideas . . . or are you fleeing from an angry step-father."

Her shoulders were shaking. I thought she was crying and said so. "Turn off the rain, baby. Uncle Tony ain't got no sympathy to give away. This is the night that I feel sorry, so very sorry for myself. Shall we tell each other our little trouble?"

She said, "I'm not crying." Her voice was as shaky as her shoulders.

"Then what's wrong?"

"I—I just saw a man killed—murdered!"

"Now, now," I began in a tone that should have soothed a child. Then I did one of those perfect double takes. "What the devil did you say?"

"I saw a man murdered, and—and they're looking for me."

"Who?"

"The men who killed him."

This was getting too thick for my liking. I reached over and opened the coupe door on her side. "Scram, baby. Toddle away. I ain't got the time nor inclination to get mixed up with any psychos tonight."

"I'm not crazy!"

I looked at her a long moment. The light wasn't good enough to really tell the color of her eyes, but I could see that she wasn't hard on the visual senses. She was, in fact about the easiest thing I'd seen in a long time.

"That makes it worse," I said. "If you aren't crazy, or a liar, then what you just said a minute ago is the truth, and this is not my night to get mixed up in murders. Move it, this is a private car."

She gave me a long steady look, then turned and started to get out of the car. Instead she suddenly reached out and pulled the door shut. "Here they come," her voice was shaking again. "Please help me, you don't want to be responsible for my murder."

I didn't. I still thought it was a gag of some kind, and I took a look at the three characters who were walking across the paving toward the car. They didn't look like any gag.

I acted without thinking. I punched the starter button with one hand while I turned on the switch with the other, threw the car into reverse and we shot backward into the street.

The motion caught the three characters flat-footed. One of them yelled. I couldn't understand what he said, merely heard his voice. Then I had the car in first, jerking it out of the way of an onrushing bus. A minute later we were singing along on the wet street.

The girl settled back into the seat corner, giving a long deep sigh as if all her troubles were now ended.

The shirt was sticking to my shoulder blades

damply. Apparently I'd been sweating without realizing it. Those three men had not acted friendly.

"Give out," I said after we'd traveled a couple of blocks, "or would you rather wait and spill the whole thing to the cops."

"Why should I tell the police anything?" She sat erect with a jerk.

I slowed down and turned the corner into a darker side street, watching the rear view mirror to see if we were being tailed. Apparently we weren't. I breathed easier.

"Look, honey, smart people always tell the police when they've seen a killing. They stay a lot happier that way."

"But . . . but I can't. I can't afford to get mixed up in anything like this."

I WAS getting sore. Here, I'd stuck my neck out, way over the edge of the knife, trying to give this kid a break, and she was backfiring on me.

"I can't afford to get mixed up in anything like murder either," I said. "But I am because I gave you a lift. Now, I'm not going to be left holding the sack while you waltz off into the darkness."

She turned to look at me. "You're being silly," she said in a decisive voice. "There's no need of you getting mixed up in anything. Just drop me someplace where I can get a cab, then forget this ever happened."

That was okay by me. Maybe it sounds funny that I'd be willing not to report a killing to the cops, but look at it from my angle. I'd only been back a couple of months. I was having trouble getting started again. Once I'd owned half the juke boxes in town and had a nice thing of it, but while I'd been away, a lot of strangers had moved into my spots. I'd been around every day, trying to get started again, and all I got was a few warnings to lay off.

Right at this time I'd had enough trouble. Sure, I knew a lot of the cops from the old days, a lot of the fancy money boys and the bar owners, but they were making it a point not to know me.

"Okay," I said. "If that's the way you want it. But don't come running to Uncle Tony when the chips are down and the law is riding your neck for not reporting what you know. Got any choice where you want to grab a cab?"

"Which way you going?"

"Hollywood. I'm bunking with a pal in the hills."

"Drop me on the Boulevard then, if you will."

I nodded, wheeled the coupe across La Brea to the Boulevard. I turned east and let her off at the Roosevelt. Then I pulled on-down slow, for when she stepped from the car before the hotel's lights, I'd had my first good look at her



face. It knocked me for a loop. She was definitely the prettiest girl I'd ever seen.

I wasn't thinking very clearly. I didn't know what I meant to do, but there was one thing set in my mind. Suddenly I wanted to see that girl again.

I pulled to the curb, meaning to get out and walk back, but just as I started to leave the coupe, she passed me in a Yellow cab. I slid back under the wheel and kicked the motor into life. The cab went right at Highland and I went after it, right again at Sunset with me hanging on, not too close. I'd spotted his license and I wasn't going to lose him.

The night clubs along the Strip were spilling their customers from the parking lots as we passed. There wasn't much chance of the girl noticing me and realizing that she was being followed. I dogged along, wondering what kind of a darn fool I thought I was. This made less sense than anything I'd done in a long time—and I've done some pretty screwy things. But the only thing I was certain of was that I had to see her again.

The cab kept going until it reached one of the curving streets which wind back toward Wilshire. It turned south with me after it, dropping back a block and cutting my lights. I saw his brake lights flash red as he stopped. I crept forward until I could see the girl get out, then I stopped, watched her pay the cab and go up the walk to a nice shrubbery-guarded house.

I idled past and got the house number, then I went home to bed.

**P**ETE wasn't in yet. He played a trumpet at one of the night spots and he wouldn't be along for another hour. A nice guy, Pete. When he'd first hit the coast ten years before, I'd picked him up and got him a break with an orchestra I knew. He hadn't forgotten. When I sailed back into town from the South Pacific, he'd given me a bed. Lucky he did. There weren't many beds around and certainly no apartments.

I pulled down the wall bed, climbed into pajamas and grabbed a magazine. No use trying to sleep until Pete showed up. Besides, I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to lay there and think of the pin-up number and wonder just how she'd managed to get herself lined up with those killer characters.

It didn't make sense. She didn't look like the type. She didn't look like any type of gal I'd ever known.

I kept telling myself that I was slipping, that I'd been away four years and what I didn't know about dames nowadays would fill a very large book. But it didn't mean anything. I just couldn't seem to talk myself out of it.

When the knock came at the door I didn't think anything about it. Pete was always forgetting his key. He was that kind of a guy. I climbed out of bed and went over to open up for him.

"What's the matter, chump? You'd forget your head if it wasn't screwed on." I pulled open the door as I talked.

It wasn't Pete.

There were three men in the hall, and I knew without really seeing them that they were the three characters from the drive-in stand.

I started to slam the door but I wasn't quick enough. The one in front had his foot in the way. It was a big foot, but I was more interested in the gun in his hand. It looked even bigger than the foot. It was pointed at my wish-bone.

I've seen a lot of guns and I don't like them. They go off sometimes and I couldn't forget that the girl had said these men were killers.

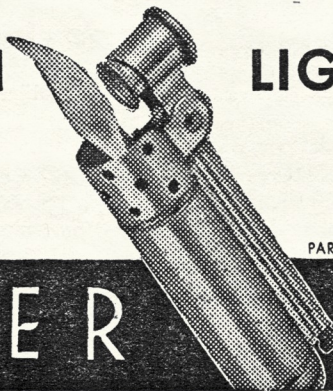
"Look," I told them. "There's a mistake somewhere. The shooting gallery is two blocks down and one to the right."

"Wise guy!" It was the man with the gun. "Back up, cousin, and quiet yourself. When we want you to sing, we'll tell you."

I backed up until I had to sit on the edge of the folding bed to keep from falling. They all came in, closing the door. The bird with the gun had a gray benny and a large beefy face.

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It was a face I'd seen somewhere a long time back but I couldn't tag it with a name. The second man was almost as large, but the third was small and slender, with hands which should have belonged to a woman.

He lisped when he spoke. "You're Tony McHale."

I got him then. I hadn't recognized him before. They'd called him the Whispering Kid in the old days—a punk who had organized other kids, going around, booing orchestras unless they were paid off, then they applauded. A nice little racket. But he seemed to have branched out.

"I'm McHale."

He smiled at me. There was something about that smile which went through you like a knife—the same look a cat gets when it's got one paw on a mouse and is kind of teasing it before making it into a meal. "I thought I remembered you. You used to have the juke boxes around and about."

I nodded, wondering what all this was leading up to.

His baby face stopped smiling and his blue eyes seemed to fade until they were almost white. "I always heard you minded your own business," he lisped. "It seems I was wrong."

I was burning inside. I wanted to heave him out of there on the back of his small neck, but the large party in the gray coat still had his gun displayed. I didn't say anything.

After a minute the kid went on. "Tonight you butted into something which wasn't your business. You picked up a girl at a sandwich stand and hauled her away from there."

I thought fast. I was pretty certain they hadn't had a good look at me, but they must have tracked me down somehow. I was sure I hadn't been followed. That left one answer—my license plate. I cursed under my breath for not being smart enough to have thought of it sooner.

I certainly had slipped plenty. No wonder I wasn't having more luck landing back in the business! There wasn't much point in lying. I'd just be building it up tougher for myself.

"Okay," I said. "I picked up a dame. She climbed into my car and gave me the business. If she was yours, you should hang signs on her to warn people off."

He considered me. "Didn't you hear us yell at you?"

I made my face blank. "Where?"

He looked at the man beside him, then back at me. "Okay, we'll skip that. Maybe you didn't see us. Maybe you did. Anyway, where's the dame live? What's her name?"

I was surprised, although, come to think of it, I shouldn't have been. "I thought she was yours," I said. "I was just about to ask you the same question."

"Shall I poke him, Kid?" It was the man

in the gray coat, the one who held the gun.

"Later," said the Kid. Then to me, "Listen, bud, you're just asking for trouble playing wise. What'd she tell you?"

"Tell me about what?"

He bit his lip. It was almost as red as if he used lipstick. "About us."

"She never mentioned, you," I said. "She asked me to buy her a drink. I took her over to the Boulevard. While I was parking the car, she ducked."

He lisped. "You're a damn liar!"

I took half a step forward, my fists knotted. The guy in the gray overcoat poked his gun forward suggestively, and I stopped. "Shall I make him talk, Kid?" The gun was only inches from my chest and I could tell by the owner's eyes that he would have loved to use it.

The Whispering Kid considered, pinching his lower lip between his thumb and long forefinger. "Maybe he's telling it straight."

The gunman said, "We could soon find out." He put out his free hand and gave me a shove. I landed back on the bed. "Get some matches, Carl."

THE THIRD man brought out a box of small wooden matches. He stepped around the Kid and grabbed one of my bare feet. I tried to kick free, and got a crack along the side of the head from the gun barrel. It wasn't hard enough to put me out, but it hurt like the devil. He lighted a match and shoved the burning end against my instep. I yelped. The gun cracked again. Carl lit a second match and shoved it in alongside the first burn. This time I was ready. It hurt plenty, but I didn't yell.

The Whispering Kid lisped, "Fun, fun." He seemed to be enjoying himself. "Want some more bud, or do you remember what the dame talked about?"

I didn't answer. There wasn't any use in telling them again that she hadn't talked. They weren't going to believe me.

Carl lit a third match. I stiffened myself for the burn—and just then Pete opened the apartment door.

We'd all been so intent on what was going on that we hadn't heard him. I'll say this for Pete, for a musician he thought fast. He had his horn case in his hand. He pushed the Kid out of his way and swung the case at the gunman's head. I heard it crack, but I was busy myself. I kicked Carl in the belly. The box of matches went one way, the lighted one he held went the other and he bent over.

I came off that bed as if it were hot, swinging as I came. Carl tried to back up, but I caught him with a right to the jaw and a left to the stomach. He didn't like it. He turned and headed for the door, running into the Whispering Kid as he did so.



The action probably saved us, for the Kid had been dragging at a gun. Carl's shoulder knocked him off balance. He turned, just as I hit him with my shoulder. The force of my charge drove his light body through the door and into the hall.

Carl was already running for the stairs. The Kid took one look and went after him. I swung around. Pete was struggling with the gunman in the gray coat and getting the worst of it. I took a hand, slamming the guy with a rabbit punch from the back.

He tore free from Pete, swinging around to face me, seeing for the first time that his pals had powdered. I saw his face change. He ducked under my swinging arm and dove for the door. I tried to get my hands on him, but I only got hold of the gray coat. He wiggled out of it and was gone, his big feet pounding along the thin hall runner until he gained the stairs. I started to go after him but stopped at the head of the stairs, realizing that I was in pajamas.

Several doors opened as I hurried back to the apartment. An irate man bawled me out for disturbing his slumbers, threatening to call the police.

Back in the apartment I bolted the door and looked at Pete, who was seated on the bed, staring sadly at the remains of his horn. He looked up when I came in. He was a little guy with wavy black hair and a thin face that women went for.

"What gives?" he asked. "Haven't you enough trouble without butting against those highbinders?"

I went over to a chair, sat down and examined the instep of my burned foot. It didn't look good. "Who are they?"

He shrugged. "Wise guys. You remember the Whispering Kid. Used to go round putting the bite on orchestras and entertainers when he was just a punk. I heard he got into the black market during the war, mostly cigarettes. The guy whose overcoat you grabbed is Big Louie Auerbach. The other guy is Carl Hammer. Used to own a small club out Culver way."

I went into the bathroom for stuff to put on my foot. When I came back I asked, "What's their angle now?"

"Gambling, I heard," he told me, "although I wouldn't know. They aren't nice people any way you take them, and personally I don't want to take them. How'd you get mixed up?"

I told him about the girl, and what she'd said about the murder. He listened, his thin face very serious. "Evidently they spotted my license plate," I said.

"Why didn't you tell them where the slick chick lived?" He wanted to know. "What's she to you that you should get a blistered foot?"

"Turn those bums loose on a nice kid like her?"

"How do you know she's a nice kid?"

He had me there. I didn't know a thing about her.

"They aren't going to forget this," he added. "I'm sorry I walked in on it. If I'd known the score, I'd have walked out fast. I've got grief enough without tangling with those boys."

I saw what he meant, and I was sorry he was dragged in. But it was too late to do much about it. He went on, "If I were you, I'd haul freight. Go on over to Reno or Vegas. A lot of boys you used to know are doing right well in those parts. Maybe you could cut yourself a piece of cake."

"And walk out on you?"

He brooded about that. "I got an offer to go east," he said. "Sammy Freed's outfit needs a trumpet player. Maybe I'll go."

I didn't say anything. He went into the bedroom. After awhile I got up and went through Big Louie's overcoat. There was a pack of policy slips in the pocket, nothing more. It looked as if my boy friends had a finger in the numbers racket.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Double Trouble

THE SUN was out and it was warm the next morning. Pete was still asleep and I went to the corner after a cup of Java.

I read the paper as I drank. There was a picture of a slick-looking bozo on page one with the caption:

*Prominent lawyer murdered in Wilshire apartment.*

I looked at the story. His name was Cullen, senior member of the firm, Cullen, French and Thomas. They were described as the attorneys for a number of movie people and from accounts, Cullen had been quite the lad around the city.

As far as the killing went, the paper didn't have much dope. Cullen's body had been discovered by his houseboy when the latter returned to the apartment at two-thirty in the morning. He said that he'd been given the night off as his employer expected a guest. He wasn't certain but he thought the guest was a woman.

Until that point the story hadn't really registered. I was still plenty sleepy. But I snapped awake then and took a look at the address. The apartment was within two blocks of the sandwich stand where the girl had crawled into my car!

I put the paper into my pocket and went back to the apartment. I looked the street over carefully, figuring that the Whispering Kid might have the joint staked out.



I didn't see anyone who looked suspicious. I tried to tell myself that I was being silly. After all, the Cullen murder might not have been the one the girl was talking about. In fact, there might not have been a killing at all. But if there hadn't, why had the Whispering Kid and his lovely pals been so anxious to find the girl?

I waked Pete, and he was in a bad humor. I showed him the paper and his humor got worse.

"Now I know I'm going east. I wish I'd thrown you out on your ear when you came around looking for a bed. This makes it plenty tough."

"Why? We knew there'd been a killing."

He grunted. "I forgot that you've been away four years. This Cullen has moved in since you were gone. His clients are a lot of easy money boys and fight managers and such. His death is bound to make a stink, a big one, and I'm just a little guy, trying to earn coffee and beans tooting a horn. This ain't no place for little guys to monkey in. This will be hot, with all the big shots ducking for cover and trying to find a scapegoat to hang it on. You'd make a lovely scape-goat."

"You're being silly," I said. "I never saw Cullen, alive or dead. I never was near his place. I—"

"You're in it," he said. "The Whispering Kid knows that you're in it, and that lad has a lot of connections despite the way he paints his face. Don't kid yourself, my friend. If they get their fingers on you, they'll sweat you, but good!"

I tried to laugh it off, but Pete was serious and he wasn't a lad that scared easy. "I've got to see her," I decided. "I've got to warn her to be careful."

He let out a squawk at that. "See who, the sandwich stand girl? Now I know you're nuts. Look, if it's dough, I'll stake you to Vegas. A plane leaves at noon."

"It isn't dough," I told him. "I'm still fat enough to get along until something turns up. But if you'd ever seen her face you'd understand what I mean."

"You're nuts. The Army drove you screwy, they should have you locked up." He was still saying the same words in different ways when I left.

I didn't want to be tagged. I took a look at the street before I backed the coupe out, and I watched the rear view mirror all the way into Hollywood. Apparently I wasn't being tailed, but I certainly didn't want to lead the Whispering Kid and his playmates to the girl. I parked the coupe in a lot, cut through to the Boulevard and went into a music store that belonged to a pal.

I nodded, went through and out the rear door. It gave on the parking lot I'd just left.

I got in the coupe and drove away, certain that anyone trailing me would be waiting in front of the music store.

THE HOUSE into which the girl had disappeared the night before looked bigger in daylight. It made me wonder if my shoes were shined properly. I went along the walk and climbed three steps to the porch. To the right of the house was a walled garden, masked from the street, but standing on the porch I could see over the wall.

There was a girl on one of the winding paths. Her back was toward me but I was pretty certain it was the girl of the drive-in.

I walked to the end of the porch, put one hand on the wall and vaulted over. I landed in a strip of grass border and my feet made no noise. She didn't realize that she wasn't alone in the garden until I was almost behind her.

"Good morning."

She turned. I give her credit she didn't let out a yell, although her mouth opened slightly. For an instant I didn't know what she intended to do, then she said in a curiously level tone, "Good morning."

She looked somewhat different from the night before. The clothes were different, and the hair do, and I'd only had one good look at her as she stood under the lights of the Roosevelt marquee, but still very nice. Her eyes were gray, level and wide-spaced. Her hair was soft, beautiful.

I said, "Probably you don't remember me. You didn't get a very good look last night. It was rather dark in the coupe."

"I'm only sure of one thing"—her tone was still level—"I've never seen you before in my life."

I shouldn't have been surprised, of course. If I'd been in her spot, that is exactly the way I'd have played it, denying all knowledge of what had happened the night before.

But I wasn't in her spot. I was in my own, and I couldn't forget the Whispering Kid and his buddies—my foot was too sore to let me forget. Also, I'd gotten Pete mixed up in this thing, all because of her.

"Look," I said. "In certain ways I don't blame you. But there's no use trying to pretend you're an ostrich and burying your head in the sands. The tough guys aren't going to run away just because you can't see them."

She was frowning now. "Perhaps all this double talk makes sense to you," she said slowly. "But, honestly, it doesn't to me. Just how did you manage to get into this garden anyhow, surely not through the house?"

"I came over the wall," I told her.

"Then suppose you go back over the wall before I call the police."

"You've changed." My tone was a little mocking. "You weren't anxious to talk to the



police last night. If you had, maybe both of us wouldn't be in the spot."

"Police, last night?" Her face changed; the gray eyes got a little wary. "Will you stop talking in riddles and tell me exactly what you mean?"

"Look!" I was really fed up. "Stop stalling. You can't forget that you climbed into my car at the drive-in stand, that you told me you'd seen a man murdered and that they were after you."

"Who was after me?"

"The Whispering Kid," I told her, "and a couple of his boy friends. What you don't know is that they caught up with me after you pulled your duckout and asked questions. If you don't believe it, I'll show you my blisters. I've got some swell ones, on the bottom of my left foot."

"And what makes you think it was me." She glanced down at my left foot instinctively.

"I got a good look at you when you got out of the coupe," I said. "And also, I trailed your cab out here. It was you, all right, darling. No mistake about that."

She considered me carefully. I felt as if those gray eyes were taking me apart, seeing how cheap my clothes were, guessing at the slender size of my roll. "Just how much do you want?"

I felt my cheeks get hot. She thought I was here to put the bite on her, that I was pulling a little blackmail! "Look, sister. You've got your networks crossed. I don't want a thing, except to warn you that you're in trouble. This Cullen kill is going to smell up the town, and the Whispering Kid—"

"You mean Bennet Cullen? Is that who I am supposed to have seen murdered?"

This was getting thick, but she gave me no chance to think. "Come on," she said and turning, headed for the house with me trailing her. We went into a living room through some glass doors, past a startled maid and up a wide staircase to the second floor.

I didn't know what the score was. This chick moved around too fast for me. She pushed open a door and disappeared. I followed slowly. For all I knew she was going after a gun to blow my head apart with.

I stepped in and stopped. It was a woman's bedroom which had cost a lot to furnish, but that wasn't what made me stop. The girl had paused beside the bed and was looking down. There was a second girl in it.

She'd been asleep. She wasn't quite awake yet and she hadn't seen me. They weren't twins but they were enough alike so there was no difficulty in guessing that they were sisters.

"What's the matter, Mary?" The one in the bed yawned and sat up. She had on pajamas, a light satiny pink.

The girl who had led me upstairs said in a tight voice, "Just where were you last night, Carmen?"

Carmen yawned. She still hadn't seen me standing in the doorway. "Around." She overdid her careless tone a little. "Why?"

"Were you out with Bennet Cullen—after promising me that you wouldn't see him again?"

"Now, Mary." She started to get out of bed, then saw me and didn't. Instead she settled back against the pillows, her face whitening until it was almost the color of the sheets. "Who—who's that?"

"A friend of yours," said the standing girl. "You took a ride in his car or something."

"You, you followed me!"

I came on into the room and closed the door. I wasn't certain how many servants they had and I didn't think that we needed anyone listening in. "I followed you," I said, "but I didn't come here to cause any trouble. I came here to help."

The girl on the bed seemed to be considering. Gradually the color came back into her face. "I knew you wouldn't cause any trouble." She was turning on the old charm, and she had plenty. "I knew I could depend on you."

The sister cut in. "Stop it, Carmen. I read the paper this morning. Bennett Cullen was found murdered. Were you with him last night? Do you know who killed him?"

Carmen said, "Please Mary, please. My head aches so badly and—"

"No you don't!" Her sister caught her shoulder, and dragged her from the bed. "It's my fault, I suppose. I've spoiled you, I've never made you face facts. But now you've got to. Get some clothes on. We'll wait for you downstairs. Then you're going down and tell the whole story to the police."

CARMEN was scared now. There was no faking. "I can't get mixed up in this. I can't. You've no right—you. . ." She started to cry.

"Five minutes." Her sister was resolute. "You're already mixed up in this. The best way will be to straighten it out now. Come on," she said to me.

I went, gladly. I wasn't used to women fighting, or women's bedrooms.

In the downstairs she turned to face me. "Now, suppose you tell me exactly what happened and who you are."

I told her. This was a gal I could understand. She wasted few words in argument, and less time getting to the point. I told her my name, how I'd had a string of juke boxes before the war, how I'd been in the Marines, come back, and was trying to rebuild my business.

I explained everything that had happened



last night and wound up with: "Maybe I shouldn't have come here this morning, but I figured that your sister should know about the Whispering Kid and his pals. She's not safe as long as they're around."

"You think they killed Bennett Cullen?"

I shrugged. "Your sister knows more about that than I do. One thing I'm certain of, they're plenty anxious to find her. They didn't burn my foot just for fun."

She frowned, glancing down again at my foot.

"There're two things you can do," I went on. "One is to take your sister to the cops and get it all straightened out. The other is to get her out of town."

"Why?"

"Because, the Whispering Kid and his boys are going to keep looking for her. They're either afraid of her, or she has something which they want pretty badly. They don't know who she is, but they'll find out."

"How?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I don't even know who she is, or who you are, or what her connection was with Cullen. But I'll bet on the Whispering Kid. He knows what she looks like. That's enough. He'll find out who she is. You can lay your last dime on that."

She said, "I'm Mary Gilchrist. Does that mean anything to you?"

It should have. The name sounded familiar but I couldn't tag it. She must have seen by my expression that it didn't register. "You don't listen to radio much, do you?"

I shrugged. "Lady, where I been the only radio we had was walkie-talkie."

"Of course," she said. "I'm stupid. I sing. I guess I got my break after you left the country. Anyway, I'm doing all right. I'm out here to make a picture."

I whistled softly. "The publicity of your sister being mixed up in the Cullen murder isn't going to help."

"It isn't," she admitted. "Bennett Cullen was my attorney. Whatever else he was, he was a good lawyer, but I didn't like Carmen going around with him, and I said so, very plainly."

This was getting worse and worse. There were a dozen reasons why she couldn't go to the cops, but if she didn't, someone might lead the cops to her.

I looked at her. She had all the younger girl's looks and plenty besides. Carmen's face showed weakness. There wasn't any in Mary's. And there was a lot of character. I decided that I wouldn't want her mad at me, which made me think of something else.

She'd been mad at Cullen for running around with her sister. The question was, how mad, and if she'd done anything about it.

The thought was silly, and I tried to put it

away from me almost as soon as it came. She was no killer. Besides, I was certain that the Whispering Kid and his boys had killed the lawyer. Suddenly I wanted very much to talk to Carmen, to have a showdown with her. I said so.

"We'd better find out exactly what your sister knows," I told the singer. "It will be easier to decide what's to be done after that."

Mary Gilchrist glanced at her wrist watch, frowning. "She should be dressed by now. I'll go see what's keeping her." She disappeared into the hall and I took a turn of the room. It was a nice room. I've always thought you can tell more about people by the rooms they live in than by what they say.

This one had books and magazines scattered around, good books, the kind I hadn't seen for years. I'd been right. The girl was something extra special. She had looks, ability, sense, only I'd had it all figured for the wrong girl.

I heard her coming and knew from the way her heels tapped on the stairs that she was in a hurry.

"Carmen's gone!" she said, bursting through the archway.

I swung around, startled. "What do you mean, gone?"

She extended a scrap of paper which I took and read.

Am ducking out. It's better this way. I haven't caused you anything but grief. Keep your chin up and stay in there pitching. Be seeing you, pal. He's cute, but not my type.

Carmen.

I felt my face get a little red. I wasn't used to having people call me cute. But if Mary Gilchrist noticed my confusion she gave no sign. She was too worried.

I tried to be practical. "Any idea where she'd go?"

Mary shook her head. "We haven't many friends out here. We've only been in California two months, and the people we know are more my friends than hers."

"Take any luggage?"

"An overnight bag. The maid saw her going out the back way."

"What about money?"

"She has plenty I guess. I keep an account in her name."

I sat down. "Well, we were discussing what to do and I guess this solves it. If she gets out of town, she should be safe enough for awhile."

"I don't like it." Mary Gilchrist was frowning. "I don't like running away from things—it doesn't help. Those men, the ones who burned your foot, aren't going to leave you alone merely because my sister has run out."

She was right on that score. "I could run



out too," I said without conviction, for I didn't want to run out. I wanted to be around where I could see her again.

I was kidding myself, I knew. This gal was out of my class, way out. The house represented dough. From her account she was doing okay on the air, with a chance of going places in pictures. I shrugged. "So what do we do. We can't go to the cops. We actually don't know a thing. We're not even certain that Bennett Cullen is the man your sister saw killed. We think he is, but we're not certain."

"I'm going down and see Bill French," she said.

"Who's he?"

"Bennett's partner. He and Ross Thomas are the other two members of the firm."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### I'll Be Killing You . . .

I WASN'T very sold on the trip, but she insisted that I go along and tell what I knew and the way I felt. If Mary Gilchrist had asked me to jump over the moon, I'd have taken a running leap at it. She had all the looks that had attracted me to her sister—plus brains and personality.

The office was one of those fancy affairs with ankle deep brown rugs and leather-seated tubular chairs. I felt as out of place as a gold fish in a tub of champagne.

We didn't wait but a minute, although the reception room was filled with people.

Bill French turned out to be a fat man of about fifty, a smooth article. I guessed that he was shrewd enough to be anyone's mouthpiece.

He took both Mary's hands and led her to a seat, then he turned on the smile for me. I don't think he figured I was important, but he was the kind of lad that never overlooked any bets.

"This is Mr. McHale," she said. "A friend."

French nodded. "I'm glad you came in Mary," his heavy face settled into lines of grief. "You undoubtedly heard about poor Bennett. It will make changes."

"That's why I came to see you."

He held up a large hand. "I know that you're naturally worried about your affairs, but I haven't had time to even consider them. I've been busy all morning with the police."

"I didn't come here about my affairs," she told him. "I came about Bennett's murder. You see, I think that Carmen saw him killed."

The fat man started with surprise. "Saw him killed?"

She nodded, turning to me. "Mr. McHale knows more about it than I do. He'll tell you."

I started to tell him, but he held up one big hand. "Wait, I want my partner to hear this."

He flipped a switch and spoke into the office phone. A moment later a tall man came through a connecting door. He was almost as thin as Bill French was fat. A man about forty, his narrow head was entirely bald; a huge nose jutted from his face, making him look like an unpleasant eagle.

"This is Ross Thomas," French said. "Now, if you don't mind starting over again, Mr. McHale."

I started over. I gave them the works, all about the Whispering Kid and his pals and what they'd done to my foot. When I finished, the two lawyers looked at each other silently. French was the first to speak. He released his pent-up breath slowly.

"Well, what do you think?"

Thomas took time to answer. "I don't know what to say. I wish that Carmen hadn't run out. The police know that there was a woman with Bennett last night. They were seen at several night spots during the evening. They've been trying to find out who she is all day."

He hesitated. "I don't know exactly what to tell you to do. If the papers ever connect you with the case they'll have a field day, of course, but I don't see any other way out."

Mary said, "Don't mind me. Just tell me what to do."

He picked up the phone, called headquarters and asked for Captain Justin. After he'd given the captain the story he said, "You might get a quiet pickup order out for the younger girl. I'd appreciate it if you kept Miss Gilchrist out of it as much as possible. You can understand what the publicity might mean in her case. Yes, I'll send them down there at once." He hung up and looked at Mary.

"You know where to go?"

"I know," I told him. I'd known Justin when he'd been a sergeant. "Come on, Mary."

We went out. The elevator was too crowded to do much talking. I didn't speak until we reached the building lobby. "This can be bad," I warned in a low voice. "Justin is honest, and he means the best in the world, but he suspects everyone and he's thick-headed."

She gave a little, tired motion with her shoulders. "It can't be helped. It's my fault for not taking a tighter rein on Carmen. I let her run wild, I fear. I've been so busy. But I'm sorry that you got dragged in."

I shrugged. "I'm not important."

She turned to look at me. "Why are you always disparaging yourself? There aren't many men who would have gone to all the trouble you have to help me."

I said, "I don't see where I've been very much help, pal. I just brought you grief. You might never have known anything about this if I'd kept my mouth shut."



She shook her head. "Things of this kind usually come out. It might have hit me any time, without warning. Carmen's a little fool, but she's all I've got. Her welfare is more important than all the picture contracts and radio jobs in the world. I've got to find her. I've got to straighten this out somehow."

I didn't answer. In her trim tailored suit, she was about the nicest thing I ever hoped to see. I wanted to pick her up and take her away from there to some place where she wouldn't ever be troubled again.

But what could I do? I seemed to be so much of a jerk that I couldn't take care of myself, let alone a girl like that. "Let's go down and get it over with," I said, and held open the door for her.

The sidewalk was crowded, and I was paying much more attention to the girl at my side than I was to the pedestrians around us. I should have been watching. I'd grown up, watching every step I made, and my Army training had served to alert my senses, but having Mary with me was like a drug. I seemed to be moving through a golden haze that had no direct relationship with the world.

Not until I heard Big Louie Auerbach's hoarse voice in my ear did I realize my danger. Then it was too late.

"There's a gun in my pocket," he whispered. "A funny move and the dame gets it, right in the belly."

**M**AYBE it sounds strange. Maybe he wouldn't have shot, on a crowded street with perhaps two hundred people watching, but something in his manner told me that he would. I froze. I was more scared than I've ever been in my life.

Mary stopped and looked around. She was quick; she realized something was wrong. I guess it must have showed in my face.

"What is it, Tony?"

"It's death, lady," Big Louie told her. "There's a car parked round the corner with the engine running. Walk around and get in. Either of you try something cute and they'll scrape you off the sidewalk."

She didn't know what it was all about, but she kept her head. I don't know about her, but my legs felt like rubber as we moved to the corner with Big Louie tailing us.

Carl Hammer was under the wheel. He gave us a tight grin as we got in. Big Louie followed, crowding his bulk against the girl.

The car swung out into traffic and Carl said without turning, "Good work, chum."

Big Louie grinned. "Like shooting fish," he said. "I thought this McHale was a wise baby."

I didn't answer directly. Instead I said, "Look, what's the idea."

"Shut up." Big Louie reached across the

girl and slapped me across the mouth with the back of his hand. "That's for stealing my new coat, and this"—he hit me again, so hard that my head jolted back against the seat—"is for lying. You didn't know who the dame was, did you? You didn't know where to find her, and yet, you're walking around the streets with her as big as life!"

Horror gripped me. Big Louie was making the same mistake I had made. He thought that Mary Gilchrist was her sister Carmen!

I opened my mouth to protest, but the protest died. There wasn't any use of arguing here. They'd never believe me after I had denied knowing the girl on the preceding night. Better wait until I had a chance to think.

But there wasn't too much time. The car went out Sixth and pulled into a small brick garage building on one of the side streets. The front part of the garage seemed to be a small repair shop. A steel fire door in the rear wall slid back and we drove through into a second room. There was a loading platform at the rear.

We were ordered out, up three steps to this platform and through another door. Beyond was a small print shop with two men working at a small hand press. I didn't need to be told they were printing policy slips.

We crossed the shop and were herded into an office. The Whispering Kid was sitting behind a desk. He didn't get up when we came in, but he did smile, the same smile which had sent shivers chasing themselves up my spine the night before.

"Where'd you find them?"

Big Louie chuckled. "Just where I said we would. We staked out Cullen's office."

The Whispering Kid's pale eyes flickered. "Any trouble?"

"None," Big Louie was very pleased with himself. "I thought you said this McHale was tough."

The Whispering Kid turned to me. "So, you lied last night. I don't like liars."

"This isn't the girl I picked up last night," I told him steadily. "I don't suppose you'll believe it but she isn't."

"I don't. I had a look at her at Cullen's apartment. She left fast, but I had a look. It's the girl all right, isn't it, Louie?"

"Cinch," said the big man.

Mary Gilchrist's voice was unhurried and held no sign of fear. "You're mistaken," she told them. "I never was in Bennett Cullen's apartment in my life."

The Whispering Kid's lisp was more pronounced. "Now look, chick. You're just building yourself up for trouble, see. We don't want to hurt you, and we don't care if you bumped Cullen off. The bum had it coming anyway you look at things, but he also had a hundred grand that was ours. We want it."



"You mean you think *she* killed him?"

"What else," he turned to look at me, his pale eyes registering surprise.

I laughed. I couldn't help it, and I got a belt along the side of my head. Big Louie apparently didn't like laughter. It almost knocked me off my feet and I swung around, my fists ready, but he had his gun in his hand. I never saw a man so ready with a gun.

The Kid said, "What do you think's so funny, McHale?"

I shrugged. "For hours I've been figuring you killed Bennett Cullen and now you pull this."

"Stop stalling!" His lisp was so bad that I could barely understand him. "First you claim not to know the girl, second you appear with her at Cullen's office, and third you say that you thought I killed him. This doesn't make sense."

I started to explain, and then I didn't for I got the implication which I hadn't thought of a moment before. I was certain that Mary Gilchrist had nothing to do with Bennett Cullen's murder, but was I as sure that Carmen was equally innocent? I couldn't explain without involving the younger sister and I knew Mary would never forgive me for doing that.

Instead I shrugged. "Take it or leave it. I'm telling the truth."

"We'll leave it," he said. "Go on over and sit down in the corner, McHale. We want to talk to the girl, not you."

"Now listen. . . " I started forward but one of Louie's big hands landed on my shoulder and jerking me back, spun me around.

"You heard what the Kid said. Go on and sit down before you get hurt." He shoved me toward the chair so hard that I almost fell into it.

CARL CAME over to stand at my side. He didn't say anything, but I knew he was there to keep me quiet. The Kid seemed to forget that I existed. He turned his full attention to Mary.

"Look, sister," he lisped up at her. "We haven't a thing against you, see. It's this way. We've been having some trouble with some guys here and there and we put up a hundred grand to quiet the rumble. Cullen was our mouthpiece. He was supposed to fix things, only the fix didn't stay in place, and a lot of our boys got knocked over. So we said, how come? Deliver or hand back the dough. He didn't deliver, so we put the heat on. He finally promised to come across last night. Just for fun, Carl here tailed him. He went to his box at the bank yesterday and carried away a package. We figure it was the dough. He carried it home, and he didn't go out until you picked him up in a cab around seven.

"We were supposed to see him at eleven-

thirty. We showed up, rang his bell and got no answer. I opened the door and you came bustling by me. I went after you but the elevator was an automatic and you were already inside, riding down. I went back, found Cullen on the floor with a bullet in his heart and the money not around.

"I didn't hang at that apartment too long. I went down to where Big Louie was waiting for me in the car and asked him if a dame had come out. He said yes. He said that you'd hurried up the Boulevard and that he'd watched because you were good-looking. He said you'd turned into the sandwich stand and climbed into a car.

"We went rushing over there, but you left before we got to you. However, we spotted your boyfriend's license plate. I'm telling you all this because I want you to realize that there ain't no use horsing. We know what we know and we want our money."

I looked at Mary. She was standing before the desk quietly. I couldn't see her face because her back was toward me, and her tone was so low I had trouble hearing the words. "I don't think you're fooling," she told the Kid steadily. "Tony told me what you did to his foot because he refused to give you information about the girl. Incidentally, although you won't believe me, I'm not the girl you saw at Bennett Cullen's apartment last night. I'm Mary Gilchrist and at the time you mention I was at the radio station, singing. I couldn't have been at the apartment."

The Kid started to speak, but he was cut short by Big Louie who suddenly let out a yelp. "Say that again?"

"Say what?" She turned toward him in surprise.

"Why, that you're Mary Gilchrist. Can you prove it?"

She was startled. "Why, yes, that is, I have my driver's license in my bag, and my studio pass, and yes, I've got a pass from the war department with my picture on it. I needed it for USO shows."

"Show me!" The big man was excited.

For answer she dug down into her bag and passed over the required items. He stared at them, then at her. "Well, what do you know. . . "

The Whispering Kid lisped impatiently. "What's this got to do with it?"

"Everything," Big Louie was still staring at the girl. "They had a special program on last night, see, from ten till two and she sings. I'm nuts about her singing, I always listen."

"So what?" the Whispering Kid was still not impressed.

"So I was listening last night. I have the car radio on, listening while you go up to Cullen's apartment. I'm listening and she's singing right at the same time that the girl



busts out and goes racing down to the sand-which stand. So, how can she be on the air and running down the Boulevard at one and the same time?"

**THE KID** was angry. "I don't know, and I don't give a damn. All I know is that this is the jane I saw coming out of Cullen's joint. Maybe it was a transcription."

"Naw," Big Louie was positive. "It was a live show. It wasn't her, Kid. It couldn't have been. I know she looks like this other dame, but it couldn't be, I'm telling you."

The Whispering Kid stared at the big man as if he didn't quite believe him, then he said to Carl Hammer, "You saw her, Carl. Take a look, what do you think?"

Hammer had been standing at my side, a gun in hand. He'd showed little interest in the argument, paying most of his attention to me.

Now he turned and took a step forward.

I didn't wait for more. I reached out, caught the gun with my left hand and hit his wrist hard with my right. Surprise and pain made him release his grip. He let out a yelp which caused Big Louie to spin around, the Kid to leap from his chair. But they were too late. I already had Hammer's gun reversed and had them covered.

"Take it easy," I warned. "I've had quite a beating from you buzzards, and I don't like it. I'd get a lot of pleasure out of shooting one of you, or for that matter, all of you, and I think the cops would give me a vote of thanks."

They believed me. They stood perfectly still, watching.

"Get over against that wall," I ordered. "Dig your noses into the plaster, fast."

Again they obeyed although the Kid lisped. "You're making a mistake, McHale. I won't forget this. If what the girl said is true, you have nothing to fear from us but I don't like to—"

"Save it," I told him. I stepped forward quickly, got a gun from beneath his arm, then one from Big Louie. Then I looked around. There was a small washroom off the office to the right and I herded Carl Hammer and Louie into it.

"Don't be in a hurry to bust the door or make noise," I warned. "I'm taking the Kid for a little ride and you wouldn't want him to get hurt, would you?" I slammed the door and turned the key, keeping the Whispering Kid under my gun.

He said again, "You'll be sorry for this, McHale."

"Tomorrow, maybe," I told him. "Right now, you're the one who will be sorry if anything slips. We're going out and get into that car. You're going to drive. You're going to

take us downtown. Understand. I don't want to have to say a word. If it gets necessary to say anything, I'll say it with this gun."

He was no coward, but I guess he realized I wasn't fooling. We went out, climbed into the car and he touched the horn. The fire door slid out of the way and we drove through the outer garage and reached the street.

Not until we were half a block away from the garage did the Kid speak. When he did, I realized that inside he was raging. He was one punk that didn't like to be shoved around.

"Better shoot me now," he said in his lisping voice. "I'll get you for this."

"Keep talking," I said, "and you'll never get anyone again. The girl told you the truth back there, and we don't want any trouble with you. Drop us at First and Broadway and keep going. I don't give a damn where you go, but the next time we meet, I'll start swinging first."

He didn't answer as he wheeled the car through traffic. Not until we were on the curb did he say, "You talk big, but words never killed anyone. I'm going to keep checking up, just to see that the girl isn't throwing a curve. If we find out she lied, you won't be as lucky next time."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Bigger They Come . . .

**WE DIDN'T** head for the police station. Things had changed since we'd talked to Bill French and he'd called Captain Justin. Then we'd been certain that the Whispering Kid and his boys had done for Bennett Cullen. Now I wasn't certain at all. If the Kid was telling the truth, he'd had nothing to do with Cullen's death. Who then had killed the lawyer?

I wanted a chance to talk to someone who had been around town in the last year, someone who knew what was going on in the hot spots and among the easy money boys.

I thought of Pete. It ended by us taking a cab out to the apartment. He was awake and dressed, which was surprising, for it was only one o'clock and he seldom got up before three.

He started to bawl me out as I opened the door, then he realized that I was not alone and shut up. As Mary came in he gave a half gasp, then jumped to his feet. "Hello, Miss Gilchrist. You don't remember me, but I played on one of your programs. We were the guest band and—"

"I remember you perfectly." She took his hand.

"Where'd you meet this bum?" He indicated me with a jerk of his head, then his expression changed. "Oh, no—you can't be! Not the girl in the drive-in stand?"



I said that she wasn't and made him sit down. I used five minutes to explain exactly what had happened. "So you see," I added. "We're in a spot. If the Whispering Kid is telling the truth, it looks as if Carmen didn't tell us all that happened. Maybe she shot Cullen herself, but I've got another hunch."

"What's that?" His thin face was intent, interested.

"Well," I said, "the Whispering Kid and his boys were pressing Cullen for the return of their payoff money. It's a cinch Cullen wouldn't want to pay it himself, not unless he had pocketed the original dough. Therefore he'd put the bite on the man he'd paid off to."

"Well?" They were both leaning forward eagerly.

I shrugged. "Well, supposing the man— whoever he was—didn't want to come across. That left Cullen in a spot. He knew the Whispering Kid and his lads weren't the type to take no for an answer. They'd paid for protection, then hadn't gotten it and they wanted their dough back.

"Cullen might threaten the unknown man. He might say that if the dough wasn't forthcoming he'd tell the Whispering Kid who had it and let him collect direct, so the man could have shot Cullen to close his mouth."

Mary Gilchrist let her breath out slowly. "That's a clever piece of reasoning."

Pete shrugged. "It's a guess," he corrected her, "but not a bad one."

"Now," I said. "I've been away a long time. I don't know who's running payoffs in this town. But you've been around, Pete. Take a guess."

He wet his lips nervously. "You hear a lot of things around the night spots. I've got some ideas, but I'd like to do some checking."

"Go ahead and check," I told him. "We'll wait here. I imagine the cops are looking for us since we didn't show up at headquarters. I don't want to talk to them until I know more than I know now."

"I'll call you," he said, and was gone. I didn't expect his call as quickly as it came, and I didn't expect the news he had to give.

"Seen the papers?" His voice sounded strange over the wire.

"Of course not."

"Get one," he said. "I'm checking. I'll call you back." He hung up before I could say anything. I stared at the silent phone for a moment, told the girl what he had said and went down to get the paper.

The first look at the headlines almost knocked me over. They read: "Radio Singer Sought in Cullen Murder" and there was a three-column cut of Mary's face decorating page one.

I stared at it, then read the two column drop at the left of the page. Mary Gilchrist, star of

radio and screen, was sought by police for questioning in connection with the murder of Bennett Cullen, well-known filmland attorney.

There was a lot more of it. The story was carefully written. It intimated that the police held more information which they were not as yet ready to release. It made no assumption, but between the lines you could gather that the police intimated there was a better than even chance that Mary Gilchrist and the woman who had been with Cullen on the preceding evening were one and the same.

A story in an adjoining column caught my eye—an interview with Bill French in which he told the reporters that he was not only Bennett Cullen's partner, but also Mary Gilchrist's attorney, and as such was in touch with his client.

At the proper time, he added, he would surrender his client to the police. He refused to comment on whether Miss Gilchrist had been in Bennett Cullen's company on the preceding evening, but he suggested that anyone wishing to reach her should get in touch with him.

I frowned over this last, hesitated and finally went into a drug store and called a friend of mine at City Hall. He said he'd try to find out and for me to call back that evening.

Mary didn't say a word when I got back to the apartment with the paper. She just took it, her face losing color as she read the headlines. When she finished, she looked up at me.

"What's it mean, Tony?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, honey. This is getting thick. Maybe when we failed to show up at headquarters the cops figured that you'd been pulling a fast one and then lost your nerve. There's nothing to worry about. You were at the radio station last night. We can prove that you were on the air about the same time Cullen was killed."

"I'm not worrying about myself," she said. "I'm worrying about Carmen. Don't you realize what will happen when she reads this in the paper? She'll go to the police as quickly as she can get there."

"Which is what she should have done in the first place." My voice was sharper than I intended. I was a little fed up with Carmen.

"Yes," she agreed, "unless. . ." She didn't go on, and I knew why. If the Whispering Kid hadn't killed Bennett Cullen, perhaps Carmen had.

"Take it easy," I told Mary. "When she got into my car she distinctly said that she'd seen a man killed. She didn't say that she'd done the killing." I tried to make my tone convincing, but I'm not certain that I was very successful.

Her answering smile was weak. "You're a nice person, Tony."

I wasn't a nice person. I'd scrambled around for years, trying to make a living one



way and another. I'd never stolen blind men's pennies, but maybe that was because I'd never been that broke.

"Don't kid yourself," I told her almost harshly. "You don't know a thing about me."

"I know enough," she said. "It's strange. I never saw you before this morning. I'm in the worst trouble I've ever had, and you're the only one I trust."

**WE STOOD** there looking at each other for a long moment in silence. No matter what happened now, at least I'd known Mary Gilchrist. I'd never met anyone like her before. I never would again. There wasn't anyone else like her in the world for me. She was in a class by herself.

"Mary," I said, "Mary," and took a step toward her. The telephone rang.

I stopped. We were still staring at each other wordlessly. It rang again, and I moved to answer it.

Pete's hurried voice said, "Have you seen the papers?"

"I've seen them," I told him.

"Things are boiling." His voice had an excited note. "Cullen's death certainly stirred up this town. Boyce Gilbert wants to see you."

"Gilbert?" I hid my surprise. Gilbert had been a big shot before I went away, and from what I'd heard, he was bigger now. For three days I'd tried to see him and got the run-around. He had an interest in a dozen night spots, a lot of juke boxes, some said that he ran what slot machines still operated in the southern half of the state besides being one of the largest wholesale liquor distributors.

Yes, I'd wanted to see him. A word from him would have put me right back where I'd been before I left. But now, a little bell of caution rang in my brain.

"What's he want?"

Pete said, "Are you losing your mind, chum? Is he the kind of guy I go round asking what he wants? He wants to see you, and now. Get on your horse."

I got on my horse. I told Mary to sit tight in the apartment until she heard from me, and not to open the door unless she recognized my or Pete's voice through the panel. The Whispering Kid and his lads knew where it was. They might come around. Then I went down and turned the coupe westward.

Boyce Gilbert's office was on the Strip, that part of Sunset Boulevard between Hollywood and Beverly Hills which runs through a neck of unincorporated county territory.

The building was modernistic. A small, neat gold-lettered sign to the right of the entrance said, "Gilbert Enterprises." Very fancy, very open. I couldn't help remember when Gilbert had operated from the rear room of a speakeasy in the old days.

The blonde at the switchboard might have been a movie queen or a duchess. She remembered my face. I'd been there often enough, trying to see Gilbert. She gave me a fixed smile which said louder than words, "Run along, little boy, you know he won't see you."

I grinned back. "Look, sweetheart, the boss is waiting to see me. The name is McHale, Tony McHale."

She thought I was lying. She almost gave me an argument, then changing her mind, plugged in and spoke to Gilbert's secretary. I saw her face change with surprise. She had a half-dazed look as she unplugged. "You can go in, Mr. McHale. They're expecting you."

Boyce Gilbert hadn't changed much. He was a big man, with gray hair, a soft-looking face and softer-looking hands. He'd put on weight, but he was using an expensive tailor and it didn't show much.

"Glad to see you. Glad to see you, Tony." He pinned on a chorus boy smile.

"The hell you are," I said as I closed the door. "For a week I've tried to crash in here and only got my nose bruised. I tried your hotel and got nowhere. You're harder to see than a movie producer."

He looked pained. "Now Tony. I'm a busy man and my assistants try to protect me. If they didn't, the office would be cluttered up with bums."

"I can remember when your office was your hat." I was being purposely nasty. I knew from the fact that he'd sent for me and from the way he acted that he wanted something badly. I couldn't figure what it was. I didn't have anything he could possibly want, but dealing with a guy like Gilbert you had to do some shoving. He was used to shoving other people around. It was about the only language he understood.

"All right," he said, his manner changing. "So maybe you've got a right to be sore. Things have changed since you went away. The town's changed, new people have come in. I gave you a runaround. I've had to give a lot of the boys a runaround, but I could fix it up. I could see that you got your old spots back."

"What's it going to cost me?" Uninvited I crossed the office and sat down.

**HE STUDIED** me. His eyes were blue and sharp and hard. The flesh around them looked puffy and unhealthy at close range. "I want some information. I want some straight answers," he said, his well-manicured fingers playing with a letter opener.

"Maybe I haven't got it."

"You have." He dropped all pretense. "Pete Cross, the trumpet player was around this morning, asking funny questions. One of the boys put the arm on him and brought him



down here. He didn't want to talk, but we persuaded him. He told a funny story, so I had him call you."

I swore under my breath. "Where is he now?"

"Around." Gilbert gave me a tight-lipped smile. "He's safe."

"Like I'm safe," I suggested tonelessly. I still had the gun I'd taken from the Whispering Kid. It was in the waistband of my pants with my double-breasted coat buttoned over it.

"You're safe enough," he said, "if you give me some straight answers."

"Ask your questions."

"First," he said, "the Gilchrist girl told you who killed Cullen, didn't she?"

I looked at him, remembering that I'd decided that Cullen had been killed because he threatened to finger the payoff man who hadn't delivered protection to the Whispering Kid.

Gilbert could fit that description well. "She didn't," I told him. "I got the impression that the Whispering Kid was the killer, but if his story's straight, that's out."

He drummed on the desk with his fingernails as if undecided whether to believe me or not.

"Where is she? The younger sister I mean."

I shook my head. "I wish I knew."

"Where's the older one?"

I was suspicious. "What do you want to know for. She can't tell you anything. The only part of it she knows is what I told her."

"Where is she?"

I shrugged. He'd get it out of Pete if not from me. Better to seem to cooperate. "She's at Pete's apartment, but she can't tell you a thing. She was at the broadcasting station last night when Cullen was killed."

"I know that."

"And she's as worried about her sister as I am. More so, I suppose."

Gilbert considered me. "Maybe you're wondering just why I'm sticking my chin into this thing?"

"Maybe."

"It's this way," he said. "Since you've been gone I've moved up a little. Things have been coming my way, and some of the boys figure that I'm boss."

I didn't say anything.

"To stay boss," he added, "you've got to deliver. You can't promise protection and then fall down."

I still didn't answer.

"So," he went on. "I've been hearing things. I've done some business with Bennett Cullen, and certain people came to me through him. But in recent months I've understood that Cullen was doing business elsewhere."

"Who with?"

"That," said Boyce Gilbert, leaning forward and staring at me with glittering eyes,

"is what I'm trying to find out. That's what I'm asking you."

I shook my head. "You've come to the wrong exchange, chum. I don't know the answer either."

He didn't seem to hear me. "He and his partners have been getting big ideas. I couldn't be sure or I'd have stepped on them before this. You can tell Bill French that for me."

"Tell him yourself," I said. "Incidentally, that would be a very good motive why you'd want Bennett Cullen dead."

He gave me a frosty grin. "You're not so sharp. The cops thought of that first. They got me out of bed at five o'clock this morning."

I tried to laugh, but I didn't feel like laughing with him staring at me. "What about it?" I wanted to know. "How long do you keep me here?"

"Until you walk out. You're as free as air. I just wanted to talk."

"And Pete?" I didn't feel any easier. I knew Gilbert had a long arm.

"Take him with you. He's in the next room. We just hung onto him to make sure you'd show up like a nice boy, but one thing. He's nosey, tell him we don't like nosey musicians. Boys like that should be heard, but they shouldn't listen too much."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### My Crime Is Your Crime

PETE frowned over his drink. We were in a little bar, a few blocks from Gilbert's, talking it over. "The way I see it," he said, "Carmen Gilchrist is the key to the whole works. Find her and she can tell us who pulled the trigger on Bennett Cullen."

"Try and find her," I said. I was pretty worried. I didn't know what to do about Mary. She was due at the radio station at eight for her evening broadcast and the cops would be there, waiting for her.

He ignored me. He was thinking aloud. "Everyone's trying to find her. Us, the police, Bill French, and now Gilbert. I suspect the Whispering Kid and his pals are looking also. Does it strike you funny that she's creating so much attention?"

I looked at him. "Meaning what?"

He shrugged. "Meaning nothing, maybe, but you can think of it this way. There's one character who wants her worse than any of the rest of us. That's the man who killed Cullen and who she must have seen."

I shook my head. "Maybe, but there's something wrong with your theory. If the killer knew he'd been seen, why didn't he go after her last night? The Whispering Kid went after her, and I thought he was the killer, but it seems . . ."



"Couldn't it be possible that he is?" Pete asked. "After all, you haven't talked with her since you talked to the Kid."

He had something there. Still, for some reason which I couldn't explain, I believed the Kid's story. I said so.

Pete finished his drink. "Have it your own way," he said. "I don't know why I bother with this. It's none of my affair. Go on, take your girl friend down to the cops. She has an alibi, and I guess they can't drag you in, but the publicity isn't going to do her a bit of good."

He turned and walked out. I called after him, but he didn't stop. After a few minutes I left and went back to the apartment.

Mary was worried. Her face was white as she said, "I thought something had happened to you."

"Would it have made a lot of difference?"

She didn't answer that. "I called Bill French. There's nothing new about Carmen. At least he didn't know of anything."

"You didn't tell him where you are?"

She shook her head. "He didn't want to know. He said he'd have to turn me over to the police. I asked him about going to the broadcasting station. He advised me not to."

"So, we're right where we were."

She nodded, and we looked at each other unhappily. "It seems as if everything we try to do only makes things worse."

I nodded. "You hungry? I'll go get something."

"I'll go with you."

I shook my head. "Wait here. There might be a phone call or something." I went out and down to a little delicatessen. The place was full of customers and I had to wait. I was gone longer than I expected.

Hurrying back along the dark street I was surprised to find Mary waiting for me at the apartment entrance.

"What gives?"

She said, breathlessly. "It's Pete. He called from a phone booth in the broadcasting station. He said he was waiting there, thinking Carmen might come, trying to contact me. He said she'd just come into the building, and that he'd try to hold her, but we should get over there as soon as we could."

I swore at myself for not thinking of that angle. "Did he say anything else?"

"Only that the murderer and the cops might have the same idea and for us to get over there."

"You're not going," I told her. "That's the last place you're going. The cops would pick you up in a minute."

"I could wait in your car. I've got to go, Tony. I can't just sit here waiting any longer."

I knew how she felt without hearing the little break in her voice. It had been a tough

day. She was under a strain, the like of which she'd probably never experienced in her life.

"Come on," I said, setting the groceries on the step, "but remember, you stay in the car. We'll have no arguments about that."

I PARKED in a lot a block away from the station and hurried along Sunset on foot. In front of the big building, long lines of people were waiting to get in to see the various audience participation shows. I walked around them, into the wide foyer.

A plainclothes man I recognized was idling beside the information desk, a second beyond the entrance which led back to the studios. They paid no attention to me, but I guessed that if Mary Gilchrist had been with me it would have been a different story.

Pete wasn't anywhere in sight. Neither was Carmen. I hesitated. Maybe she had not found her sister there and gone. Maybe Pete had followed her. Then I saw the Whispering Kid.

He was standing outside the doors, watching me. He saw me glance in his direction, turned and vanished into the crowd. I swore to myself, and looked around for a phone. I'd decided on what I meant to do. I was going to call Boyce Gilbert and tell him that the Whispering Kid was at the broadcasting studio. I was going to offer him a trade. I was going to tell him that I knew where Carmen Gilchrist was.

It was a test. By Gilbert's reaction to the news I hoped to guess whether or not he had killed Bennett Cullen. I moved to the phone booths with this in mind. There were four of them. Three were occupied, the fourth at the end was dark, but the door was half-closed. I suppose that's the reason that no one was using it. I suppose they thought it out of order. I hesitated for a moment myself, but none of the occupants of the other booths showed any signs of finishing their conversations.

Impatiently, I moved to the end booth and tried to force the door inward. Something caused it to stick, not solidly, but as if it were being held in position by something which yielded a little under pressure.

I peered in, and then I gasped. A man's body was huddled inside that phone booth, half sitting, half leaning against the wall. The light wasn't good in that end of the foyer; it was very dark inside the booth. I fumbled, found and struck a match, holding it through the crack where the door failed to close.

I think I knew what the match would show before I stuck it into the booth. But even so I wasn't prepared for the wave of nausea which hit me at sight of Pete's dead face. It lasted for the moment the match burned, then was replaced by a blinding rage.

Cullen's death hadn't affected me directly. I'd worried about Mary being drawn in be-



cause of Carmen. I'd been afraid of both The Whispering Kid and Gilbert—but this was something else!

Pete was dead. The only guy who had cared enough when I got back to see that I had a place to sleep. Pete was dead because he'd been trying to help me, not because he had any interest in the business personally.

I struck a second match, and it showed me how he'd died. I could see the handle of the knife, still protruding from his side. Who'd killed him, why? I didn't know but I guessed that the killer had spotted him, following Carmen, had followed Pete, perhaps been in the next booth when Pete phoned the apartment and talked to Mary.

I didn't think that Pete had ever left the booth. I thought the killer had pulled open the door, knifed him and then pulled it partly closed as Pete slumped to the floor inside.

I went over and leaned against the wall and lit a cigarette with hands which shook. I had to do something; I meant to do something. It was a good bet that if the murderer had rid himself of Pete it was because he meant to take Carmen away from the broadcasting studio, and he didn't mean to be watched.

He had Carmen then, and if he could silence her, his troubles would be over. How to prevent him from silencing her? That was my problem at the moment. If I could persuade him that the girl he had wasn't Carmen, but instead was Mary . . .

I thought about that for a long minute. One of the other phone booths was now empty. I went into it and called Boyce Gilbert. "I've found that girl," I said, when he finally reached the phone. "She has a story to tell. Something which might interest you."

He sounded surprised. "You found her? Where is she now?"

"She'll be at the apartment," I said. "Pete's apartment." I gave him the number and hung up. Then I called Bill French. When the lawyer answered I said, "Look, I need some help."

"Help, what kind?"

"Gilbert's coming over to talk to Carmen," I said. "I don't think she should talk to anyone without having a lawyer around."

He said, "That's smart . . . you really you've found her?" His voice changed.

"That's right," I said. "And now I'm worried about Mary."

His voice sharpened. "What about Mary?"

"She didn't take your advice," I said. "She tried to sneak into the broadcasting station. She wore one of Carmen's dresses and changed the way she fixed her hair. She's vanished."

He swore. "I'll be right out."

I hung up and went outside. The Whispering Kid was standing at the edge of the steps, pretending to be very interested in traffic. I

paused at his side." Still want your hundred grand?"

He swung around, his painted lips twisting back from his teeth in a snarl. "You kidding?"

I said, "I'm going to be doing business in this town for a long time. I don't like you, but I'm not hunting trouble either. The guy who got your hundred grand is coming up to my apartment in half an hour. Be there, and bring your boys along."

He was suspicious. "What kind of deal is this?"

I shrugged. "This guy made the same mistake you did. He grabbed Mary instead of her sister. I've got the sister at my apartment."

He considered this. "If you're putting something over, I personally will fill your stomach with lead."

"Get your playmates," I said, "and don't be late." I started off to where I'd left the car, but I kept watching to see if he tailed me. He didn't. He stood where I'd left him for a couple of minutes. Then he went in the opposite direction.

**M**AKEUP, and clothes, and hairdo. I was amazed. She hadn't had but a few minutes while I waited impatiently in the living room of her Beverly home, but when she came downstairs I almost thought that Carmen had actually returned.

They looked so much alike anyhow, and whoever had killed Cullen certainly couldn't have gotten more than a quick look.

"All right," I told her. "It's up to you. I don't know how this will work out. It's a chance, and a long one. We may get hurt."

"Who were you calling while I dressed?"

"The police."

"You mean they're going to be there!"

I shook my head. "I've got them out looking for Carmen. I told them where to look."

She was startled. "You know where she is?"

I shrugged. "One of three places—I don't know which. That's what we're going to find out. Did you ever play poker?"

She bit her lip. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at it. What do I have to do?"

I told her. I explained carefully. "It depends on you, baby, and whatever happens, don't forget that you're supposed to be Carmen, and that it's Mary you're trying to save."

Things weren't easy at the apartment by the time we got there. Bill French was hunched over in the corner, saying nothing. Boyce Gilbert and one of his men stood just inside the door. The Whispering Kid and Big Louie were across the room, and the Kid was calling Gilbert every name he could lay his tongue to.

Another minute and I think the whole thing might have blown up like a keg of powder, but our arrival centered all their attention on us.



I walked in first, with a gun in my hand. The Whispering Kid saw it; his eyes bugged out a little. "What kind of a cross is this?"

"Shut up," I said. "The gun is just to make sure that none of you gets excited and hurts someone. You all know Carmen, don't you? At least all of you know her by sight."

They didn't say anything. You could have cut the tension in that room with a knife.

"Now," I went on, "we aren't people who want trouble. We like to mind our own business, when you let us alone."

Boyce Gilbert cut me short. "What's all this about? Stop making speeches and get to the point."

"The point is," I told him. "That Carmen saw Bennett Cullen murdered last night. She knows the man who did it—and that man is in this room."

They looked at each other like a bunch of stray dogs who trusted no one, not even themselves.

I went on, "Carmen doesn't want trouble. She hasn't wanted it from the first. All she wanted was to stay clear. She's proved that by not going to the police all day."

"But the killer wouldn't let her alone. He seized a girl at the broadcasting station an hour ago. He seized her because he thought he was getting hold of Carmen. Instead he grabbed her sister Mary."

They were all tense, listening. "Now," I said. "Carmen still doesn't want trouble. She'll still not go to the police, but she does want to be certain her sister's all right. She'll trade. If the killer will release Mary Gilchrist and have her here within the hour, this girl won't call copper. If he doesn't, she'll yell her head off."

Gilbert made an impatient sound. "What's this to me? I didn't kill Cullen."

I raised my eyebrows. "Listen, Boyce. It's all a part of a little game. Carmen is close-mouthed. She wouldn't even tell me who the killer is. But she gave me all your names. She said that one of you killed Cullen."

Again they looked at each other. "To hell with this," said Gilbert. "I'm leaving. I want no part of it."

"Likewise." The Whispering Kid motioned Big Louie toward the door. Silently I watched them go. When the door closed Bill French said sourly.

"Looks like your little scheme didn't work, McHale."

"Scheme, what scheme?"

"Trying to bluff them?"

I shrugged. "If they think it's a bluff they'd better think again." I walked to the phone and called the police department. When I got Justin on the wire I said, "Standby. This is Tony McHale. I might have news for you in an hour." Then I hung up.

French rose. "Well, I guess I can't do you any good here."

I shook my head. "Not unless you can persuade one of those buzzards that we mean business."

Not until he had gone did Mary speak.

"I was never so scared in my life. I was afraid to open my mouth, afraid I'd say the wrong thing."

"You did just right," I said. "We're playing a busted flush. We're trying to make them think we have a strong hand when we haven't a thing. All we can do now is to wait."

"You think they'll—he'll—release Carmen?"

"He's got to do one of two things," I said, "either try and kill us, or release her."

"You're right!" Bill French was standing in the door, a gun held loosely in his hand. "Only I'm going to do both, McHale. I'm going to kill you, and then I'll take care of Carmen. These girls look too much alike. I spotted Mary as soon as I came in, but the other men were fooled. However, you apparently suspect me or you wouldn't have included me in your little party. If you suspect, you'd keep on nosing around. It's better to kill you now than later."

MARY was watching him, her mouth a little open. "Tony, you mean. . . ."

"That Bill French killed his partner?" I nodded. "Looks that way. You see, I think they were trying to take over the town, take it away from Boyce Gilbert. Cullen talked the Whispering Kid into paying his protection money through them, only they failed to deliver on protection and the Kid got sore. Right, French?"

The man's teeth flashed as he stepped in. "You're smart. Cullen was yellow, ready to throw up the game. I wouldn't stand for that. I meant to scare him out of town, but I had no chance. He was out with Carmen all evening. They finally came back to the apartment. I was hiding there. I tried to wait for her to go but just as she was leaving, the door bell rang. I knew it would be the Whispering Kid after his money. I had to work fast."

"I stepped out and let Cullen have it. I meant to get the girl too, but she moved fast. She was out the door before I could shoot, and I couldn't go after her because the Kid chased her to the elevator."

"While he was following her down the hall, I ducked out and went the other way down the fire escape. I meant to pick her up in front, but the Kid and his boys spoiled that too."

"Well, I had the hundred grand in my pocket, so I went out to the Gilchrist house and waited across the street, meaning to get her when she came home. You spoiled that by trailing her. I saw you. I thought it was the

*(Continued on page 97)*





# WHEN GANGDOM RULED

•AN ILLUSTRATED CHRONICLE OF THE TURBULENT TWENTIES• *by* WINDAS

Rivalry between the various booze-barons reached a peak of reprisal and horror in 1926.

Harry Burgess lost his vast east side beer franchise (and his life) when he was handed a package purporting to be a cash settlement for the sale of his holdings to his chief competitor, Jo Hirschman.

But the package was a time bomb....

①



Gunfire shattered the quiet of Brooklyn's warehouse district the night that the Donahue-Loritz factions fought for control of the local liquor racket.

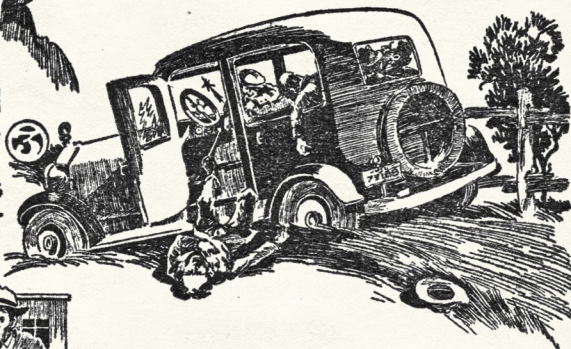
It shattered also the lives of so many of Loritz's henchmen, that thereafter Donahue had things all his own way, until Prohibition officers got busy and gathered him in.

②



'Jiggs' Bortelli and Marcus Loeb patched up a truce between their gangsters, deciding that after all a good neighbor policy might prove more profitable. But it didn't last, and finally Bortelli and four of his followers were found in a bullet riddled car outside Cleveland.

③



Both the Valentine's Day massacre in Chicago, and Detroit's Meisner affray, were the result of gangster reprisals, and only went to prove the fallacy of the saying that there is honor among thieves. But out of evil there sometimes comes good, for whichever gangs won, the country at large benefited by the demise of the others.

WINDAS. 1946



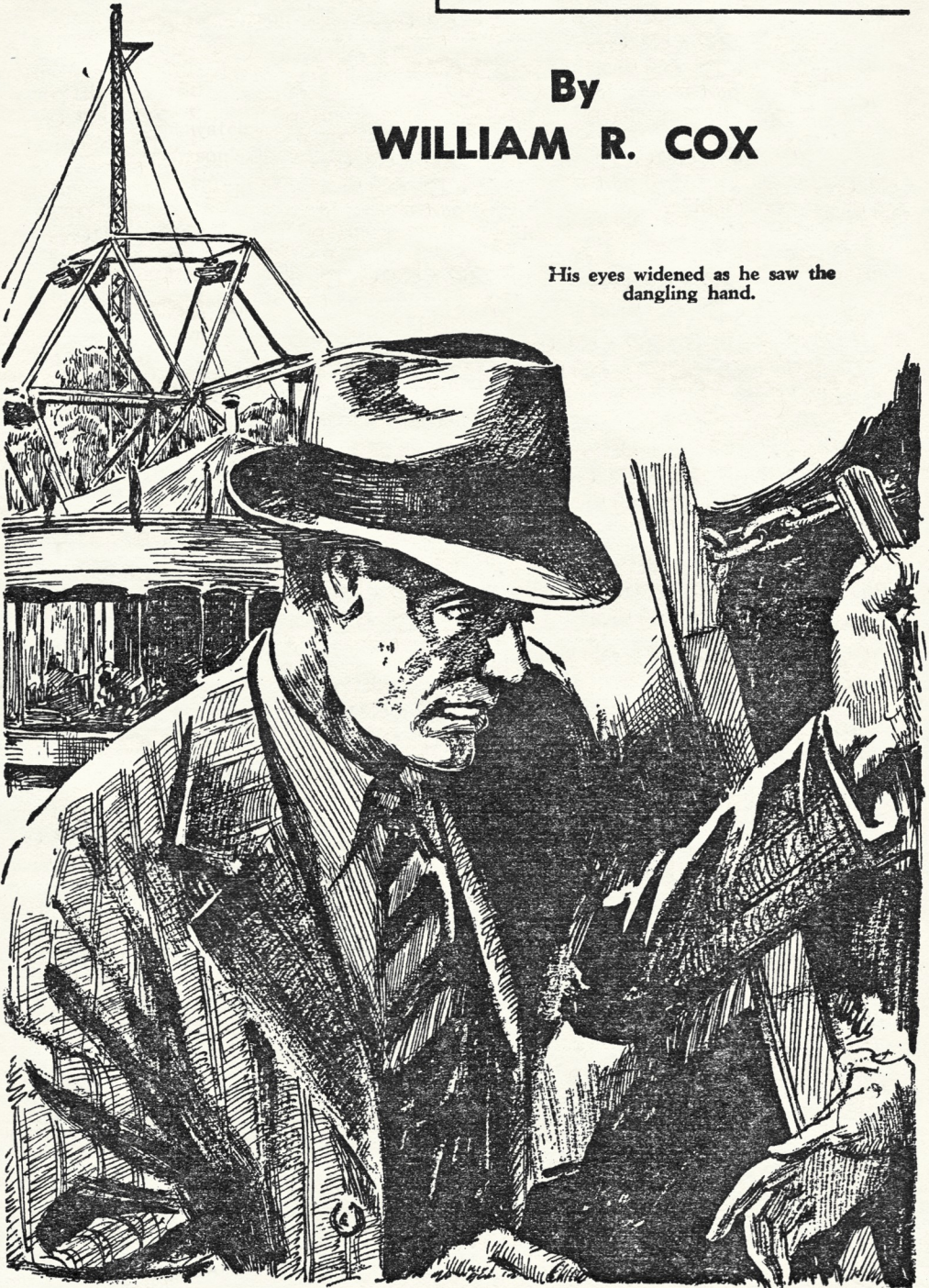
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# THE CORPSE

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By  
**WILLIAM R. COX**

His eyes widened as he saw the  
dangling hand.





# DROPS IN

*Carnival people have their own strange and fascinating world,  
with its peculiar language and time-honored customs. But  
sometimes an outsider slips in—dead! And then—Well,  
see for yourself. . . .*

SLICK said, "Baby, I gotta go. You don't understand, because you ain't carney. You're Broadway, but my folks were kinkers. I was raised on flokum and dukie. The Little Doc is in trouble—and I've got to get with it."

"But the contract!" wailed Jinny Rye. She was dancier-slim and pretty as a speckled pup. She wanted to marry Slick and dance all over Broadway and Fifty-Second Street; since leaving the carnival the two kids had come close to realizing their ambition. They were good, they were show-hardened, they were tough in a nice way.

Slick said, "Look, the deal is upstate. A rattler'll take me and bring me in three days. We'll open with bangles, baby, honest. Nobody is going to stop us—we're on the ladder marked 'Up.' But I got to get with it."

She said, "I'm going, too. If you go, I go with you. Doc gave us our stake, and even if he is a woman-hater, I'm for him."

"Okay," said Slick. "Pack the keister, kid." He was lapsing into the carney argot at the thought of the ferris wheel, the smell of the grease joint, the remembrance of the sounds of barkers, bag guys, shills along the midway. Porton's Shows, now owned by the Little Doc, was in a jam. He had to go see about it. The telegram had been from Abe the Barker and was urgent: "DOC ON STUFF CLEMS HOSTILE JOHN LAW ROUGH CHAINED TO RAILS. . . ABE." Which, freely translated, meant that the Little Doc was drinking whiskey while the carnival was in difficulty with the local people of Kentville, the sheriff had moved in, and the show was legally prevented from moving on.

Slick was happy stowing his checkbook in his pocket; he had saved a couple of thousand dollars since leaving the road, and Doc was welcome to every cent of it. The little, morose man had always treated Slick well when Slick was a stick for the med show, and as Jinny had remarked, Doc had given them their original stake to try their dance act in Big Time.

On the train, going north, Slick considered. There was no one in the show to take over when Doc was on a bender. Truthfully, the medman was the biggest attraction of the carney. His semi-humorous, commonsense health talks drew the Clems and Judys, and held them. His remedy was nothing harmful—even if lacking qualities Doc never actually claimed for it. People bought the stuff at a dollar a throw after looking at Doc's sixteen-inch biceps and tremendous chest development, always set off by immaculate white silk shirts. Thus initiated, they would hit the midway happy and spend their money.

Cleanliness, was Doc's fetish, along with vegetarianism and other quirks of diet. He was a misogynist, a periodical drunkard and a hypochondriac, but he was the biggest little man in carney business. Porton Shows could have been larger; but Doc, with something mysterious in his past, did not want it that way. He concealed his dipsomania as best he could and took his elaborate trailer and the lumbering red wagons into the sticks. He was content—or so it seemed.

They got off the train at Kentville—a slim young couple, dressed in Broadway clothing, as alien as Arabs in this rural county seat. They stood, looking about for conveyance to the lot. It was a farm center town, with jeeps and hay trucks and a brick courthouse. One hotel, Slick thought, and some motels. He took Jinny's slim elbow and steered her toward a sedan which appeared to be a taxi. The driver slumped behind the wheel, a hatchet-faced man with a dented nose.

Slick said, "We want to go to the carnival grounds."

The man roused himself, stared at them. He called loudly, "Hey, Pat!"

From the station came a man who was tall as a tree and wide as a house. He had a wall-eye and a belly hanging over his pants top, and he wore a slouch hat. He was immediately identified to Slick's practiced eye as local law. He lumbered toward them, and the cabbie said, "Carney lice."



Slick said, "Hiya, Sheriff? What's the beef against the carney?"

Pat Golan rubbed a ham-like hand across his belly. "None of your damn business. Git goin'!" His voice was not loud, his manner indifferent. He took it for granted that he was the law, and that was that.

Slick said, "Now look, Sheriff. Doc never tolerated grifters or broad tossers or shell men. If he owes a feed bill. . . ."

Pat Golan's wall-eye went away, came back. "You got money?"

"To pay a right bill," said Slick. "Not for graft."

Golan's face purpled, but his voice still was calm. "You better git. There's a train south in four hours."

**T**HE SHERIFF turned and walked away, and it was like a house being moved to another site. The cabman sat in his car, sneering. Two or three characters, who looked like tough town lads, snickered.

Slick shrugged, picked up the two bags and said, "C'mon, baby. We can take a bus or walk."

There was a bus. Doc always managed to get near a public conveyance line. It was late afternoon when the creaking vehicle discharged them at the lot. Slick inhaled the carney, through nostrils, lungs, and pores. It was there, nestling on a nice lot. It was complete. But it was much too quiet.

Not a wheel was turning. There was no bally; there was no smoke from the grease tent. Slick carried the bags toward the spot aside from the midway where Doc always parked. The two trailers stood, empty.

The one Doc lived in held two bunks. Slick put Jinny's bag in it. He took his own over to the med trailer, which he had once driven. It was small, and he knew it well. He threw his new, pigskin bag into a corner and frowned, staring around the narrow confines. It looked like this trailer had never been occupied. He climbed down and walked around to the back, where a platform could be let down for Doc to make his bally.

Once Slick had operated the mechanics of this stand. He reached out and touched the lock. It was open, the padlock hanging loose. Knowing Doc's neatness, this seemed funny. Slick worked the lever which lowered the semi-circular platform. The wall opened, came slowly down. The sun was getting low, but the purple shadows from the hills had not quite touched the trailer. Slick knew the mechanism was not working right. He went closer, gave a tug at the tailgate which formed the platform.

His eyes widened as he stood rooted, staring. Then with frantic haste he shoved the dangling arm back into the small space,

threw his weight against the metal of the gate. His face was close to that of the woman, to her dead eyes, open but unseeing. She was small and blonde, with dark streaks close to her scalp; her lips were white under heavy rouge. Yet she was not of the carney, he knew, as he worked desperately to close the trailer. There was something of another, different world about her. It was in the smart suit she was wearing, in the planes of her delicate, weary, but once beautiful face.

He got the lock fastened, wiped it with his handkerchief. There had been no sign of a wound, but the woman had been murdered, he knew. Murdered and stuffed into Doc's trailer—and Doc was on a binge. Slick walked away, shaking to the knees, but determined to put distance between himself and the corpse. He thought of his bag, not two feet from the compartment which housed the body, but he would not need the bag if things went wrong now. That gargantuan sheriff would see to that, once it was established that Slick and Jinny had been of the carney.

He saw Jinny, walking toward the **VENUS IN SOAPSUDDS** tent, where she had once worked as the end girl on the line, taking a daily bath in simulated suds for the wide-eyed rubes. The show was closed—everything was closed. It was chow-time, Slick realized. Then he saw Abe.

Abe was old-time, with a rum nose and rheumy eyes and a brass voice. He came toward them, shambling a little, dressed in checks and a red tie and exuding incongruous grief. He greeted them with open arms and said, "Let's duck into the lead joint and spiel. Hell's t' pay, kids, all hell."

They went into the shooting gallery, which was tightly tented. They sat on boxes and Abe said, "What happened, we got the license here eke okay, see, and the John give us free. Doc was showin' signs, but he stayed off the stuff for a day. We did good business, but there's tough Clems here. The farms are loaded. City boys come for war work an' stuff. And then the grifters moved in. Where they come from, I don't know, but they muscled in."

"But Doc never allowed cheaters with the show," Slick said.

"Ole Peg-leg opened with shells," said Abe. "You remember him—Sing Sing had him. Doc went out and chased him. John Law comes up and asks if Peg-leg is hurtin' Doc."

"You mean the sheriff was with the grifters?"

"Mebbe," said Abe. "He played dumb. A cabby named Noddy Hunt, a broken-nosed bum, kept bringin' 'em out. There was a show-down, a Clem got hurt, the grifters disappeared. They came to get Doc, plastered



the show with a \$5,000 fine. But Doc was on it, then, and chased the deputies. Then Doc disappeared."

Slick said, "It was a frame, Abe. The sheriff and his pal the cabby run in cheaters, then clamp down on the show. Doc could have beat that old rap. What happened to Doc?"

"Whiskey," said Abe virtuously.

Slick hesitated. "Abe, was there a woman? A small, blonde woman in a gray suit, kinda uptown?"

"Not that I seen," said Abe. "The John is goin' to foreclose on the show as soon as he can get a judge to hold still. That's the fix now. The big lug owns it here, believe me, kids."

Jinny said, "He won't let you operate, will he?"

"He won't let nobody do nothin'," said Abe emphatically. "We're runnin' outa punk, even. In another day we got to scram, all of us, or starve."

"I can see it," said Slick. "I haven't got five Gs, either. Is there anyone in the show who has dough?"

"We got a grand, together," said Abe mournfully. "Not another sou."

"I got two thousand," said Slick. "Doc always has punk—if we could only find him."

"He ain't around or about," said Abe. "He wasn't due for a bender, either. He had a lost weekend last month."

Slick said, "Look, Abe. Don't let the performers get panicky, see? Spread it around that I'm here and I'm loaded. Jinny will stick with the kinkers tonight while I look around."

"You look around much here and you'll get your tail inna can," Abe warned. "We can't even go to town. Some John Law is always startin' an act with us if we show in Kentville. These is tough rubes, kid."

Slick said, "They know the answers, all right. But I'll look."

Jinny said, "Don't get into trouble, Slick. Maybe we can raise some money, somehow."

He said, "You go with Abe, baby. You stay with the girls until I come and get you, understand?" He made a sign they each knew—it meant trouble. She would understand and keep it from Abe and the others. He walked off into the gathering gloom, without any idea what he should do, but with a certain conviction of what must be done.

**WORKING** in the dark, it was a terrible task. He was very slim and not tall, and although his arms and legs were steely-strong from dancing, this was a job for a bigger man. He got the back of the trailer opened and the body rolled over.

Even in the gloom of night he could see that

it was a knife wound. It had not bled externally very much, but the high class suit was ruined. He got a cloth and worked hard on the place where it had been, and he hoped the bloodstains would disappear.

He got the corpse on his shoulder and staggered off. It was fine that the Doc always parked at the far edge of the lot. He made it into the small copse of woods he had spotted. He went as far as he could go, then gently put down the body. The woman hadn't weighed very much, at that. He was tempted to cross her hands and put pennies on her eyes, but that was silly stuff. He said a little prayer over her; he could not help doing that much. Then he left the woods very quickly, going back to the road where he had caught the bus.

One came along, which he boarded. There were a couple of rough-looking men aboard, in waist-high denims and checkered shirts, and they had a pint bottle out of which they all drank. They paid little attention to Slick. He got off in front of the courthouse and looked at the lamp-lit main street of Kentville.

He had only one advantage: he knew the Little Doc better than anyone. He knew the peculiar workings of the medman's mind. Doc was smart, brave, and rugged, but he had cliché mental processes—he did certain things in a certain way. Slick was aware of that, and if he could put his knowledge to work, he thought he might find Doc. That was the most important thing—the only thing which would help. Find Doc.

He found out one thing in a couple of moments—there was only one bar of any size in Kentville. It was called The Cafe, and it was on the main street next to a package store. He went into the package store, where an indolent clerk sold him a pint of whiskey.

Slick said, "I had a pal used to buy this brand—little man with big shoulders. Did you ever see him? He was through here lately. Called himself Doc."

The clerk said, "Yeah—you mean the carney doc. He bought a quart last week. Haven't seen him since."

Slick walked out as fast as he could. He had an idea there were people who would not want the clerk to talk so freely, but he had always found that someone was dumb in any racket, and the clerk fitted the part. Down near the courthouse again, he paused, utilizing the shadow of an old, thick oak tree to conceal himself.

One quart would not hold Doc very long. One quart scarcely got him started. There had been a beef at the carney and Abe had said Doc was beginning then, and that he had run off some law. So that would account for the quart.



Doc never carried a supply of liquor, in fact was a prohibitionist of the first water when not on a tear. Therefore, Doc had not bought his whiskey in Kentville, because none of the biggest stores carried the little-known brand which was his favorite.

Slick leaned against the tree, thinking. He saw a door open at the side of the courthouse and a huge figure emerge. The light fell across the gross face of the Sheriff. Then the door clanged with a steely sound. A car chugged up and the Sheriff went toward it.

Slick ran along the side of the brick building, keeping in the shadow. The pint bottle was a lump in his pocket, but he clung to it. He heard the cabby—Noddy Hunt—call, "Everything okay, Pat?"

The Sheriff grunted a reply and got into the cab. The gears ground; it was apparent that Hunt did not take good care of his jalopy. Smoke trailed to Main Street where the cab disappeared.

Slick walked back to the front of the courthouse. A lanky man in homespun came from nowhere and said, "What's your name, bud?"

"Jack," said Slick calmly. "What's yours?"

The lean man said, "I'm a constable, bud. Don't git fresh with me."

Slick said, "I'm looking for my cousin—a girl. Where's headquarters?"

"In the jail," said the lean man. "We don't allow vags here, men or gals. You better leave town, bud."

Slick said, "I'll take a look in the jail, officer. My cousin was a small blonde lady, older'n me." He was treading dangerously, but he thought he might have another dumb-bell and he wanted information desperately.

"I reckon you will, at that," said the officer complacently. He reached out and grabbed Slick's elbow. "Walk!"

They went down to the door from which Slick had seen the sheriff exit. It clanged heavily behind them, and they were in a bare room with one desk and one chair and a rack of guns behind a locked glass door. There was another door leading inward, to which the constable had keys. Slick went close to him, and the officer dragged Slick through and into a corridor. It was the most primitive of detention cell blocks.

The officer threw Slick heavily into one of them and said, "Pat'll wanta see you. He don't like slickers lookin' for women."

There were two more steely bangs, then Slick was alone. He waited a moment, reached into his pocket and took out the keys he had picked from the constable's pocket while they wrestled. Chuckling, he let himself out of the cell.

He walked up and down the corridor, but he was the only occupant of the block so far as he could see. He was, after all, a dancer,

not a detective or tough guy, but he had certain facts in his possession. He was carney-trained, and to be stupid was the cardinal sin.

He went back through the first iron door. He looked around the bare room, which seemed too bare, even for this neck of the woods. He saw a door and went to it. It was locked. It led to some place in the rear of the courthouse, which was interesting. It was a wooden door, and he tried the keys. Although none quite fit, he was able to make one do. He got the latch turned far enough, took out an ordinary card and worked it. The door fell open.

He went through another room, which had a steel hook in the wall at a suggestive height and no furniture at all. Pat Golan was beginning to assume the proportions of a jailer of a type some small communities do not even know they elect to office. There was another door, just as easy as the first.

Manacles clanked and a voice said, "If you don't let me out, so help me, I'll kill you!"

Slick swallowed. It was pitch-dark in the room, except for the light slithering through the doorway, accentuating the shadows.

Slick called, "Hey, Doc."

There was a little silence. Then Doc said, "How did you get here? You're supposed to be making good on Broadway, you and your girl."

Slick said, "I got some keys. You remember Mysto used to teach me how to use keys?"

Doc said, "He's got my feet and wrists manacled. I'll kill him!"

Slick crossed the room. There was an iron bed; Doc was spread-eagled on it. Slick worked the wrist irons first. They were a little rusty, which made it tough, but by bending and twisting with careful hands, Slick got them loose. Doc worked them together, restoring the circulation.

He said conversationally, "They had to do this, because I hit them a couple of times. That cabby, that Hunt, and Golan himself. They've got old Peg-leg in with them. They want the show, all of it."

"It's a queer racket," said Slick. "Stealin' a carney."

"Damned strange," said the little Doc. "How you coming with those leg irons? My circulation is all right in my feet. I've been concentrating on them, in case they let me loose for a moment. Is everything all right with the show? How did you find me?"

Slick said, "I'll have the irons in a minute. The show's closed tight." He said nothing about the whiskey clue, and how it had led him to believe Doc was not on a bender, because Doc never let on he drank. But he put the bottle from his pocket on the cot, just in case. In a moment he heard the screw



top come off and a gurgle of liquid. Doc did not drain it—he just took a touch for strength, and that was fine.

Doc said, "There! That's it. Let me stand."

**S**LICK stepped back, careful not to lend a hand. Doc was only five-four, and although he was as big as Joe Louis in girth and as well proportioned, he was sensitive about being short. He grumbled now, "They've fed me nothing but meat and bread and water. Side meat. My poor stomach."

Slick said, "You didn't eat the meat?"

"It was my duty," said Doc stiffly, "to my show and myself. I had to remain alive. These rubes are trying to steal my show. You know how I hate law suits, publicity of any kind. They shanghaied me, trying to utilize this fact."

Slick said, "They'd have had you in another day. The sheriff's got a writ."

"Peg-leg," said Doc. "Golan and Hunt."

"You can't just kill them," Slick protested. He thought of the small, blonde woman in the woods. He said, "Can you walk? Let's amcsray."

Doc said, "I can walk." They went through the first room. Doc glanced at the hook on the wall and said flatly, "They threatened me with that. They have a bull whip."

Slick said, "We've got to get out. If we can pay off the rap and take the show out, we can think about gettin' even later."

They went into the bare office. Slick was beginning to sweat a little. If the constable came back, or if one of Golan's deputies walked in, or the sheriff himself came back from his ride, there would be hell to pay.

Doc said, "Just a moment." He went calmly behind the desk, opened a drawer, took out a telephone. He dialed long distance. Slick danced with impatience and fear. Into the phone, Doc said calmly, "State Police Headquarters nearest to Kentville, please. . . ."

Slick said, "Ohmigosh." Yet he could not mention the corpse of the woman and tell Doc where he had found her. The Little Doc was such a woman-hater that Slick was not eager to talk to him about a woman killed and stuffed into his trailer.

Doc got his connection. "I want a man down here at the Porton Shows. I'm the owner, and people here have been giving me trouble. I paid my license, but there is a mob of crooks operating here and the local sheriff. . . . Ah! You know him?" Doc smiled grimly.

After a moment he hung up. As he did so the door creaked and swung open. Someone was coming in from the street.

Slick went behind the opening door, flattened himself against the wall. Doc simply

dropped down behind the desk. The desk was a little wider than Doc, and Doc was short enough to get out of sight. The lean constable entered, closed the door. Slick leaned away from the wall, ready to pounce.

The officer hesitated a moment, then placed a stiff piece of paper upon the desk, weighing it down with a paper weight. He walked to the cell block door, opened it and went inside. The door clanged behind him.

Slick jumped, swinging open the exit. Doc came from behind the desk, looked at the piece of paper, picked it up and read, "Writ for attaching. . . . H'mmm. Judge Lea granted the paper for taking over the show, I see." He put the paper carefully in his pocket and walked with dignity into the street. Slick closed the door quietly behind them, locked it and left the constable's key in the lock.

At the curb was a small sedan, the motor still running. It had official plates. Doc said, "Stupidity, that's what counts in our favor. You drive." He climbed in and sat straight in the front seat.

Slick scrambled behind the wheel. Inside the jail were sounds of discovery; it was time to go. With the writ issued, he had an empty feeling that all was wrong, but they were at least free and he could collect Jinny and Abe and hit for the state line, at least. And Doc always had some cash somewhere to start over. . . .

At the corner of Main Street he turned slowly. Two of the toughs who had ridden in on the bus with him were there. One was calling to a third, in front of The Cafe.

"C'mon, Sam. Sheriff's sworn us all in. He's goin' out t' take over the damn carney where we got cheated."

They were all making for a truck. There were a dozen of them. If Golan had gone on out to start proceedings, there would be other deputies with him. Maybe they would hurt Jinny. . . . Slick depressed the accelerator and the constable's car leaped onto the road.

Doc said, "There's Peg-leg, Hunt, and the sheriff. Peg-leg came in with his grifters. I threw them out, but Golan was with them. They gave him an excuse to plaster me with a fine, hold me so that I could not pay it, then take over the show."

Slick said, "It sounds like a wild and woolly plot."

"Most crimes are. But they happen."

Slick said, "I don't see how the State Cops can do anything against county law."

"If there is crime, a straight John Law will want it fixed," said Doc. "They're peculiar in that respect, if they're straight. Not many, I find, have anything but larceny in them, but the State cops here are good."

Slick said, "But—but how about murder?"



"There has been no murder—yet," said Doc grimly. "Peg-leg and Noddy Hunt. I know them."

Slick said, "I caught on that Hunt was a carney once. He made a crack. He called Jinny and me carney lice. That's our lingo."

Doc said, "Very observant of you, Slick. Must you drive so recklessly?"

Pat Golan and his deputies might even now be assaulting Jinny, Slick thought. He went around the last curve to the carney lot, but as yet there was no sign of riot. He eased off, braked in behind Doc's trailer. He took a deep breath and said, "Doc, there has been a murder."

Doc said, "What? Who? If they've hurt any of my men—"

"It—it was a woman," said Slick desperately. "A small, blonde. But not carney. She wore a gray suit. Somebody stabbed her, Doc. They—they stuck her inside the platform of the bally stand . . . you know. I took her out, Doc. I put her in the woods. She was kinda little, and didn't weigh much, and . . . It wasn't so hot, Doc. . . ."

There was absolute silence. Slick shivered and said, "You ain't sore at me, are you, Doc? I hadda get rid of her. I didn't know where you were, then."

Doc said, "No. I'm not sore, Slick. Not a bit sore. Of course not. You always do the right thing. That's why I—that's why you're making good in the Big Time. You have an instinctive capacity for doing the right thing. It is a gift. No—I'll retract that. It is a matter of having the right heart, the right soul. You have it, Slick. You did right."

Slick said, "I felt sorry for her. She was so little. Like Jinny."

"How was she killed?"

"A shiv," said Slick. "Someone stabbed her."

"I see," said Doc. "In my trailer, eh? Let's wait a moment, since there is no violence."

**THEY** got out of the car and went to Doc's big trailer. He went inside and flinched at sight of some of Jinny's things strewn about, but he took hold of himself in a big way, Slick thought, and went to a coffee cannister perched precariously on a shelf and took it down. Working the lid a certain way, he removed it to reveal that the cannister was made of steel and that it contained a wad of green bills. There was enough money there to pay off \$5,000 several times over, Slick guessed. If that writ had not been issued all would have been well. But with the sheriff on the lot, and his deputies ready to get rough, it was not good.

Doc mused, "So . . . they did not get it. But they knew. She knew. . . ."

Slick said, "You—you knew the lady, Doc?"

"She rapped to me about Golan," said Doc, still in a voice unlike his usual deep tones. Slick had never seen him in this mood, and it was strange. "She came here and told me that Golan was trying to take over my show by planting the grifters, then putting a big rap on me."

"When was that?"

"Just before the deputies came," said Doc. "I went out and raced them off. When I came back, she was gone."

Slick said excitedly, "Someone heard her. Someone knew she had sung to you about the grift."

"Let's go, son." Doc put the money back in the cannister and replaced it on the shelf. His wide shoulders were very straight, and he seemed more than five feet four now, Slick thought.

They went toward the midway and the performers' tent, and then they saw what was happening. There were deputies scattered all over, awaiting a signal. The truck with the denim-clad toughs came up, brandishing clubs. Golan was taking it easy, never expecting opposition, but ready for a concerted attack upon the carneys if they got tough.

A whistle blew off to their right. Far down the road a motorcycle or a trooper car was racing, but if Golan took over, the damage was done. Slick drew in his breath as men moved to close in on the tent where Jinny was telling the carneys about Broadway.

Before Slick could give voice, the Doc made a trumpet of his hands; his old, bull voice sent a pealing cry struck into the night:

"Heyyyyyy, Rube!"

They came like locusts. The razorbacks, the kinkers, the barkers, the bag man, the shills and sticks—they all came, for to fail to answer a "hey, rube," was to be ostracized forever from the carney. They came with sticks and blackjacks and one big canvasman carried a maul. They came wearing the traditional white armband or scarf and fell upon anyone who was not so marked.

Doc and Slick hastily donned handkerchiefs. A form arose and swung at them with a two-by-four. Doc caught him. The man went up in the air, reversed, landed head down against a tent stake and lay still. Slick picked up the scantling and whaled a running deputy over the small of the back.

They made for the performers' tent. The lights were out—the girls would be holding still, but ready. Slick got up to the slit and called, "Jinny!"

Mazie, the palmist, said, "She went out."

Slick wheeled and ran frantically, everywhere. He thought he saw Golan once, towering among a suddenly panic-stricken mob of



deputies, but the sheriff melted away into the night.

A figure came at him without a white band, and Slick used the club on its skull. The man moaned and lay still. It was one of the three tough drunks. Slick jumped over him, making for the Doc's trailer, remembering that Jinny's clothing was there, thinking she might have gone there.

The fight was general, now, and the deputies had rallied a little. They outnumbered the carneys—Golan had shrewdly seen to that. Doc was in among them, using only those powerful hands, tearing men off their feet, tossing them like sacks of wheat against a wagon or a tent.

Slick sighted the trailers. There were several men around them now. Slick slowed, using caution. He came up behind one large fellow and laid him flat with a whack. Men's backs could not withstand the scantling, he thought grimly. He slid closer.

Out of Doc's big trailer came Jinny. Someone was shoving her from behind. She stumbled and almost fell, then ducking low, she brought her head up into the man's middle and reached clawing, long fingernails to slash his face. The man was Noddy Hunt, his hatchet face livid with rage as he sought to evade her hands.

Two deputies sprang to Hunt's assistance. As they touched Jinny, Slick saw red. He leaped, all prudence deserting him. He got the nearest man full across the face with his crude weapon. The second swung a blackjack.

Slick went to his knees. He heard Golan's detached, cruel voice, "Kick him to death. Take the girl."

Slick rolled, bringing up his knees. His trained dancer's muscles gave him the balance, and when the mace-swinger came in with heavy boots, Slick jack-knifed. His heels jammed the man's face. In another motion he was on his feet. A third attacker started for him, but Jinny stuck a slim foot between his legs and the man went down as Slick jumped on his neck. It was carney fighting, down to the bricks, nothing barred, no quarter asked for.

Golan roared thickly, "Have I got to take this shrimp myself?"

Then Hunt was in, and Slick saw a knife flash. He thought of the dead woman in the woods. He groped, came up with the two-by-four.

Using it like a battering ram, he lunged, trying for that crooked nose.

He missed. But he got the end of the stick into Hunt's mouth, just as the blade swished by his chest. He pulled back, then swung the club. Hunt pitched on his face. Jinny cried, "Look out, the big guy!"

He scarcely had time to duck. Golan was in, moving amazingly fast for such a giant. One hand grabbed Slick, held him helpless. The other held a limp blackjack. Golan raised it for the finisher.

Slick kicked for the groin. The mace descended. It was curtains, Slick thought, just as things looked pretty good. Curtains . . . and Golan would be able to toss Jinny in his jail. . . .

Then the blackjack disappeared. It just seemed to vanish into the night, and Slick was able to wrench loose and stagger to Jinny's side. The assailants were all down. Jinny said, "Look! I wouldn't have believed it!"

The Doc had come from behind. He had taken off his coat and the silk shirt, which was not immaculate after his jail stay, hung on him in tatters. The immense biceps and shoulder muscles stood out in bas relief as the moon shed its pale light upon the strange scene.

The Doc had a collar-and-elbow on the huge sheriff. Golan stood, powerless, his thick lips parted, amazement in every line of his face. Never in his life had this Colossus found a man anywhere near his own great strength.

In an instant the Doc had moved in. His shoulders bent, his busy hands did things to the sheriff. Hoisting the giant, he flung him in the old Irish whip, spinning the bulk of the man, hurling him. Ten feet away Golan sprawled, and Slick almost could laugh at the spectacle.

Then Hunt was crawling. Slick had to get him with a quick kick. It brought him nearer the action. He saw Doc had followed up his move and was astride Golan. The sheriff's paws seized a leg and Slick trembled, but the Doc just stood there, and the Doc's terrible hands were slamming Golan's face into hamburger.

**T**HE TROOPERS came, three of them. The lights of the carney were switched on by the electrician, and all was illuminated. Men lay in distorted heaps all over the lot. Mostly they were invading deputies, but some of them were carneys, and the women came and took these away into the tents and nursed them with practised hands. The lieutenant of troopers was named Ballard, who wore a fine uniform and an intelligent face.

Doc stopped pummeling Golan, who was rugged enough, Slick thought, because the big man hauled himself painfully to his feet and in his monotone said, "I want every soul on this here show in jail. I call upon you all to he'p me."

Ballard said, "Are you the person who phoned me?"



Doc said, "I called you. I'm carrying Judge Lea's writ to attach this show in my pocket."

Ballard said, "Why, then, this man has his rights."

Doc pulled out the paper. He said, "Look at the date, Lieutenant."

Ballard adjusted the paper under the light. Noddy Hunt was crawling again. Slick watched him out of the corner of his eye, and was suddenly tense. The trooper said, "Why, this is not good until tomorrow. And how come you are in possession of it instead of the sheriff?"

Doc said, "It's my proof he brought hoodlums out here to attack my show. My people defended themselves. This man is one who considers himself above law, Lieutenant. He has kept me in his jail, threatened me, for days. The entire plot was cooked up by Noddy Hunt, an old carney man, who thought he and the sheriff could muscle in and steal the show."

Hunt got to his feet. He reached for the padlock on the back of the med trailer. He found it locked, as Slick had left it, and scowled. He wrenched at it, and Slick called, "It's no good, Hunt."

Hunt snarled, "There was a woman around here, Lieutenant. A small, blonde. She's gone now—"

"I found her," Slick said. "She's out in the woods."

Ballard's voice changed, became sharp. "A dead woman?"

"Knifed," said Slick. "While Doc was in jail, I found her. I got Doc out, and we came out here to see what we could find while you were on your way. These characters showed up and started a fight. They were grabbing my girl—"

"Where did you find this dead woman?" asked Ballard sharply.

"In the woods, over there," said Slick promptly.

"It's a dirty lie! She was inna. . . ." Hunt stopped.

Golan turned ponderously upon Hunt. He said, "I might've been fooled along here some'eres. Hunt, how'd you know where a dead woman was?"

Hunt, his mouth bleeding, talked thickly past broken teeth. "I seen him do it. The Doc. He knifed this woman and put her in the back of that there trailer."

"You saw this—and did not report it?" Ballard's eyebrows went up.

Slick went closer to Hunt. He made a sudden grab, held the man tight with one hand, reached inside the back of his shirt with the other. He came out with a sheath, made of leather, slung between Hunt's shoulder blades. He handed it without words to Ballard. Jinny

swooped, bent, picked up Hunt's fallen knife from the earth.

Ballard said, "I begin to understand."

Doc said, "This woman came to me and said they were out to frame me. She recited the details. Then she disappeared. I assure you, Lieutenant, I have no knife, nor do I ever use one. Stab wounds can be identified with the weapon which causes them, I understand."

Ballard said, "Yes, they can. If this man's blade fits the wound in the body he will be found guilty."

"I'd enjoy seeing him burn," said the Doc. His voice assumed the old bally accent, the attention-getting, easy melliflence which was not all fakery, but part of the drama which was the little Doc's life. "There is no lower form of human life, Lieutenant, than a woman killer who is also a traitor to his kind. I knew this Hunt, years ago. He was of the carnivals, Lieutenant, until he became so rotten he was evicted. Peg-leg, the cheater, was his friend."

This man came back, Lieutenant, to attempt to swindle me. He had the connivance of this goliath of a country bumpkin Hitler. They sent the grifters in. I threw them out. He came back with his charges and his tricks. I have defeated him, and I will prosecute this man to the limit for murder. He will fry slowly in the electric chair, for by his own admission, he knew the woman had been put in the trailer."

Even Slick was spellbound, as often as he had heard the little Doc spiel. The dramatics, underplayed for the trooper, got them all. The dead body of the woman among the trees forgotten, they were watching Noddy Hunt's torn face and the tense, long-jawed face of the Doc.

There was a long pause. Then Hunt screamed, "I didn't do it, Doc. Onna level. That big tick got me into this. It was her idea—hers, not mine, you hear? Then she got cold and rapped to you, and he wouldn't stand for it. He went for her. He's got a jackknife, a big one, in his kick right now. He did it, Doc. I won't fry! I worked the gimmick for him onna trailer, but I didn't do it. Golan done it!"

The sheriff stood swaying, his face swelling where Doc had let him have it. His voice was still calm, and Slick could see that it veiled great villainy.

He only said, "Hunt's a dope fiend. He's crazy. Who is this woman, anyway? An' where is she?"

The troopers had a big flashlight. Slick said, "Bring that." He led them into the woods. He said, "I brought her here. I felt sorry, her all cramped up in the little space back of that trailer. I found Doc and we



called you guys. That's all I know, Lieutenant."

Hunt babbled, staring at the composed, small body, "It's his own wife. Why should I stab his wife? It's Golan's woman."

Golan said nothing. Then Doc was bending close, his face like granite, his voice like a bell. "Lieutenant, look here. In her hand, as she was dying."

The hand was small-boned, almost emaciated. Now that the merciless flash held the woman in its grip, Slick could see that she had lived hard despite the fineness of her structure. She was gaunt, there were still hard lines about her mouth. Clenched in the hand was a bit of cloth.

Doc came up and jumped at the same time. He said, "The sheriff almost never changes his shirt." He yanked and the fat man's shirt-tail came out of his trousers. "He is so fat he cannot see beneath his belt. He never knew he had lost a piece of the material."

There was a small, torn spot in the shirt. Golan stumbled backwards, but two troopers had him. His pendulous mouth hung open, he was staring, the sweat was running down his face. Doc said, "Low metabolism. That is why he seems so calm. But look at him—a guilty murderer if ever one lived!"

Ballard said, "With Hunt testifying, it's a good case. I'll take them both. You should move the show, perhaps, but don't leave the state."

**THEY** went, the troopers and their prisoners. Some men came and took away the woman. Slick turned away, but the Doc looked on, his face granite-like.

In the trailer Abe was calming the carneys and getting the show ready to move. Ambulances were coming to pick up the wounded. Doc sat and stared at an old scrap-book he took from a locked cabinet in the back of the trailer.

Slick said, "It came out lucky. That woman, though—she haunts me. I'll bet one time she was a looker."

Jinny said, "Hush. We had better be going, Slick."

The Doc never looked up. They went out, and the troopers offered them a lift. They could make a midnight train back to the Big Street and their contract would be okay, Slick said. There was no use saying anything to the Doc when he was like that. Abe would have to take over for the moving. Doc would sure get several quarts now and really go on one.

Jinny said, "I looked over his shoulder, Slick. That woman—a picture in the scrap-book."

"What? Doc? You know how he hates women."

"Now you know why," said Jinny, clutching Slick's hand. "The picture was tagged 'Dr. and Mrs.'"

Slick said, "Ohmigosh!"

"Yes." Jinny nodded. "Let's get back to hoofing. Let's get far away. The Doc won't like us when he wakes up from this one. We know too much now."

"Ohmigosh," Slick repeated. "Good-bye to the carney. It'll be a long time before we can come back."

"But we'll come back," she sighed. "We always do."



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*It was a well-staged, and a very  
deadly, little show—until the  
cast started acting up. . . .*

THE minute he saw the fluttering beam of those headlights lancing up the steep winding road from the city, Joe Willis went into action. A dozen scrambling steps took him down from the scrubby bushes to the slippery, ice-coated roadbed.

He was chuckling harshly as he swung the big log into place, because he knew the moment for which he had so carefully planned and waited had come. He knew the guy toiling up the twisting, tricky canyon trail had to be Sheriff Sam Padgett.

Joe had clocked him up the trail three nights in succession, knew he drove like a wild man each night going home, and knew also that



# THE WAITING TRAP

By RICHARD BRISTER

Padgett didn't have a Chinaman's chance once his front wheels hit that log barrier across the roadbed.

"Okay, Padgett," Joe said softly. "Come and get it." He moved back from the road to watch it. "You'll look pretty, pitching down the side of that canyon!" He spat viciously to emphasize the emotions he felt.

The day the bulls nailed his kid brother, Harry, Joe had gone almost crazy. Padgett was in it, up to his ears, and it was as brutal a business as anything Joe'd ever heard of.

Harry had been with Shapiro and Nipper Daly on the Hardin City Bank caper. There'd been a lot of unnecessary shooting on that job. Harry had caught a slug in his leg and missed the get-away car, but he gave the bulls a good run. They'd finally holed him up in a two-by-four shack, down near the city dumps.

Padgett told them to fire the shack. Harry never did come out alive. The crowd heard the kid's suicide shot, from inside there, just as the flames got to him.

Joe crinkled his nose, as if he could smell the kid's flesh burning. Once he'd had a nightmare about it. That's how come he'd traveled the length of five states, to even up things with Sam Padgett. He was taking his chances. He was wanted in Idaho on a manslaughter charge; the feds were on the lookout for him. But hell, that was life, taking chances.

He heard Padgett's car coming.

"Come on, you fat slob," he said, as the car neared the trap he had carefully set. "Step on it!"

He saw the car skid, heard a grinding thud as it piled into the barrier. It plunged wildly over the rim of the gorge, went rolling and crashing down the steep side wall. It finally crashed to a stop against a huge pine tree.

Joe laughed as he rolled the log down after the sheriff's sedan. He wore a tight smile of triumph on the way to his own tiny coupe. There wasn't a chance in hell that Padgett had lived. Joe's only regret, as he kicked the coupe's starter, was that the kid couldn't have been here to see it.

**JOE** was sleeping the next afternoon when Hymie Fink came busting in on him, waving a newspaper.

Hymie was a rat-faced little punk who grubbed a fair living out of the numbers and a better one harboring an occasional fugitive from the law.

Hymie was in a sweat about something.

"You gotta get out, Joe. I don't want you. Not for a hundred a day. Not for—"

"What's the matter?" Joe snarled. "Gimme that paper!"

There was a front-page picture of Sam Padgett, propped on a hospital bed, swathed in bandages. Apparently both of his arms were broken. He wore plaster casts on them. His face was a mass of cuts and abrasions, as if he'd taken a header through his car's windshield.

Joe stood up, swearing. Hymie Fink's anxious eyes followed him. "You muffed it," he said scornfully. "You got to get—"

Joe said, "Cut your yapping. Just a couple more days, till I cool off a—"

Hymie's voice took on a hysterical note. "You get out! You leave, hear me. I—"

"You punk," Joe broke in. "You snivellin' little phony." He grabbed Hymie's shirt and shoved his fist in the rat-like face.

Hymie whimpered. "It ain't safe, Joe. You're too hot! Padgett's no fool. He'll figure out who tried to get him."

Joe shook the newspaper. "According to this, he don't figure nothing. Just a log on the road. It coulda slid down off the slope. It coulda fell off a truck, maybe. What makes you so sure Padgett's wise?" He grabbed Hymie's collar. "You been talkin' to people?"

Hymie cowered. "Hell, am I nuts?"

"I'm stayin'," Joe said flatly. "I'll pay you two C's. Don't give me no lip. I'll be a couple days yet. Get used to it, Hymie."

He felt his nose crinkle. That imaginary stench was back, assailing his nostrils. He knew why that was. He had failed to get Padgett.

Well, he'd get him, next time. He'd make sure, he thought grimly, and touched his .38 in its armpit holster.

Padgett left the hospital three days after he entered. The newspapers made a big splash about it. There was the usual sickening guff about the sheriff's "iron constitution," and "amazing recuperative powers."

Joe scowled at the pictures of Padgett, a fat moon-faced slob, grinning, complacent, despite the plaster casts on both arms.

Padgett was no publicity dodger. He knew the vote-getting value of his little adventure. The papers said his men wanted to mound a guard around his house until he got better.

"Don't bother," Padgett was quoted. "A policeman's job is protecting the public—not being protected."



"You fat four-flusher!" Joe spat at the newspaper likeness of Padgett. "You slob, you! I got to hand it to you. You sure are making it easy."

Tonight, he decided. Tonight, I'll get him.

Sam Padgett seldom succumbed to fear, but he had a strong presentiment of trouble this evening. He stirred in his chair by the open fire, and glanced at his gray-haired wife.

"Don't wait up for me, Ellen. I'm restless tonight. Might sit here an hour, 'fore I'll feel like sleeping."

His pleasant wife frowned. "What is it, Sam? You're worried."

The sheriff shook his head, frowning. "Just these darn casts on my arms. Itch somethin' awful. Run along up, now, Ellen."

He wished she would go. He had a notion there'd be company tonight. And hardly the kind for poor excitable Ellen. If there was to be shooting and such, he wanted her upstairs, out of harm's way.

She asked strangely, "You're sure you'll be all right, Sam?"

He nodded gravely. "Go along with you. What would folks say if they could see how you baby their sheriff?"

She smiled, reassured by the old joke between them. He watched her pad up out of sight.

**W**ILLIS made a wide circle of the sheriff's house before he risked crossing the lawn. He caught his breath in a harsh gasp of delight when, through the living room window, he saw Padgett's round figure propped in front of a flickering fire.

All alone! Sitting there like a fat gnome, a self-assured fool who figured he was going to live forever!

That crackling fire was right down Joe's alley. The noise would cover his entrance nicely. And even if Padgett *did* hear him, what could he do? With both arms encased in plaster casts, he'd be utterly helpless. Joe chuckled. He'd play the fat fool along a while, before he plugged him. Let him look Death in the face, like Harry'd had to, before he got it.

The back door wasn't even locked, he discovered, exulting. He let himself in quietly, slipped his shoes off and stood stocking-footed in the kitchen till his eyes got used to the darkness. When he could make out the gas range clearly, he crept toward the living room . . . and Sam Padgett!

When his groping hands found the knob, he jerked the door open, took three quick steps into the room.

"Don't move, Padgett!"

Joe had to admire the old boy's guts. Padgett just twisted sideways in the chair and stared quietly at him.

"Where'd *you* come from?" He lifted his arms in their heavy casts, then let them fall, as if the effort were almost too much. "Who are you?"

"Ever hear of the Willis brothers, Sheriff?"

Padgett said bleakly, "So you're Harry Willis' big brother. The tough guy—the one the kid was so proud of. You don't look so—"

"Cut that, Padgett." Joe snapped angrily. "If you got anything important to say, say it quick. I ain't here to play dominoes with you." He pulled his .38 out of its inside holster.

Padgett's pale eyes didn't waver. "So it *was* you that set that road trap, eh, Willis?" His eyes smiled a little. "For a big-time guy, that was clumsy. Should've made sure I was dead." He chuckled. "You surprise me, Joe. You really surpri—"

"Shut up!" Joe said. He found Padgett's calm strangely dismaying. Joe had killed men before, plenty of them. The others had cowered, pleaded with him. Padgett acted as if it was all a big joke, as if the prospect of a .38 slug in his belly amused him.

Joe tasted only bitter disappointment and hatred in this moment. The familiar stench came back to his nostrils, filling him with new fury. "Laugh!" he gritted. "Laugh, you fat moron. Laugh your guts out!" He pointed the gun straight at Padgett's round belly. "Laugh this off, while you're—"

Thunder crashed as he tightened his finger around the trigger. The noise of exploding gun powder completely filled the small room, and the buzzing reverberations seemed to take on a weird pattern of laughter. Joe went staggering backward, struck numb with terror.

The walls whirled about him, trembling, as if from an earthquake. Something ripped fiercely at his chest. His knees gave way, and he toppled heavily onto the carpet.

His own gun had not spoken. From Padgett's right hand, somewhere within its plaster cast, another gun had fired first. Joe's blurring eyes watched the plaster crack off Padgett's hand, and tumble down over the carpet.

Padgett had tricked him! Planting a gun in his hand, inside the cast, all ready for action. No wonder the fat devil had laughed, while Joe blustered and threatened!

Joe was faintly aware of swift footfalls coming down the stairway, of rustling skirts near him. And then Padgett's voice:

"It's all right, Ellen. Don't fuss now. The right arm never *was* broken. Just a little trick I worked up—but I didn't dare tell you. You know how you fuss about guns in the house, and this one wasn't six inches from you tonight, while you gave me my dinner!"



# THE CLOCK READS DEATH

*Take a trip with Hymie the Hackie and let him tell you how he found out that where there's a will—there's a slay!*



He gets up close and shoves the gat against my spine.

**N**OW Mamie, I know you don't like me to take your new fur coat back that I got you so you would get out of my lawyer's hair, but I tell you, I gotta.

Anyhow, you already got your good out of it when you walked up and down in front of Mrs. Schultz' window all afternoon and she told all the neighbors.

And if you will please stop wailing before the cops think we have one of their sirens in this flat, I will explain why it is a necessity

**By**  
**PARKER BONNER**



that I should get that coat before I have to report to work and listen to that female dispatcher Juanita complain because I miss work.

And like I say, it is mostly your fault, because you are always yapping at me to improve myself. I'm thinking about that when I tell this old Joe about reading in the paper how some old John leaves his favorite cabbie fifty Gs in his will.

This Joe I'm telling it to is a regular, which I have been hauling all winter, and usually I take him to Gyp McAvoy's nice quiet gambling joint.

Well, my passenger listens to what I tell him and he nods which same I can see in the mirror and he says, "That was a nice thing for the man to do, Hymie, a very fine thing indeed," only his voice sounds absent-minded when he says it, so I figure I'm catching a brush-off and don't say no more.

Well, anyhow, I get him to McAvoy's and he is half asleep or something. He comes to with a jerk when the cab halts, and as I help him out he says, "Sorry Hymie. I'm preoccupied tonight. I have had a bit of a tiff with my sister. Money you know. It upsets me. Always money."

He shakes his head and gives with a big sigh, and I am disgusted because what I tell him about the fifty Gs has not registered, but he tips me a fin which is not peanuts, so I figure that for five anyone can get preoccupied with me.

The next morning Juanita yells that this Joe wants I should pick him up at McAvoy's and I am surprised because it seems a long hitch for an old duck like him to put in at the tables. But when he shows, he is fresh and chipper like he just had a bath and a shave, so I figure I'm wrong.

I think he wants me to take him home, but instead he says downtown. I ride him down and he goes into a building and stays a long time. I am almost asleep when he returns and waves a paper under my nose. Well, I get my eyes open and he tells me to read it, so I read and it is all heavy looking legal business, and then I see my name and something about fifty Gs.

Honest, Mamie, I choke up and almost cry, and my head is whirling around so fast I can hardly drive him back up town. Finally we get up to the Murryhill and there is an old doll standing out on the sidewalk. She doesn't hardly give me the chance to get the door open before she waddles over.

"John, John McGillicuddy," she says. "Where have you been? Where were you all last night?" Right away I tab her for this sister with which he has been having tiffs.

I think maybe my fare will be put out, but I am wrong because he merely smiles as he gets out and says, "I have been studying the

law of averages as related to the turns of a roulette wheel."

The old girl squawks again, and says, "How much. . . ?" Then she recalls I am standing there with my mouth open, and tries to lead him into the hotel.

But he is not ready to go. He says, "A minute if you please. This is Hymie Beerman. He has been most kind to me and this morning I redrew my will, leaving him the small sum of fifty thousand dollars."

There it was again. He'd showed me the will, but it was still a jolt hearing it. I began to think that I wouldn't need to improve myself any more because from what I have seen of guys with dough they have not been exposed to much improvement.

I'm so busy feeling good that I hardly notice for a minute how the old doll takes it.

"Young man," she says finally, "you must put no credence in this will. It—it is only one of my brother's whims."

Well, whim or not, I am not worried, while she hustles the old boy into the hotel. I figure that a Joe who is smart enough to have that kind of mazoola to give away is smart enough not to let his sister talk him into changing that will.

So I shove off and am feeling very good all afternoon, which I should know by now is a sure sign of trouble coming. But I am not thinking of trouble at all except the usual with Juanita when I check in, and she tells me in her nasty way how I am getting popular with my Murryhill freight and the old Joe wants me to pick him up at ten.

**I** FIGURE that the will is okay or otherwise he would not wish to see me, and sure enough when I bring the subject up he smiles kind of like Santa Claus and says how it is his greatest pleasure to bring happiness to all and sundry. I do not know how to say thanks for fifty Gs because I never had no experience along that line before, so all the way downtown I am telling him what I will do with the money, like getting the kids a fancy education, and a new hack for me all fixed up like I always planned, with a magazine rack for the customers, and his name on a gold plate right under my license, because I think he maybe would get a kick out of knowing this while he is still alive.

Well, he does get a kick, and he makes some suggestions, and I'm telling you what we plan is the fanciest hack in the world, and finally he gets out at Gyp's place and tells me to wait, so I don't waste the time like some drivers I know but instead crawl in back and go to work on that correspondence course on chicken farming which you get me to take.

But I hardly get more than a page when out comes this old Joe. He seems to be in a hurry



like I never see him before, and he gives me an address over on Third which I don't think is a nice part of town.

I try and tell him so but he is agitated or something and only gives me short answers, so I don't tell him about the round the world trip which I plan to take you on, but just drive over to this address in silence.

Well, it turns out to be just a door opening on a crummy-looking staircase. He don't say nothing, not even telling me to wait. He just busts out and disappears up the stairs without even paying me. I figure I gotta wait whether he wants it or not. I reach for a butt and find I am out, so I walk down to a drug store in the next block.

I am gone maybe ten minutes because the wisenheimer which runs this store is quite independent, not having heard that there is a war over, and he takes his time waiting on customers.

When I get back to the jalopy I see that McGillicuddy has returned and is in the back seat, sound asleep.

Well, I am not surprised. He has been traveling at a great rate for an old Joe of his advanced age, so I do not wake him but merely ease in the gear so that the clutch does not grab like normal, and drive him back to his hotel.

He does not even awake when the doorman opens the hack. I get out and go round, figuring maybe I will have to walk him in in his sleep. I tap him on the knee, because he is kind of large to lift, and I shake him.

He moves sideways then, and he keeps moving. He would have bumped his noggin on the window if I don't catch him. I think for a minute he is sick, then the doorman flashes his light into the cab and we see his face is gray and he ain't breathing.

The doorman lets out a blat, then he turns and runs into the hotel. I switch on the dome light and I know that the old Joe is dead. Honest, Mamie, I am feeling bad. I like that guy like I like very few customers and I even forget that now I have fifty Gs coming. I try and move him into a more comfortable position because even a dead Joe should not lie that way. It is hard on the neck. And then I see his hand. It is all bloody and I think he has pinched it in a door or something until I look.

I get kind of sick then like the time I eat the preserves your mother made because there are some wire staples in his fingers like the kind Juanita uses to fasten our time and gas sheets together and I figure that a Joe does not go about catching his hand in a staple machine by accident.

Well, I know that the doorman has gone to call copper, and that maybe this will be unpleasant, but at least I try and set up the

old guy in a dignified position. When I get him parked in the corner, something falls from his pocket.

I pick it up from the floor and see it is a pad of paper with columns of figures written on it, one column headed, "Black," the other headed, "Red."

Well as you know I am not the gambling type, being only a dice man at times, when I think the game is strictly on the up and up, but I know enough to recognize that these figures are the ones which my old Joe is using to study the averages on a roulette wheel, and it is almost like he has left me a second fifty Gs, because the system must be good or he couldn't last for a full night at Gyp McAvoy's since I have heard a rumor that McAvoy's wheels are not the kind which you stay with long unless you have a very good system.

I am about to examine the pad, but I hear a siren and know that I will have visitors, and that there is no good in spreading a thing like this about and getting all the wheels in town broke by a bunch of undeserving coppers who wish to become wealthy on their nights off. I look around and there is a rip in the seat cloth which I have been meaning to get fixed, so I shove the little pad in this and pull the stuffing around so it don't show, and it is lucky I move fast because in a few minutes Park Avenue looks like Kline's store on a busy day, what with McGillicuddy's sister and the doorman and Captain Scott and his homicide boys besides the regular prowler car, and pavement cops which show up.

**CAPTAIN SCOTT** has me off to one side telling him all about what has occurred, just as I am telling you all the truth, only I do not mention the will or the fifty Gs because although Captain Scott means well he is a cop and cops are easy guys to get confused.

There is another bureau man standing there, and he growls like he is scaring somebody. "What is this," he demands, "a life history?"

"It's Hymie Beerman," says Captain Scott in a tired voice. "He is the longest-winded hackie in New York and I have found from experience that the only way to get the truth from him is to let him tell it in his own dumb way."

Well, I don't clip him because as I say I do not wish for him to be confused, but before I can crack back this old dame who is McGillicuddy's sister lets out a squawk. "That's him! That's the driver I was telling you about. That's the one my brother mentioned in that fool will."

"What will?" says Captain Scott, and I do not care for the way he looks at me because I can tell by his eyes that he is beginning to get confused.



I start to speak but he puts the arm on me and motions for the old dame to go ahead. Just like a woman, she spills the works, how her brother stays out all last night and when he pulls up he shows her this will which leaves me fifty Gs. She starts to add something, but Captain Scott says,

"What about it, Hymie? Why didn't you tell me about the will?"

"I cannot tell a lie. The lady is right. The old Joe did mention me in his will."

"There's your motive," says the old doll. "A man like this would certainly commit murder if he thought he was going to receive fifty thousand dollars."

"She is dead wrong," I say, "and no crack intended, and you should know that I am not so dumb that if I have committed homicide I would bring the body back in my hack. Furthermore, Captain, I know personally that this catfish had a tiff with her brother last night because he tells me so and further it is money which they argue about."

"Now, I am not one who goes about accusing people, but a dame who is arguing always about dough will not like it much if her brother goes tossing away fifty Gs here and there."

"You mean she killed him?" Captain Scott sounds as if he can hardly believe his ears.

"She does not do it personally," I say, "because a dame of her constitution can hardly carry an old Joe like this and put him back in the cab. But there are men in Manhattan, to say nothing of Queens, who for fifty dollars would knock over an old Joe and no questions asked."

"You have a point there," he admits, but even so they take me to Centre Street and keep asking me questions. Finally a cop comes in and whispers to Captain Scott and he listens and finally he looks at me.

"What was that address on Third Avenue where you say you took the old man?"

I tell him again and he says, "Hymie, that place burned out last month, and there is nothing there but empty flats which have not been repaired. Why would anyone want to go there?"

I am irritated. "Look, Captain," I say. "I've got my professional ethics. I do not ask passengers why they wish to go places. All I know is that the fare told me to take him to that address and I took him there, just as I said."

"I don't doubt you took him there," the Captain admits. "We checked on the drug store where you bought cigarettes and they remember you distinctly because you were very unpleasant about your change. But what I want to know is how you expected to get away with murdering him and bringing him back to the hotel in your cab?"

It come to me then that I should have recalled what I learned a long time ago, that the less you tell a cop the better off you are. I shut my mouth and don't say nothing, because now that he is confused there is no way I can make him understand the truth.

"Put him away," says Captain Scott.

"Yuh mean you're charging me with homicide?" I gasp.

"Just a material witness," he says.

One of the other men object. "He'll be out on bail."

"Who would bail him out?" asks Scott. "Besides, if they do, we can pick him up easy. Hymie wouldn't go more than twenty miles from New York. He'd be afraid the Indians would get him," which shows how dumb the Captain is because everyone knows there aren't no Indians east of the Mississippi.

**W**ELL they take me out to the booking desk and they are putting my stuff in an envelope when someone says, "Hello, Hymie. Hear you're in a jam?"

I look around and see it is Bertrand Howel who is a high class ambulance chaser who don't monkey with no petty larceny raps because it don't pay enough. I almost ask him to give me a lift, but I ain't got much money and he probably wouldn't be interested. So I am some surprised when he says, "I'm your lawyer, Hymie. Don't worry your head about a thing."

Well, I do worry about several things, and I don't get much sleep. Honest, them mattresses are as thin as your mother's blood and I am very low down in my mind when daylight comes, but with it comes Bertrand.

I do not understand why he is taking such an interest in my case that he gets up at six o'clock in the morning. But as soon as the turnkey lets him in he starts talking about the will which this old Joe made leaving me fifty Gs and how he is very happy for me and is convinced of my absolute innocence.

"Hymie," he says, "anyone in their right mind should see that you wouldn't hurt a guy that was doing for you what this old gentleman did, but it is a well known fact among my profession that a juryman has not got a right mind or scarcely any mind at all and that a smart prosecutor can get a conviction on nearly anything, especially when the defendant is a hackie."

"You are indeed fortunate," he tells me further, "that I was around last night, for I am one of the few mouthpieces in this city who am not opposed to hackies as a general thing, and furthermore I am a gambler because I am ready to take your case with no money down."

"Believe me, up at Sing Sing they are already dusting off the seat and making the



electrodes shorter because you are not tall. In short, my friend you are a gone pigeon unless I hocus-pocus that jury into letting you go. So if you will sign this bit of paper I will proceed to go about getting you out on bail."

Well, the little bit of paper is very simple. It says merely that I am willing for Bertrand to have half my fifty Gs when and if I collect, and in return he will serve as my attorney and furnish all needed expenses from his own pocket, including my bail.

Well, I don't like kissing away twenty-five Gs which I haven't even got into my hands yet, but as Bertrand points out, if they prove me guilty of homicide I will have nothing anyhow, because the law says that a man cannot get nothing from a victim that way, and besides not getting the money I will be dead and gone.

So, I sign the paper quick and I am glad I did, because if I had waited a minute you would have arrived like you did, all beefing and squalling and you might have scared him off. After all there are some things which even a lawyer cannot put up with—even for twenty-five Gs.

We can hear you, clear back in the cell block as you tell the desk man I may be a fool and a cheat and a crook, but I have not got the nerve to kill nothing, not even a kitten.

Bertrand looks worried and says, "Hymie, there are more men in jails today because their wives could not keep their yaps shut, than there are for manslaughter. We have got to find some way to content your little woman and make her get out and stay out, otherwise you are fried!"

Well, I know exactly what he means, but I also do not know quite what to do about it as the only way I have ever got you to hush up is to buy you something which you wish, and at this moment the only thing you are really wishing for with all your might is a fur coat.

So I tell Bertrand that, and he looks sort of strained like he has lost a very important case, but finally he says, "I will make the down payment on a fur coat for your frau if it will get her out of here, but you will have to give it back to me when you get the share from the old Joe's will."

Well, I have enough to worry me without having you crying and yelling around police stations and such, so, I say okay and sign another paper, and then he takes you out and buys the coat.

By noon I am out on bail, but I cannot work because they have grabbed my license, and I am irritated because as you know I have fixed up the hack with fancy gadgets and I am afraid Juanita will put in a substitute driver

who will not take care of them. So I sneak into the garage and take off my cigarette lighter and such.

The cops have searched the wagon and not been too careful putting things back. I hope they found a nice lot of fingerprints because lots of people ride in hacks, and they all leave a print of one kind or another. They just can't help it.

All my tools and things is piled in the front seat and seeing them I recall the little pad which drops out of McGillicuddy's coat. So I wonder did they find that, but they didn't because it is still in the ripped place at the back of the seat where I took a chance on hiding it.

**W**ELL, I have a lot of time on my hands.

I sit down and take the pad and look at the long rows of numbers and I am trying to make sense from them because now that Bertrand is taking a half of my fifty Gs I feel kind of poor and think maybe I should build the stake up a little if I can figure out the system. Well, the numbers on the first page is just like Greek, and so are the ones I find on the second.

At the end there are half a dozen blank pages and I turn the pad over and I see there is some grease on my fingers and it has smeared on the back page. Then I see something else. The grease isn't very thick and through it shows kind of writing, and I think that is strange until I realize the writing is just dents in the paper which has filled up with the grease.

Then I have it all figured out like a flash. Someone wrote on the sheet above and bore down so hard it made the dents. I smear more grease on the sheet, and gradually I make out the letters:

**I. O. U. \$10,000  
John McGillicudy**

That comes out fairly plain, but there are weaker dents as if the old Joe had written several IOUs on other pages and the dents that writing made wasn't as sharp. Anyhow I can see that he was spreading IOUs around, and I don't figure it was simply because he wanted to make someone happy or because he wanted to part with his dough.

"Well," I says. "This is too simple for a man of your wit and brains, Hymie, and a four-year-old child is not needed to tell you what it means. IOUs are not common legal exchange with which you pay cab fare and things, but they are common enough as markers in a gambling emporium, and Mr. Gyp McAvoy runs the only gambling house which the old Joe ever goes to while you are hauling him."



This does not clear the waters, but makes them all the darker because I cannot figure why Mr. Gyp McAvoy, who is a very careful citizen, and who runs his business on a strictly commercial basis, could figure to gain by the old Joe's death. It is a well known fact that gambling debts are not collectible from a dead man.

For my dough the sister is still the guilty one, and I think that maybe these IOUs will make Captain Scott agree with me because the way I look at things, if the old Joe was getting rid of his dough here and there with IOUs and wills and such, the sister might figure that she had better finger him while he still had some remaining to make it worth her while.

So I find a phone and spend a nickel calling Captain Scott. The minute he hears my voice on the wire he starts. He kind of chokes and then he says very cold and level. "All day I have been trying to prove that you had nothing to do with that hack murder. I stick my neck out and do not book you for murder, and now do you know what they bring me?"

"No," I says.

"The stapler!" he hollers. "The stapler which you used on that old man's hand, still with his blood on it. You didn't even have sense enough to throw the blasted thing out of the cab."

"I'll have you booked," he goes on, "murder this time, my rat-like friend. I'll have you tried and I'll personally see that you cook. Why did you have to use that stapler? Why didn't you just scare him to death with that padded wrench you carry? Why did you make it so complicated?"

"You mean," I gasp, "that that's what killed him—fear?"

"Yeah," said the Captain. "Fear. He was an old man, and his ticker was weak. You were trying to talk him into something, weren't you, heel? Maybe you wanted your fifty Gs now, not later. He wouldn't give, so you used the stapler. He couldn't take no more. His heart just got all tuckered out and quit."

"Captain," I says. "Captain. You just give me an idea."

"I'll give you the hot seat," he says. "That's what I'll give you."

"Wait," I says. "It might interest you to know that McGillicuddy is on the cuff to Gyp McAvoy for plenty and—"

Captain Scott says, "Save your breath, killer. First you try to put the arm on the old lady and now you try and finger Gyp. We already had Gyp down here. Sure the old man was at his joint a lot, but do you know what he played for? Nickels and dimes. McAvoy says they let him sit on a stool and figure out

some system because they figured he had dough and after he got his system figured he would loosen up with some real coin, only he never did.

"Now stop clowning and come down here before I get out a pickup order and tell the boys to pot you on sight."

I hang up then. I see it is no use to argue with him in his current mood. I go out and Guiseppe Smith comes by in his hack and I mooch a ride with him. I notice he does not care for the cab one half as much as I do with mine.

Also I borrow a wrench before I get out at McAvoy's. I wish I have the one which you pad with cloth so that I can care for drunks without breaking the skin, but I do not figure I have time to go back to the garage for same, especially as the Captain is putting out a pickup order for me and some of them cops we have can shoot like nobody's business.

The place don't look like much from the outside. A couple of steps down and into this bar room. Gyp has been there a long time, and every so often he gets raided and they break up the furniture and the next thing they know he is running and they raid him again. A very stubborn character, if you want my opinion.

There is nothing doing except a guy mopping out the bar and I ask him where Gyp is and he don't even look twice, just jerks his thumb backwards.

I wander through and the gambling room looks funny, all deserted, with covers on the tables and kind of dark, and then I find an office down there at the back and push open the door.

**G**YP is at a desk and he is a very patent leather guy with waxed black hair and a narrow puss and a little soup strainer with points on his upper lip.

I am some disappointed because he is not alone, as there is a big lug with him who I recognize as a wrestler which used to act up at the Garden and who I now hear, is Gyp's hardware valet. They both look surprised and I can tell by their manner that they are not pleased, but I do not keep them long in suspense.

"Gyp," I says. "Last night one of my good customers gets checked out, and I'm wondering how you are figuring on collecting on them IOUs which he happens to have written for you?"

Well, he don't say a word. His black eyes just start to shine and his hand moves toward the drawer but I tell him to take it easy as I don't like to get mixed up with guns and I wave the wrench at him.



So Gyp's hand stops moving and he says to the big lug wrestler.

"Take him."

So this Rosey laughs and he says, "Stand still cluck, before you get hurt! This pocket is not empty."

That irritates me and I look at him. "Shame on you, Rosey, such a big guy which used to work nice and clean with your hands, hiding behind a little gun. You got no self respect left?"

This makes him angry. He comes at me with his teeth shoved out. "Why, you dumb little hackie! I'll break you in two." He gets up close and shoves the gat against my spine, then he takes my wrench and makes sure there ain't another one of them hidden in my pockets.

Gyp leans back in his chair and is smiling a little like a guy getting ready to watch a good show. Well, you could say I am in a bad way, but you know, Mamie, I have handled plenty of drunks, and this Rosey is careless. He is so mad he can hardly wait to get his fingers into my neck.

Well, I grab the wrist of the hand which is feeling my pockets and I swing sideways, twisting as I do so, just like it tells in that magazine commando course which you have me take, and sure enough it works like the book says it should.

Rosey's gun goes off. It rips a hole right in the sleeve of my coat, and the next thing I have heaved him over my shoulder and am on top of him and his wrist is twisted clear out of place.

He is bellowing like all hell and making a lot of unnecessary noise.

Well, Gyp is so surprised he almost falls from his chair. He is very anxious to get at the drawer where his gun is, but he works so fast he gets in his own way and by the minute he drags it open, I have the wrench which I heave right into his face. It knocks out some teeth and takes him right out from the chair. Some other lug comes rushing in and I trip him, and I am sitting there with Rosey's gun on the three of them when Captain Scott walks in.

I am glad to see him but I don't understand how he gets there so quick until he explains that he recalls me talking about McAvoy, and figures I'm dumb enough to come here alone and they come down to pick me up as fast as they can.

Only they pick Gyp up instead and take him and his two boys to headquarters, for even Captain Scott realizes that there is more than meets the eye when I show him the pad and he sees that they didn't just jump me for exercise.

Well, Gyp is a very smart one and he has

had experience with cops and after talking with his mouthpiece he sings. He says it is not his fault that the old Joe dies and that he did not wish the man any harm but merely wishes to scare him into paying the IOUs which he has signed. He explains that he told McGillicuddy that he has sold the IOUs to another character who is at the Third Avenue address to which we drive. This is a stall so McGillicuddy cannot scream copper after undergoing the treatment.

And Gyp says he sends Rosey and the other lug over to this burned-out flat to put a little heat on the old Joe. But he claims that homicide is not in his mind, and that his orders are strict that they only rough him up a bit. The stapler, he claims, is Rosey's idea, and not his own.

Anyhow, the old Joe's ticker goes sour, and they are scared, so they carry him down and park him in my cab and toss the stapler under the seat and scam.

I can see that Captain Scott isn't impressed by Gyp's story and I figure he will try and nick him for manslaughter at least, but Gyp's lawyer is smart, so I don't know what the law can tag him with.

Anyhow, I am feeling somewhat relieved, what with this and that, and suddenly I recall the paper I signed which gives Bertrand half of my fifty Gs. I am distressed because I have done all the work and it does not seem fair for him to come along now and cut in for half.

So I ask Captain Scott isn't there some way I can shake out of it without giving Bertrand all that dough, and he gets a funny look on his pan and he says, "Ain't you heard, Hymie, there *isn't* any dough."

Well, I don't get it because I saw in black and white right in that will where I was supposed to collect fifty Gs, and tell him this emphatically.

"It's this way," says Captain Scott. "This Mr. McGillicuddy was a little soft in the head. He wasn't exactly crazy, but he had the delusion he was rich. In reality, his sister owned the money, not him, and she doled it out to him a bit at a time. The will's no good—because he simply didn't have any money to leave."

Well, believe me, Mamie, that is a shock, but it ain't the worst, because Bertrand is sore at me and says I hired him under false pretenses and he is going to sue me for the down-payment on your coat, and we gotta take it back right now, because not only can't I pay Bertrand what I owe him, but also I couldn't pay them monthly installments if I had to. So, stop your squalling and let's get going. Getting mixed up with lawyers is almost worse than getting mixed up in murder. . .



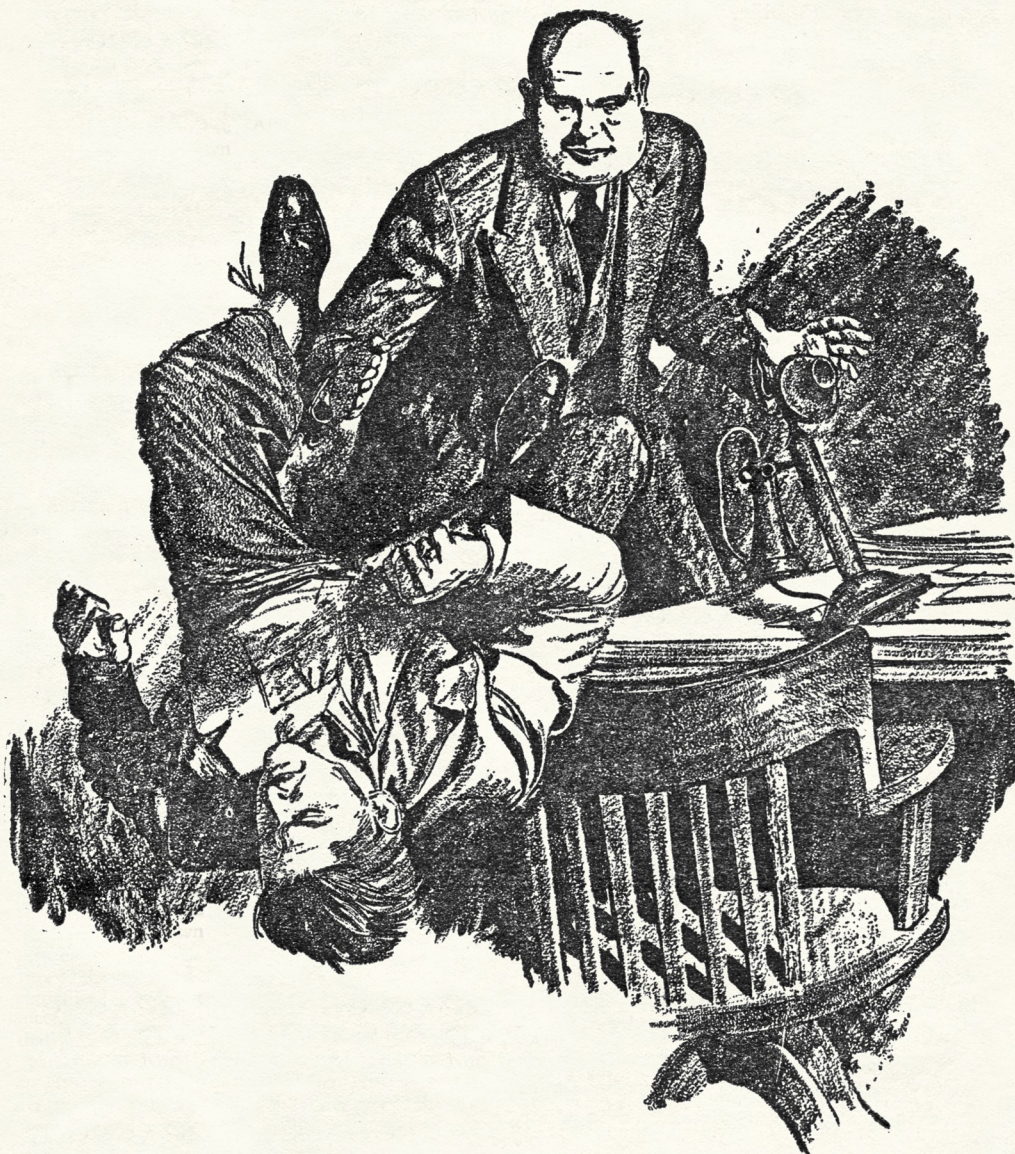
● By **JOHN D. MacDONALD** ●

I WAS sitting in one of my charming limp rag positions behind my beat-up desk, wondering idly if I could reach the button on my desk lamp without exerting myself too much. Dusk was creeping into the office and it was getting too dark to admire my latest office addition. I dragged deeply on my cigarette; my throat was getting raw from talking. . . .

With all current cases cleaned up—having located the ex-employee who set fire to a

client's garage, and convinced a banker client that his wife was really on the level in spite of her new black panties—I could plan a quiet evening to include some dark ale, a rare steak and the quiet corner of a bar.

I reviewed my bank balance which was clinging by its little white teeth just over the four figure mark, and I remembered that I had just finished handing myself some hearty compliments on my prowess when somebody whammed at my office door.



● He stepped forward and gave me a slap across the chest. . . . ●



# • CASH ON THE COFFIN! •

*A thousand dollars for one night's work looked like good dough to Dugan—if he could stay alive to spend it!*

As my nerves are sometimes not of the best, I was still about six inches in the air when I snapped the light on. I hollered "Come in!" in what I call my office voice.

The door opened. This character came in sideways to keep from sticking in the door. He was a little guy, but only in height. He had one of those heads shaped like a pear, the wide end sitting solidly on his shoulders where there should have been a neck. A flat-plastered mat of black hair, big liquid eyes like grapes floating in Carter's ink, and an apologetic manner completed the picture. The apologetic manner didn't fit as well as his tailored clothes, but he looked prosperous enough to earn my party smile.

He smiled too, looking like King Kong before he ate the blonde. "You like to sit in dark, ha?"

"I'm testing my carrots. Learning to be a night fighter," I said. "What can I steal for you?"

"Jokes, ha? Maybe you too funny to do my work." He lost his big false smile.

I go on the basis that the customer is always wrong—a throwback to the days when I worked in a department store on Christmas. "Maybe I am. I'm as funny as a new boil. What kind of work do you want done?"

For a few seconds he stared at me, searching my face with his big juicy eyes. I sat tight, lit another cigarette, and blew a smoke ring. It settled nicely over the desk pen.

He said, "Okay! You do my work. I need you for witness. Where I go there is probably trouble." He dropped into the chair beside my desk. The chair creaked under his weight. I guessed him at two eighty, maybe a little more. He folded his hands on the edge of my desk like a little kid at Sunday school. The desk lamp glowed on huge scarred knuckles and on the lumps of old breaks across the backs of his hands.

"Maybe I don't go for the kind of work you need. I'm no hood. What'd you say your name was?"

"I'm Tony Rubio." He smiled at me again. "You do my work." His name meant nothing to me.

"Maybe I do, maybe I don't." In spite of my

bold attempt at indifference, I felt he had control of the situation. I felt like a neurotic mouse being psychoanalyzed by a very rugged cat.

"You work for me. Know Mr. Clipper Ryan?"

I nodded. Everybody in town either knew or had heard of the Clipper—a big suave gent with a foolproof gambling joint. He not only had more than enough friends in the administration, but it was harder to get into his joint, unless he okayed you, than it was to get into the vault at the First National. And just as easy to come out loaded with cash. Still the suckers poured in. They all seemed to forget that everybody had reason to call him the Clipper.

"I want you should come to his place with me," said Tony, "and be there for the trouble."

I shook my head with determination. I'm no amateur medal of honor man. "Nuts, Tony. Not me. If I pulled a cannon within three blocks of the Clipper's palace, both his boys and the local Gestapo would fire for record. I breathe better without holes."

"Ha! You pretty smart man. I get lots a guys if I want that stuff. I need a fine guy for the cops to talk to if I get trouble. I find out they listen to you."

"Yeah? You mean you just want me around so I can tell the cops what happened—if anything does. What are you planning? Suppose you get knocked off? Besides, what makes you think the cops always believe me? I'm not a public enemy, but I don't think I'm their dream child either."

Again he smiled, this time as though he meant it. "Look! Nothing happen to Tony!"

He reached over onto my desk and grabbed an old horseshoe that I'd found once when I wake up in a barn. A character had bounced it off my skull, and since it hadn't penetrated the bone structure, I figured it was good luck. He took hold of one end of it in each hand and slowly pulled it out straight, flecks of rust dropping onto his vest.

I gulped and said, "Hey!" feeling as robust as a snowflake. Then he bent it back to a U shape and gently put it back where it was. He didn't even grunt over the job. Then, in a movement like a flash of light, his big hand slid in toward his left armpit. When it whisked out, a snub nosed thirty-eight was peering at me.

I smiled, but my heart wasn't in it.

He slid the gun back and I heard the quiet snick of a spring holster. Then the big clown stood up, spreading his arms wide. "Hit me inna gut. Come on! Hit me inna gut."

I felt like a blushing bride. "I couldn't."



"Come on!" he said again, nasty, so I got up out of my chair. He stepped back a little to give me room to swing. I felt foolish, but I said to myself, 'Okay, chump! You asked for it.'

I licked my lips as I anticipated sinking my arm up to the elbow in that protruding mass of blubber. I know how to hit, how to time it so that all the weight of my shoulders and back and all the strength of my arm explode at the point of impact. I braced myself and hit him, with all I had.

It was like slugging a bucket of rocks. I almost sprained by wrist. It knocked him back a step, but that was all. He laughed, stepped forward and gave me a backhanded slap across the chest. I mentally counted my broken ribs as I fell back over my own chair and slammed into the wall. My heels slid out and I sat on the floor so hard that one of the shades shot up to the top and went flipping around the roller.

He came over to me and helped me up. I picked up my chair and sat down in a state of collapse, a lot less proud of a reasonable set of muscles and a pretty rugged build than I had ever been before in my life.

"Now you afraid to go with me to see Clipper Ryan?" Tony asked.

"Brother," I said, "I'd go with you right through the Green Bay Packer's line and backfield, eating a strawberry cone. But I'd still like to know what you are going to do."

Again that measuring silence of his, only this time he looked almost friendly. "Okay, Dugan. Ryan thinks I'm big sucker. I lose maybe fifteen Gs on his crap table. All the time I lose it I find out how the table is crooked. Me, I got my own place out West. This my vacation. Now I know how he fix the dice. Tonight I go pick up maybe a hundred Gs on the table. I need fine fellow like you to tell the cops when I have trouble—if I get trouble. The cops will believe you."

I looked into his eyes and said, "You're going to try to cheat the Clipper?"

"No! No! I make the dice honest and win with honest dice." He sounded as hurt as if I had accused him of knocking off his invalid aunt.

"What's in it for me?" I made no attempt to conceal that serious feeling I get whenever cash is discussed.

"Five percent of what I win."

"Not this time, Tony. Cash on the line. You might lose, you know."

He shrugged his heavy shoulders, fished a slim roll out of his pocket. It shone with quality rather than quantity. He pulled off a one-G-note and tossed it on the desk. I had never even seen one before. I know my eyes bugged out.

Ever been betrayed by the sight of cash.

I was. The sight of that fat juicy bill drove what I have always figured to be my common sense for out of my mind . . . almost. I didn't stop to think that he could probably get some joker just as reliable for a lot less cash. But somehow I had even begun to like the big lug, so I stopped thinking and picked up the lettuce leaf and the job.

He talked me out of carrying a gun, so I compromised and took Daisy. Daisy is a little girl about six inches long in a leather dress with a padded lead head and a back like a steel spring. In fact it is a steel spring. When he wasn't looking, I wadded up the big bill and stuck it deep into the bowl of one of my pipes. I left the pipe on my desk.

**WE** HAD a little trouble getting into Ryan's.

The guy on the door was happy to see Tony, but he had to get the Clipper's okay before he would let me in, even though Tony kept saying, "This my friend. This my friend."

I'd seen a picture of Ryan, but in the flesh he was even prettier. A tall, banker type with iron-gray hair, an outdoor complexion and a prosperous double chin. But his eyes were small and of that shade of cold gray you see on some winter mornings.

The place was packed. As we dropped our hats and walked into the crap game room, I got a chance to look the crowd over. There was a sprinkling of college kids all trying hard to look like Bacall and Alan Ladd, a larger group of young-old clients trying to look like the college kids, and a group of the usual production line sharpies trying to look sharp. I don't know where we fitted. Tony looked like nothing human, and I look like a piano mover who has dropped a few pianos . . . right on his face.

According to Tony's instructions I hung right by his elbow as he waded into the crowd around the big table. He huffed up into the backs of people's necks, until he'd cleared a space a yard wide where he could rest his chest against the table. I managed to wiggle in beside him.

The game went along very quietly for a while, with me even winning eleven bucks on side bets. Then, when Tony's turn came, he asked for new dice. They handed him the dice bowl and he picked out a new set and slung them down the table. An eight. The guy with the rake dragged them back toward himself, picked them up and threw them down to Tony's waiting paw. I knew that the switch must have been made when he picked them up. Tony had bet a hundred on his first roll. People began to moan about his taking too much time with the dice, but Tony just kept shaking them and smiling. Then he fished in his pocket, pulled out the slim roll and said,



"Ten thousand, I eight!" That shut them up.

I began to get excited. A guy on the floor hurried over when the man running the table raised his eyebrow. They had a consultation, then the man with the rake said, "Yes, sir. You're covered."

Tony threw first a four, then an eight. All the people around the table gasped in unison and forgot to make any side bets.

Tony says, "Okay. Shoot the twenty Gs." He shook for a long time while another conference went on; the house decided to cover. Tony rolled an eleven. The community gasp was louder. I even heard myself gasp.

I saw, out of the corner of my eye, one of the house men moving in behind us. I nudged Tony and whispered to him, so low that no one else could hear, "Watch out behind!"

Tony turned and looked at me, outraged anger on his face. He roared, "What you say? You say I cheat? Why you—I'll break every—"

The customers melted away like snowballs on a griddle. House men ran at us from all directions and there I was, all closed in, with Tony showing his teeth at me.

I suddenly didn't like him so much. I heard him murmur, "Big sucker!" and his meaty fist exploded on the side of my head.

I almost went out, but I could still vaguely see and feel and hear. I was limp, though. Somebody spun me so that my back was to Tony. I dimly heard somebody shout, "Mr. Ryan! Mr. Ryan!"

A big arm came up under my right arm, tight against my armpit, holding me up. I saw something white in the hand at the end of my arm, and as my head began to clear I saw that it was a handkerchief wrapped around the grip end of a familiar looking snub-nosed revolver.

Someone shouted, "Lookout! He's got a gun!" and just then the close group in front of me opened up and I saw Ryan hurrying toward us.

He spotted the gun and stopped dead, about eight feet in front of me. In that second's pause the gun whammed once. The slug caught him right in the mouth, shattering a fifty cent hole through his lips and teeth. He stood for a split second, his eyes clouding over, then collapsed hard on his face, landing like a sack of bones.

I made the mistake of trying to struggle. Somebody crashed me in the back of the neck. Again the dimness . . . I was on the floor, and somebody was fumbling with my hand; there was a forest of legs around me. I tried to roll and the whole world exploded. I guess maybe they kicked me in the head. . . .

My first thought before I opened my eyes was that I must have been mixing my drinks

the night before. Like a dope I thought I was in bed. I knew better when I opened my eyes and looked up into the grim face of Lieutenant Buster Mercer. He turned his glance to someone else I couldn't see and said, "He's coming around now. Line them all up over there. Don't smudge the prints on that gun."

My voice sounded to me as though it came through a pillow. "Hello, Buster."

He looked down at me. "Shut up, Dugan!"

Then it all came back. I remembered Tony, the arm with the gun, the bits of Ryan's teeth flying, the whole dirty frame. I sat up, feeling sick and dizzy, but so mad that I almost forgot my stomach.

They lead me over to a chair. I sat down heavily, shaking my head to clear it a little more. I began to realize that I was going to need a better head than nature had donated to me to get out of this jam.

**B**USTER began to get the facts while one of his boys stood behind him taking notes. He called on one of the house men first, a ratty-looking citizen. Buster is an efficient guy with a long jaw and oriental-looking eyes. He has a sour acid wit and a mind like a meat axe. He's on Homicide, and we have always got along, but he was acting like our friendship was only a memory.

"Tell me your name and what happened," Buster asked the sleek-looking houseman.

"I'm Joseph Delehanty," the guy said. "I come running over when this guy—" he points at me—"makes some crack to the fat Joe who was shooting the dice." He points to Tony who is sitting across the room, his face a solid mask of innocence. "It looks like a fight starting and the boss doesn't—er—didn't like fights, so all the boys rush in to split 'em up. Then that guy—" he points at me again—"pulls a gun. We duck a little and Ryan comes across the room just in time to catch one in the teeth, knocking him off. Then that guy over there knocks him out and we call you fellows. Too bad." He looks down at the quiet hulk of Ryan on the floor. He is the type of guy I hate like poison on sight, and now I hated him a little more for lying.

Buster hauled one of the women out of line. She was a bare-shouldered, fox-faced babe of forty. "What happened here?"

"I'm Miss Elizabeth Jordan," she says, sniggering over the miss. "It's just like that man said. I saw that fellow over there shoot the Clipper. I saw him do it. I saw the gun in his hand." She got a dramatic note in her voice as she pointed at me, her hand shaking a little. I winked at her and she spun on her heel, looking the other way.

"Okay," Buster said, his voice sounding tired. He turned to my ex-friend, Tony. "That your story too, Mr.—"



"Rubio. Tony Rubio. Yeah. I'm shooting the dice and that guy says 'Who you cheating?' I get mad and he starts a row. The boys come around. He pulls a gun and shoots the fellow you call Clipper. I hit him on the neck and he falls down. Somebody kick him and he stay quiet 'till you get here. I never see him before. I think maybe. . . ." He made a little spinning motion with one thick forefinger near his temple.

As the whole truth came home to me, I realized just how tight the spot was. Here were twenty witnesses, some lying and some telling what they thought was the truth, but all of them convincing Buster that I had knocked off the Clipper! A lump of ice began to grow in my middle, and chill fingers played minor chords along my backbone.

Buster stood in front of me, his bony hands on his hips, a look of disgust and disappointment on his face. "I thought you were square, Dugan," he said. "But I've been wrong before too. Have you got any answers?"

I put my best go-to-church expression on my face and tried to look soulful. I said, "Buster, this is a frame."

I could see he didn't believe me and I didn't blame him. Then all of a sudden the answer came to me. I smiled and snapped my fingers.

I said in a louder voice, "I can prove it's a frame! Let me talk to you alone for a couple of minutes." My sudden change must have had an effect on him, also, since he was in the habit of trusting me. And that's a hard habit to break in five minutes.

After a few seconds he said, "Come on," and led the way out into one of the other rooms. It hurt me again to notice that he didn't let me get too close to him when we got there. I talked seriously for about a minute. His expression changed from doubt and incredulity to approval and relief.

Ten minutes later two of the prowling cars were roaring toward my office, eighteen blocks away. Tony and I were the only passengers outside of the cops. I was glad the big jerk was riding in the other car. He had looked sort of queerly at me when we'd left.

The elevator wasn't running, so we climbed the three flights. I unlocked my office door.

I snapped on the light and glanced at Buster. He nodded, so I took charge. "Okay, gentlemen. You too, Tony. I am now going to demonstrate a gadget used by poverty-stricken private eyes who can't afford to rent the services of a beautiful blonde secretary to take notes."

I fiddled in my desk drawer, noticing with wry amusement that one of the uniformed boys eased his gun halfway out of the holster while my hands were out of sight. I made the final adjustments and clicked the switch under the edge of my desk. A rasping voice, mixed

with the muted whir of cheap equipment, sounded scratchily in the room:

"You sit in dark, ha?" The voice was Tony's. I looked at him and the mask had dissolved. His eyes were wide open. So was his big mouth. Then they all heard my scratchy answer. "I'm testing my carrots. Learning to be a night fighter. What can I steal for you?"

I sank into my chair, watched Buster wink at me and stared with the appreciation of a connoisseur at the beads of sweat oozing out of Tony's forehead. I could almost see his slow mind tick over as he realized that everything he had said had been recorded.

THE record continued. During the portion of silence, the time when he had enticed me to swat him one "inna gut," I said casually to Buster, "The big jerk probably has got the hanky in his pocket that held the gun when he shot Ryan. Can't you find powder or something on it?"

That did it. I don't blame the two cops. They didn't know the score. They still had the idea that I had blasted the Clipper. Also they were making the mistake of low-rating Tony the same as I did at first. They weren't watching Tony as much as they were me. He clapped his big hand against his pocket and probably felt the incriminating handkerchief.

He flung one arm back and his heavy knuckles smashed into the chin of the frailer of the two cops, who was standing on his right. He swung the same hand back in a roundhouse hook and bashed the second cop right in the center of his face. You only had to hear those two solid smacks to know that both the boys were sleeping quietly. For all his weight, Tony moved like a fat cat, quick and deadly. He headed for Buster who had reached for his gun at the sound of the first blow. I fumbled in my hip pocket for Daisy, and discovered that someone had lifted her while I was out. I tried to find my gun, but opened the wrong drawer, losing precious seconds. The voices were still scratching away on my record cylinder. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tony bat Buster's gun out of his hand, then bust the lieutenant smack on the forehead with one of those fast overhand rights. Buster's head whammed against the wall, and he dropped like a wet sheet from a clothesline.

I couldn't lay my hands on the gun as Tony headed for me and that precious record—a record that would mean my continuing to look at all jails from the outside.

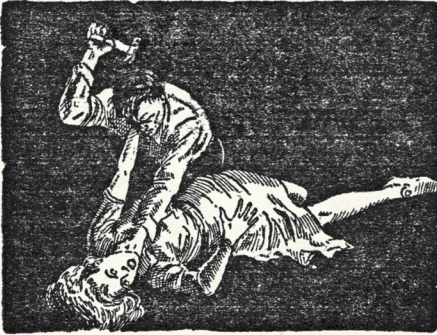
In desperation I snatched the horseshoe and, when he came close enough, I bounced it hard on his head. The shoe rang like a bell, but he kept coming. Instead of hitting me

*(Continued on page 96)*



# TODDITIES IN CRIME

by **LEE and JAKOBSSON**



Next door to a revival meeting in Los Angeles stood a bar where Lloyd Pusey—hillbilly barroom crooner—competed lustily for customers with the lady evangelist.

Neither made any headway against the other, so the lady evangelist did the next best thing—she married Lloyd! Lloyd reformed, began to croon hymns, and the revival-and-reform business boomed—but it turned out to be God and devil working side by side still. One night his wife told him she had reformed four other guys by marrying them—and he killed her with a hammer.

Death made a pig of itself at the picnic wedding of Marcia Skulbitch of Gador, Yugoslavia—by consuming all of a roast shoat which had been prepared for the festivities, and by killing a seven-year-old girl and an eighteen-year-old boy. A discarded suitor had loaded the animal with dynamite; it went off in the middle of the feast, while being turned on the spit.

The killer lost out because both bridegroom and bride, whom he'd wanted to murder, were uninjured. And the world lost out because Jovan Protich, the murderer, escaped. . . .



When the police of Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, found 18-year-old Djura Mesaroch dying in his dingy, candle-lit room, they were handed one of those impossible cases. Doors and windows were locked on the inside. There was no gun on the premises—no ballistics markings on the fatal bullet.

Police and newspapers dubbed the killing a "ghost murder"—until Djura, on his deathbed, confessed he'd exploded the bullet into his brain by candle flame, thinking the police would blame the only other person with a motive—his rival in love.

Shortly afterward Djura became a ghost in fact—the victim of his own too perfect planning!



About a half century ago, Marie Bartet reigned as the belle of the Paris underworld, until for assorted crimes the authorities sent her to that hell-on-earth—Devil's Island. It turned out to be exactly what Marie wanted.

She made herself right at home, became a model prisoner and an honest woman. Permitted the freedom of the island, she married a fellow convict, reared two children, built a house and garden, and in general made herself a little bit of heaven out of hell. When an epidemic wiped out her family, authorities offered to send her home to France. She refused and lived happily ever after—or until a short while ago when she died at the age of seventy-five.

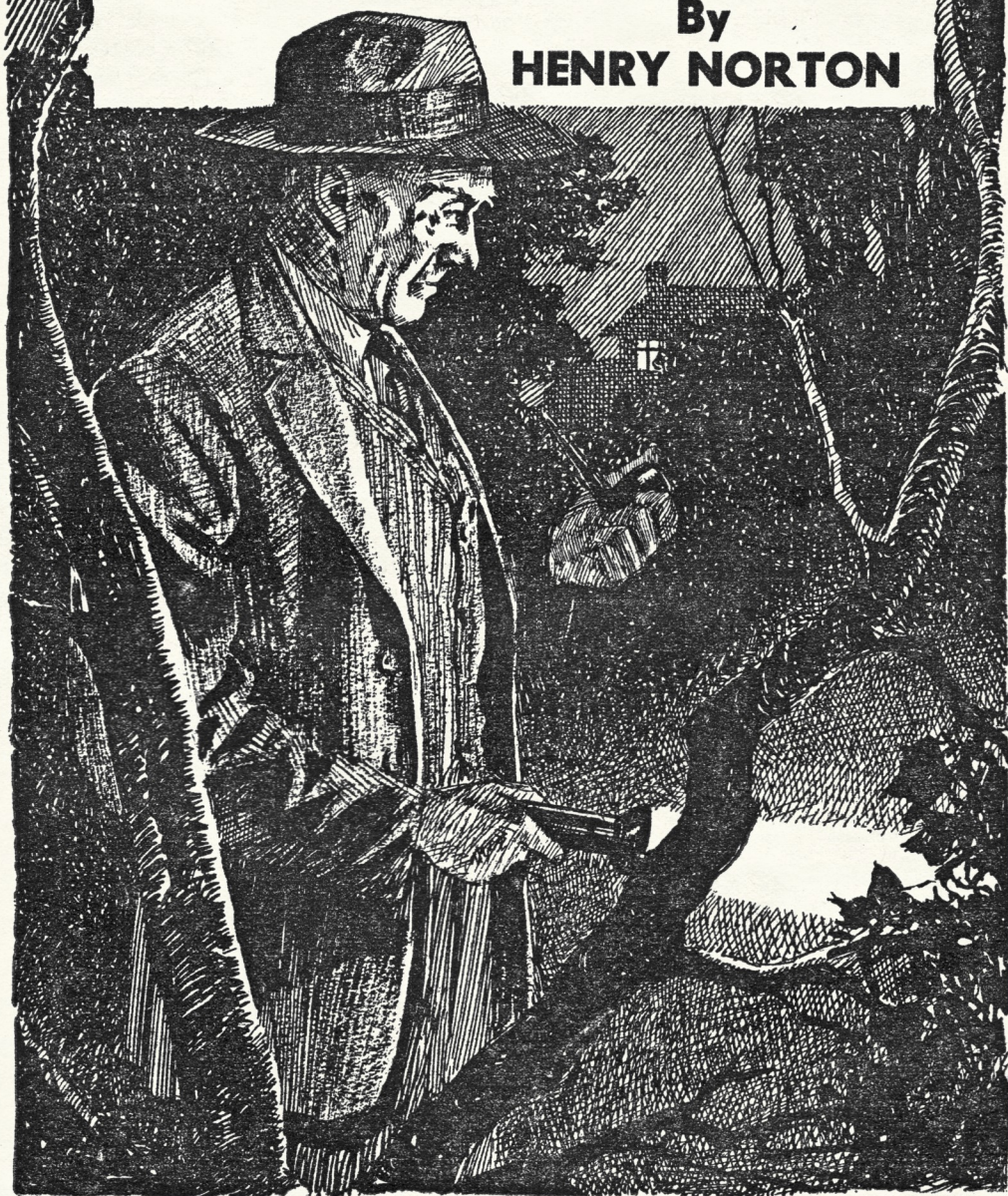




# SHERIFF LOVATT'S DEATH-WATCH

*An Unusual Crime Novelette*

By  
**HENRY NORTON**





*"I've seen many a crime in Mill Center," Sheriff Lovatt said, "but this is a new low in humanity. I think I'll quit this job and go to raisin' rattlesnakes —to improve the company I keep!"*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Trail to Death

SHERIFF LOVATT placed flame above the gleaming bowl of his pipe and puffed it slowly and lovingly to life. He cradled the bowl in the small crevice between flat cheek and prominent nose, and rubbed the briar against the skin until natural oil had imparted a newer, clearer luster. He held it out at arm's length, studying the way the warming oils brightened the grain.

To the man across the desk, it was the idle gesture of a not very sharp citizen, a man more obsessed by the daily, sensuous pleasures of life than the problem at hand. To deputy sheriff Clete Parker, bent over a pile of tax forms in the corner of the office, it was two

square flags, red with black centers, one above the other—the hurricane warning in any port of the world.

Lovatt said in a cold, small voice, "I want this again, please. You tell me you got a letter, threatening to kidnap your little boy, if you don't mail twenty thousand dollars to Box 42A in Portland?"

"Don't forget about the threats!" the man said excitedly. "Death to the whole family, if I go to the police! That's the part I'm worried about, Sheriff. I'm taking a terrible chance coming here!"

"You certainly are!" said Sheriff Lovatt.

The sheriff was a small man, dressed in rumpled gray, with a broad-brimmed hat set squarely on a narrow, contemplative face. His skin, his eyes, even his voice, went along with the predominant grayness of his per-

The sheriff flashed his light.





sonality. He was as unobtrusive as mist along a gray stone wall; he made as little impression on those he met as was possible with a living person. And that non-impression was the result of careful deliberation.

Lovatt had been sheriff of his county—for which Mill Center was the county seat—for twenty-seven years. It was not a populous community, and a more obtrusive figure would have been struck by political lightning long ago. Lovatt owed his office longevity to his doing a good job in a quiet way, claiming neither blame nor praise for the job at hand. He knew the law; he knew his own powers, and he would throw both of them overboard for a shadowy lady who was with him constantly—the lady known as Justice. If there was another influence in his life, it had never made itself manifest.

"You bet I am!" the man agreed warmly. He was a dark man, not very large but round of face and body. He wore conservative, beautiful-tailored clothes. His hat had probably cost as much as the sheriff's entire wardrobe.

"You bet I'm taking a chance," he repeated. "I've got a wife and two kids; and the hell of it is, I don't even know which one of the boys they're after!"

Sheriff Lovatt rose, making a slow, unfolding job of it. He stood for a moment with one palm resting lightly on the desk, leaning over the dark, round face of the man who had called on him.

"Carpenter, what I meant by your takin' a chance," Lovatt said, "is that you're takin' a chance comin' into a sheriff's office with a story like you just told, half of which is pure lie. Maybe you don't know it, but this county hasn't had an unsolved crime for twenty-seven years. You're pickin' a bad place to start your funny business."

Drake Carpenter scrambled to his feet then, lifted upward on the impaling stare of the sheriff's acid eyes. His voice refused him once, and then the torrent of words came out like a broken beaver dam in spate:

"Well I must say you've got a damned queer way of doing things!" he said angrily. "I come to you with a threat against the safety of my family, and you throw insult in my face! Whose side are you on, anyway?" He began warming to his subject. "You may be a little tin god around here, but you'll find out I'm not impressed by your reputation or your office. I have influence—"

As if by magic the thin palm of Sheriff Lovatt lifted through the flow of words. The little gray man said, "Hold on, now. I said you'd lied. You have. But that doesn't mean I won't protect your family. No kidnaper is going to operate in this county. You can depend on that!"

Carpenter's bluster died away before the cold impact of the sheriff's words. He swallowed. "That's what I came here for, Sheriff. If you can guarantee to protect my children, I—"

"I don't have to guarantee," the sheriff cut in roughly. "I'm telling you, mister, your children will be safe, from anybody!"

The round man slammed angrily out of the room, and Lovatt turned leisurely to look at his deputy. For the first time a faint glint of humor touched the grayness of his features. "Okay, boy, say it."

A blush came up from under Clete Parker's collar and climbed to the roots of his crisp black hair. He grinned apologetically.

"I must be pretty obvious," he said. "But all the same, I thought you were pretty tough on the guy. With a kidnap threat hanging over him, and all."

"That's the trouble," Lovatt said. Kidnapin' is such a detestable crime that it colors your thinkin'. You get the picture of a child snatched away from its family, maybe cold and hungry, ill-treated—and the mind bogs down in sentiment. It fails to follow through to the real problem. Which is, if the guy who wrote that letter really intended to kidnap one of the children, why didn't he do it first and write the letter afterward, instead of puttin' 'em on guard?"

"Maybe it's simple extortion by threat."

"Y'mean somebody was just tryin' to scare this Carpenter in sendin' twenty thousand dollars? That the kidnaper didn't have any real intention of doin' anything if the try happened to fail?"

Clete grinned affectionately at Lovatt. "You can save that down-to-earth stuff for the voters," he said. "You know what simple extortion is as well as I do."

The sheriff snorted, but did not look entirely displeased. "I don't think anybody'd pick Drake Carpenter as the kind to scare easy," he said. "Anyway, that's a thing we can check on danged easy."

**H**E SPENT a few minutes in telephonic conversation with a government office in Portland, some hundred miles away. He held the line while someone in that office made a local call. When he hung up, he nodded in grim satisfaction to Clete.

"It ain't a post office box. It's a code number, instructing the postmaster to forward the letter to Salt Lake City to another number that also looks like a code."

"Laying out a trail for us, eh?"

Lovatt said thoughtfully, "The longer the trail, the more steps in it. And one of 'em's gonna slip. If they make the trail long enough, they'll catch themselves."

"Hey!" Clete said, "It seems to me the



Carpenters came here from Salt Lake City. I could be wrong about it, but . . ."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Lovatt. "I wouldn't be surprised if this whole thing was cooked up by that Carpenter."

"Kidnaping his own child?"

"There's more'n kidnapin' to this," said Lovatt.

"You just haven't got any faith in humanity," said the deputy.

"I've got as much as it deserved," the sheriff said. "Just look inside yourself, Clete, and tell me how many crimes you might have committed yourself if you hadn't been scared of gettin' caught."

The deputy's face got grim, and a little afraid. He said, "You mean about the—" and then he stopped. He said, "You really believe that, don't you, Sheriff?"

"I believe it about myself, and about any person who ever drew breath," said Sheriff Lovatt. "Given a reason, and some chance of gettin' away with it, anybody will commit a crime. Me, or you, or Carpenter or anybody. It's knowin' that, Clete, that makes a good peace officer."

It was more than an idle theory. Time and again in the long slow years that had spun beneath the sheriff's thumb as virtual czar of Jefferson County, Lovatt had found occasion to test his belief. He had never gone into a case hampered by a preconceived belief in any man's innocence. As a consequence, he had laid punishment upon a number of proud heads in Mill Center, and had brought down the mighty as the occasion demanded. Conversely, there were a number of men and women walking the streets of Mill Center today who might have been in prison save for Lovatt's own free-wheeling type of justice.

"It's knowin' that," he repeated.

Clete Parker absently scratched a point on his desk a few inches from the stump of his left wrist. His hand was gone, left on some forgotten Pacific battlefield as part of his country's bid for a livable world. But sometimes Clete's tangled nerves told him that his left hand itched, and then he would involuntarily scratch the place where that hand should be. It usually made him aware and a little sheepish. Now he did it, and did not notice.

"Then what do we do?" he asked.

"About Carpenter?" said Lovatt. "We stand guard on his place tonight, Clete, and every night until we can see the clear shape of things to come. I'll ask Del Moon to help us, though it's properly none of his job. But he's one of the few men in town I c'n trust. I never cared overly much for that town marshal, even if he did save my life one time long ago."

"You mean Joe?" said Clete Parker. "No, I'd rather have Del Moon handy if the going

got rough, in spite of his size. He's a pretty solid character, Del."

Dryly Lovatt said, "Solid is the word. . ."

Del Moon was coroner of Jefferson County, a great, shambling bear of a man whose brusque manners and unfortunate appearance made it difficult, if not actually impossible, for him to earn a living in private medical practice. In spite of that, he was a brilliant surgeon and diagnostician. He had developed, in his years with Lovatt, a skill at autopsy that made his findings almost infallible. And because it had been Lovatt who got the coroner's position for him, Del Moon was fiercely and unswervingly loyal to the little gray sheriff.

He came into Lovatt's office now, in answer to a phoned request, and the straight wooden chair complained loudly as he settled into it. He lolled his massive head to one side and stared at the sheriff silently.

"It's like this, Del," explained the sheriff. "We seem to have a kidnaper's threat. I want you to help me an' Clete stand guard for a few nights."

Moon grunted. "Who's worth snatchin' in this town?"

"It's them new people that bought the old Garvey house," said Lovatt. "There's Drake Carpenter an' his wife an' two kids. Then there's Mrs. Carpenter's brother; guy named Layton, and a cousin or somethin' named Tony Congreve. Somebody threatened to take one of the kids, an' said they'd kill one of the family if the matter was taken to the police."

"Sounds like a stupid way to go about it to me," said Del Moon. "Why didn't they grab one of the kids first, and then send a ransom note. This way they've given time to scare up protection."

Lovatt nodded approvingly. "That's the point," he said. "Either the kidnaper ain't so bright, or there's a good deal more to this than shows on the surface."

"What do you know about this outfit?"

"Not much yet, 'cept that I don't like Carpenter's looks," the sheriff admitted. "I'm havin' him checked up on, though. Lemme see . . ."

He pulled an enormous gold watch from his pocket, pressed the stem to open the lid of the hunting case, and stared at the watch face as if he expected to find all the answers written on it.

"It's a mite after four now," he said. "That'd make it after five in Salt Lake, so I doubt if we hear anything tonight. We'll have to go it blind. Now, I'm gonna station you two boys outside. About the worst that might happen to you'll be a mite of rain. I'll spend the evenin' in the house, where I c'n keep my eyes on things."



"In other words," Clete said, "you think there's as much chance of trouble from inside as from outside."

Lovatt said thoughtfully, "More, Clete."

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Vigil

THE OLD Garvey house had been built by a lumber tycoon, ironically composed entirely of brick. It was a massive, hideous pile in the Georgian tradition, set high upon a knoll overlooking Mill Center, surrounded by sweeping lawns and a fringe of brush. It was almost dark when the sheriff brought his car to the entrance of the grounds and stopped to unload his passengers.

"Stay out of sight," he ordered. "I want 'em to think I'm alone. If I need any help I'll shove my pistol through a window an' fire three shots close together. If either of you run onto anything, do the same."

They got out and melted into the brush at either side of the drive. Del Moon, for all his size, moved soundlessly into the shadow of the undergrowth. As for Clete Parker—well, he'd learned his stealth at Marine boot camp and later. His missing hand was mute testimony of the game he'd played, but he was still a powerful, versatile, dangerous fighting man. There was no pitying Clete Parker. He didn't want pity, and he didn't need it. The sheriff drove on up to the house, and there was a little warmth about his heart at the thought of the two who stood guard outside.

A maid in a black dress, white apron and cap admitted him to the baronial entrance hall of the house. Lovatt swung his broad-brimmed gray hat idly against a lean thigh and looked around him at the trappings of wealth. A lot of happiness money gave you, he thought. Here was this family scared to death, just because they had money.

The sheriff reflected that none of the troubles bred of great wealth would ever be his. The county paid him a modest salary set by law—enough to live on, but certainly not enough to get rich on. Still, if you counted the chances it gave him to be of service to those he considered his own people, Lovatt was a wealthy man indeed.

There was a brisk throat-clearing behind him, and he turned to face Drake Carpenter. The man wore a dinner jacket, and he carried a napkin in his hand. His face wore an air of polite reproach.

"Were you intending to guard the house from inside?" he asked pointedly.

The sheriff said reasonably, "Well, anything that happens will have to happen to someone inside, Mr. Carpenter. I figure I'd

better be right close to the scene of action."

"But I don't want anything to happen to anybody in the house!" Carpenter said. "I want any danger stopped before it gets that close."

"How do you know where the danger's comin' from?" Lovatt asked. "You've got servants in the house. You've got relatives that might not be above clippin' you. I can't pretend to guess where the trouble's gonna start. But I intend to be where it's gonna happen!"

Drake Carpenter squinted at him thoughtfully, as if he had found something in the sheriff's words to give him some new ideas. He stood a moment, and then said:

"You'll pardon me if I finish dinner?"

"Fly at it," said Lovatt.

The man turned back. "Uh—perhaps you'd like to join us, Sheriff. I think the cook could manage another squab, if you'd honor us . . ."

Dryly, the sheriff said, "I just polished off a rib steak at Ethel's All-Nite Diner, Mr. Carpenter. I couldn't eat another morsel, not even a baby pigeon."

Exasperation and puzzlement mingled on Carpenter's face as he went out of the hall toward the dining room. Left to his own devices, the sheriff wandered the lower rooms restlessly. The house was no stranger to him; when old Tom Garvey had been alive, the sheriff was almost the only caller.

Lovatt thought of that as he prowled through the silent rooms, inspecting window locks and door catches. He remembered the way old Tom had died, poisoned by a sly, hateful, penny-ante killer. Death was no stranger to this house. He wondered what kind of death it was that hovered over it tonight. He could feel in his bones that it was there, but he would not be able to recognize it until it showed its grisly face.

The family came straggling in after dinner, and by then the outer blackness pressed heavily against the windows. Sheriff Lovatt met the two youngsters—five and seven—bad-mannered children with the stamp of spoilage heavily upon them. He met a feather-minded woman at least fifteen years younger than her husband, vague and coy in her greeting, who seemed to have no conception of the danger that hung above the household.

He met Mrs. Carpenter's brother, a thin-faced, mild blond man about Carpenter's age. His name was Tom Layton. He said very little, but there was bitterness in all of it.

He met the cousin—and wondered fleetingly if that might not be a euphemistic term for a somewhat warmer relationship. Tony Congreve, lath-lean, courtly, with a clipped black moustache and a clipped British accent; not the type of person Lovatt would choose to hold bets, and that was for sure.



In the brightly-lighted hall they seemed to be so many figures cut out and pasted around him, in spite of their efforts at animation.

Mrs. Carpenter said happily, "Can you imagine, sheriff? Drake had completely forgotten about Tony—he's my poor dear auntie's boy—completely forgotten about his being in the family. It just shows you what all this money making leads to. Positively, it makes a man forget about his family."

Lovatt said, "Yes, ma'am, a husband sometimes gets confused about his wife's relations."

She stared at him bleakly for a moment and then snapped back to her original geniality. "I suppose so," she sighed. "A wife's relatives—" she stressed the word—"might be a problem to a busy man."

"You heard him, Della," Tom Layton said nastily.

Tony Congreve said, "Oh, I say now—"

"Is this the guy's gonna kidnap us?" demanded the older child. "Is he, huh?"

"Darling, hush!" said Della Carpenter, with a half-humorous glance toward Lovatt. "This is the brave policeman who's going to save you, aren't you, Mr.—er, what—can't you show him your star, or your club or something?"

"No, ma'am," the sheriff said.

There was an uncomfortable silence, broken at last by Drake Carpenter. "Now, just what do you intend to do in the matter of safeguarding the family, Sheriff? I mean, what are your plans?"

"Just sit here," said Lovatt.

"Sounds like a fine, energetic plan," Layton said.

"I don't understand," said Carpenter.

"I know this house pretty well," Lovatt told them. "Used t'belong to a friend of mine. There's a place a man c'n sit in this hall and see front door, back door, stair case an' upper hall. Nobody c'n come in, go out, go up or down stairs, or go from one bedroom to another unless I see 'em do it."

Tony Congreve said, "You'd better let this chap take care of things. He knows what he's about, if you ask me."

"Which we didn't," said Tom Layton.

Carpenter rubbed his round chin, on which the blue of his beard showed despite close shaving. After a moment of hesitation he said, "Very well, Sheriff."

From that moment of acceptance, the sheriff might as well have been one of the ornate objects of period furniture in the room for all the attention that was given him. And this, to Lovatt, was highly acceptable, fitting in as it did with his own belief that an officer of the people should not make his presence apparent to the people any more than was absolutely necessary. He was later to think uneasily that perhaps someone had known of

that belief, had maneuvered him skillfully to the spot he was to occupy, knowing how limited were the moves he could make from it.

AT TEN o'clock, some time after the children had been put to bed and the servants had withdrawn to their quarters in the rear of the house, Mrs. Carpenter and Tony Congreve announced their intention to motor down to the inn for a drink and a dance. Lovatt did not raise his head during the furious argument that followed, in which Drake Carpenter pointed out that he had arranged for the protection of the household, and these two, by leaving, were deliberately courting danger.

"Darling," his wife said with savage sweetness, "are you worried about me, or about Tony?"

Carpenter's dark face got dangerously red as he turned to the stairs. "All right, go ahead," he choked. "I hope you both get killed!"

At ten-fifteen Tom Layton followed his brother-in-law upstairs to bed. Lovatt saw that Layton's bedroom was at the direct head of the stairs; those of Carpenter and his wife to the left; while the children were in the right wing. Congreve, he assumed, would have one of the bedrooms in the children's wing.

At eleven-thirty Drake Carpenter came down in a heavy hunting coat and announced that he was going to take a turn around the grounds. "Just to see that everything's under control."

"You'd be safer indoors," Lovatt advised.

"I'm not worried about my own safety," Carpenter said. "It's the boys I'm concerned about. I'll feel better after a look around the yard."

"I won't stop you," the sheriff said.

A deep-voiced clock somewhere in the interior of the house was tolling midnight when Lovatt heard the car pull up the driveway. Mrs. Carpenter and Congreve were back before he had expected them. He waited, but they did not come into the house.

Then, muffled but unmistakable from the front of the house, came the sound of a gun shot.

Lovatt took his watch from his pocket and snapped it open. It was ten minutes after midnight. He rose, but instead of rushing out the front door, he went upstairs. What had been done out there was done—there were other things to consider first.

He opened Layton's door. The bed had been occupied; a dim night light burned on a table beside it. But Layton was not in the room. Lovatt closed the door gently and went down the hall to the children's room. Both the boys were in bed and asleep. His watch told him that the entire survey had



taken but three minutes. He went down the steps and out to the big car on the drive.

There would be no need, he saw, to speculate on where Tony Congreve would sleep. Congreve would sleep forever, when necessary things were done, in a small area some six feet beneath the earth's surface. He lay now, stretched back against the right side of the front seat. The car was a convertible, top down. Congreve had been shot squarely between the eyes, evidently from a distance, for there were no powder burns or flame tattoos on his clear olive skin. There was nothing but the ghastly orifice that seemed to pout above his shapely nose.

He found Mrs. Carpenter, completed hysterical, crawling on her hands and knees beside the car, on the dark side. He lifted her to her feet, with a wiry strength that seemed amazing for his slight build. He cracked her sharply across the face with the palm of his hand, and used the back of the same hand against the other cheek with a violence that brought her staring eyes into focus.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"We were sitting there," she said, and her breath was a held-in whisper that could be a scream if she lost control. "Then all of a sudden his face was gone, and I heard a shot! I was afraid—I jumped out and got down on the grass so he wouldn't kill me too!"

"So who wouldn't kill you?"

"Drake!" she breathed. "He's so jealous!"

"Did you see him?"

She shook her head. "Who else could it be?"

From the woods down to the right came three sharp cracks from a pistol! It was from Clete Parker's side, and Lovatt knew that it must have been infinitely more difficult for Clete to have blasted those shots with his one available hand than it would have been to cope with most things that come out of the darkness. Lovatt dropped the panting woman on the grass and ran desperately toward the origin point of the signal.

**THE WAY** led down a slope of lawn, and there was a tangled thicket ahead from which he could hear the sound of thrashing combat. The sheriff checked and circled, came upon the struggling pair so that he could see their silhouettes against faint star shine. It took no time at all to identify Clete's blocky shoulders. The sheriff's gun barrel was cocked to slam down on the other man's head when Clete freed his right. The man's head jerked back, and he collapsed with a mumbling cry.

The sheriff flashed his light.

"Drake Carpenter!" he said. "How long've you been tusslin' with him, Clete?"

"Forever!" the deputy panted. "Yipe, he's strong for a little guy!"

"How long!"

"Ten minutes, maybe—pretty close."

The sheriff snapped open his watch. "Twenty after midnight," he said. "He could've done it, but the timing's closer'n paint!"

"Done what," Clete said. "Did I hear a gun?"

"Congreve's been shot," Lovatt said. "Anybody could of done it except the kids themselves." He scratched the back of his neck and said, "Hell, even the kids could've. Come on, Clete, let's lug this man up to the house and see what's goin' on."

Carpenter was groaning a little, almost able to walk by the time they got him up to the house. Lovatt took him straight past the car into the library and put him on a couch, then rang a strident bell he judged would bring help from the servants. It brought them all, half-clad and excited. And it brought Tom Layton from upstairs, half-clad and quite calm.

"Give Carpenter whatever he takes for bumps on the head," Lovatt snapped at the servants. "You—" he said to Layton—"where were you when that shot was fired?"

"What shot?" Layton said.

Lovatt went up the stairs three at a time, caught the man by the collar of his dressing gown, and shook him savagely. "You weren't in your room when Congreve was shot," he grated, "because I looked! Where were you?"

"Congreve shot?" the man said stupidly. "I—I don't know, Sheriff. I must've been in the bathroom. Did you say Tony Congreve was shot?"

"Deader'n Dick's hatband!" the sheriff said, grim satisfaction in his voice. "An' if you went to the bathroom, I'd of seen you. You were out the window!"

The man's eyes sharpened. He looked at Lovatt, not with fear or dislike, but as a skillful fencer might who suddenly recognizes his opponent's ability.

"There's a door cut now from my room to the master bath," he said. "I take it you don't know as much about this house as you pretend to, sheriff."

Mildly, Lovatt said, "You don't know as much about me as you think you do, either."

Two of the maids were bringing Mrs. Carpenter in, half-supporting the distraught woman. For a moment Lovatt was glad for the husband, that he was unconscious and could not see his wife's grief over another man. And then resolution hardened his heart. He went over to the prostrate man and slapped him stingingly on the cheek.

"Come alive!" he said.

Carpenter surged to his feet. Lovatt pushed



him back on the Regency seat. "Why did you shoot him?" Lovatt demanded. "Did you think you could get away with it by claimin' defense of family?"

"What do you mean, shoot him?" the rotund man said. "I saw him in the brush there and jumped him, and then somebody slugged me!"

"Don't gi'me that!" said Lovatt roughly. "Congreve's been shot, and it was while you were outside."

"But it wasn't Congreve!" the man insisted. "Hell, that sissy! This was some huge guy with arms like Strangler Lewis!" He stopped and turned sharply to look at the sheriff. "Congreve shot?"

"Everybody is sure surprised," the sheriff said. "Yes, Mr. Carpenter, Congreve with his face shot in half, an' your wife crawlin' on the grass outside the car!"

"All right," Carpenter said listlessly.

"All right what?" the sheriff demanded.

Carpenter said, "I shot him."

Lovatt said, "Why?"

"He was paying too much attention to my wife," Carpenter said in a dull voice. "I laid for him outside, and shot him through the heart. I ran for the woods, and somebody grabbed me."

"Don't you know who grabbed you?"

"For God's sake, man!" Carpenter's voice soared uncontrollably. "I've told you I killed the guy! Why do you have to torture me with details?"

"Because you're as big a liar as I ever met in my life," said Sheriff Lovatt.

CLETE PARKER came to the office at seven-thirty next morning, but the sheriff was there ahead of him. It was a dismal morning, compounded of fog and darkness as only an Oregon morning can be and still promise brightness in the afternoon. Clete settled down to his own desk and said nothing for a considerable time. Finally he could stand it no longer.

"You've got Carpenter in jail," he said.

"That's right," Lovatt agreed.

"Is he guilty? Was his story about the kidnaping threat just a stall to throw us off from his plan to kill Tony Congreve?"

The phone rang shrilly. Sheriff Lovatt reached to answer it. In the middle of his gesture he halted and waved to Clete. "Take it," he said. "I'm not here."

The deputy lifted the handset and answered, then listened while a strident female tone went on interminably. He raised his hand to the mouthpiece long enough to say in a fierce whisper. "Criminy, it's really happened!"

He closed the conversation after a furious scribbling of notes and turned in consternation to Sheriff Lovatt. "The oldest Carpenter

boy's been snatched!" he said. "They didn't miss him till this morning, but they think he was taken during the excitement last night. So it was really kidnapers after all!"

"Sure looks like it," Lovatt said.

"Then they must've killed Congreve," said Clete. "My gosh, you'd better spring Carpenter, before he gets ideas about false arrest!"

"He confessed, didn't he?"

"But Lord, man!" Clete Parker was thunderstruck. "You said he was lying at the time. I thought the only reason you locked him up was to make sure nothing happened to him!"

"Protective custody," mused the sheriff. "It's got a bad name lately, but it's a pretty sound practice if you know what you're doin'. I think we'll keep Carpenter in jail a mite longer."

He got up and walked back down the corridor to the three modest cells that constituted Jefferson County's contribution to the restraint of evil-doers. Drake Carpenter was on the point of attacking a large breakfast steak that had just been delivered from Ethel's All-Nite Lunch.

He looked up as the sheriff approached and said, "If you ask me, this is better than squab, any day."

"Can't remember askin' you," Lovatt said.

"I only dropped back to say your oldest boy was kidnaped last night. Your wife just called."

"What!"

The plate of food slipped unnoticed from the man's knee and crashed to the concrete floor. He came to the bars and gripped them, while his face slowly went to the color of hemlock ash.

"Sheriff!" he said. "Laddie's been—kidnaped?"

"If that's the oldest one," Lovatt agreed. "I may be able to tell you more in an hour or so, after I talk to the people at the house. I'll be back."

The man said, "But listen—"

But Lovatt was gone down the hall to the front of the building, leaving Carpenter to stare after him with a cloudy anger in his eyes, and sudden naked fear.

The sheriff took Clete with him, and drove out to Carpenter's house. In daylight the huge pile was less forbidding, but the mist softened the outline of the trees, soaked the earth and dampened the walks. The interior of the house was shadowed and sorrowful.

The same quiet maid led them to Mrs. Carpenter's bedroom, where they found the woman lying in dimness with an icebag on her head, and a solicitous physician hovering near. The doctor was Claude Frame. He greeted the sheriff with a sort of concern.



"She's badly shocked," he said. "I hope you won't have to ask her too many questions, Sheriff. She can't stand much more without breaking down completely."

"That might not be such a bad idea, Claude," said Lovatt. "I might learn something if I could nudge her into a real old fit of high-steerics."

"My Lord," said Dr. Frame, "you wouldn't!"

"What makes you think I wouldn't?" Lovatt said.

The woman on the bed stirred and moaned. She said in a feeble voice, "Is that the sheriff, doctor? I want to talk to him."

"Now, don't excite yourself," Frame murmured.

"Oh, no, don't excite yourself," said Lovatt. "Your son's kidnaped, your husband's in jail, and your cousin's got a hole blown in his head, but don't excite yourself!"

Doctor Frame's lips tightened, but the woman on the bed raised up and looked at Lovatt with something like new composure.

"Well," she said, "there's no place to go but up."

"You think the boy's okay, then?" Lovatt said.

"He'd better be!" she said grimly. "That no-good brother of mine's got him—I'll bet on it. He's been trying to get his hands on some of Drake's money for years, and he probably thought this was a good chance."

"This Congreve," Lovatt said. "Was he your cousin?"

She moved uneasily beneath the luxurious spread, but her eyes were bright and direct as she looked at the sheriff. "Maybe he was," she said. "He claimed to be—fourth cousin or something—and at least he was fun to be with. He had some time for me. Drake's always had his nose in one of his deals."

The sheriff said, "Would it surprise you to know that I heard from Salt Lake City this morning, and your husband's just a thin edge away from bein' a swindler?"

"Oh, I knew that," she said. "He's always coasted close to the law. And he hasn't got as much money as he pretends to have, either. Maybe fifty or sixty thousand working capital, and the rest a lot of bluff. So what? He spends it, and that's what I want."

"Then the person who sent that extortion note didn't know what a dry well he was tappin', eh?"

"That was Tom Layton, my dear brother," she said scornfully. "He didn't expect to get it all, but he probably figured on a few thousand."

"If it was Layton," Lovatt said deliberately, "he did it with your help. That mailing address goes to Portland, back to Salt Lake City, and then to this town, and the hand-

writin' on the postoffice box application here's in a woman's writin' that looks very much like yours."

She clutched at her breast and said, "Oh, my heart! Doctor, I can't stand any more! Can't you give me something—anything!"

"Really, Sheriff!" said Doctor Frame.

"Okay," the sheriff said disdainfully. "Ma'am, I'm sorry to see people like you move into Mill Center. But don't get the idea I can't handle you!"

## CHAPTER THREE

### "Make Your Play, Killer!"

LOVATT went back to his office and sat down. The wheels were all in motion now. He could see the pattern of the crime, he thought, and he had interposed the things that would bring it into the open. Now there remained but the process of waiting, and it was a galling process.

Sheriff Lovatt had two abiding hatreds in his heart—one for a killer, and one for anyone who could allow a child to suffer. He had found both in this new household, and his gray sharp eyes were red-rimmed and bitter as the hours went past.

At five, Clete Parker came to the office and found the sheriff motionless at his desk. Clete went quietly to his own work, fumbled through some papers, but his eyes were quick to catch every one of the sheriff's movements. He saw the fine, well-fired briar come out of the sheriff's pocket; the tobacco tamped lovingly into place. He saw the thoughtful match applied, and then Sheriff Lovatt brought the still cool briar up to cradle it in the hollow of his cheek, to rub new gloss into the gleaming wood.

The storm warning was up; the small gray sheriff was angry, but it would have taken a person who knew him intimately to tell it. Clete stood it as long as he could.

"What's up?" he said finally, crossing to perch on a corner of Lovatt's desk. "What's the trouble, Sheriff?"

Lovatt curled a fragrant plume of smoke around his hat brim, and looked at Clete Parker. The deputy had been thrust upon him, months ago, in one of those revolutions that sometimes occur in small town politics. Since that time the sheriff had grown to love the black-haired ex-marine for his courage, for his all-around competence, and most of all for the way he rode over the fact of his missing hand, asking no favors, accepting none. Lovatt liked men who built on what that had.

"Cleto," he said, "I think we've found a new low in humankind. I laid out a bait that couldn't hardly be ignored by a mother hog,



and it's been ignored. I think I'll quit this job an' go to raisin' rattlesnakes, just to improve the company I keep."

"You know, I'm completely in the dark on this," the deputy said. "Tony Congreve could've been killed by any one of the three—Carpenter, Mrs. Carpenter, or that screwy brother in law, Layton. On the other hand, the kidnaping of the boy indicates that it might have been an outsider. So what does it all add up to?"

"To nothin' special, yet," said the sheriff. "It looks like there ought to be a ransom note, hadn't there? Let's wait a spell and see what develops."

The Carpenter household called a half hour later to say that the ransom note had been delivered. It came smashing through a hall window, tied onto a rock. It demanded fifty thousand dollars in twenty-four hours, sent through the same channels as the first note, with the threat of the boy's death as the urgent factor. Lovatt went out and got the note. He brought it down to the jail and showed it to Drake Carpenter.

The man studied the crudely-printed note with eyes that were tight-drawn slits. The note was neatly sealed in a cellophane envelope, and something of the efficiency of that must have put its mark on Drake Carpenter, for he held it gingerly, and then handed it back through the bars with a hand that shook.

"My God!" he said. "Do you think he's all right? Remember some of those other kids they've snatched? They didn't even give 'em a chance! Killed 'em right away and then tried to collect the ransom money!"

"Do you want to send the money?" Lovatt asked.

"I haven't got that much."

"You paid two hundred thousand dollars for the Garvey place," the sheriff reminded him. "That was in the paper. You could raise the money on that."

Carpenter laughed bitterly. "Sucker bait," he said. "I got that relic for fifty grand, ten per cent down. It's nothing but a front, Sheriff. I figured to impress the local suckers with that. And it looks like they started on me before I could get a crack at them!"

"You could borrow the money from the F. B. I.," said Lovatt. "They'll provide some currency to pay off. Of course, it'll be marked—nothing you could see without a fluoroscope. Probably help catch the kidnapers."

Carpenter grasped at the straw. "You mean I can get the money from them, and they'll take a chance on getting it back? They'll give me the money to send?"

"You might not like it," said the sheriff. "We traced that first note clear back to Mill Center, and it looks like your wife's in on it.

You want her to get put in jail under the Lindbergh law? That's what it'd be if we call in the F. B. I."

"That ——" Carpenter used a word full of sibilants.

Lovatt waited, his eyes hard and cold.

Carpenter said finally, "Sheriff, I'm not a rich man, contrary to what some people might think. But if the county could arrange to provide the funds, I could guarantee to pay it back."

"Then you do think it's your wife."

The man cursed and paced back and forth across the narrow cell. He turned and glared at the sheriff, as sweat began to trickle down his temples.

"But suppose it isn't!" he said. "Maybe some of the local thugs decided I was a soft touch and snatched the kid. How can we be sure?"

"We don't have local thugs," said Lovatt. "And how would they know how to have the money sent? This last act fits in with the first note you brought me. Beyond that I don't know a thing."

The man sagged suddenly, slumped down on the bed and put his face in his hands. "I can get the money if you need it," he said. "If I borrow on everything, I can dig up fifty grand. Only don't let anything happen to the kid, sheriff. That's the important thing."

"If his mother's hired somebody to take him, he ain't in much danger," said Lovatt. "But if it is somebody else, I wonder how he's doin'? A kid that's used to everything. Good grub, lights, his own toys—wonder what he's up against, Carpenter? Maybe out in some shack in the woods, cold and hungry, with the rats runnin' across his face—"

"I'll give you the money!" the man squalled. "Get him back, Sheriff! Don't fiddle around with anything else. Just get the little guy back! Do you hear me?"

Lovatt said, "I'll do what I can."

**TOM LAYTON** was waiting in Lovatt's office when the sheriff came out from the jail. The man looked uncomfortable in a worn, dark overcoat and a beaver fur hat. He perched on the edge of one of Lovatt's uncompromisingly straight chairs and stared at the sheriff.

"What've you got against me?" he said.

"Well, I don't like you," Lovatt said. "But I suppose you're referring to criminal charges. I don't happen to have any of them right now."

"The snatch?"

"Far as we can tell, the boy'll be safe enough," said Lovatt. "And his paw's agreed to produce the money, if need be, to pay the ransom."

"He would!" the man said bitterly. "You



still got him in jail for killing Congreve, I suppose?"

"He confessed, didn't he?"

"You aren't that dumb," said Layton. "I was there when he confessed to shooting Congreve through the heart. Hell, Drake didn't even know where Tony was shot. Doesn't that prove anything?"

"That leaves you and Mrs. Carpenter, the sheriff told him."

"That leaves Mrs. Carpenter, and some outside gang," said Tom Layton. "You know darn' well I couldn't have done the murder or the kidnaping either."

"I don't know any such thing," said Lovatt. "You claim I don't know this house, but I do know that there's a balcony from your room that looks down on the driveway. You could've called to the man, and shot him when he looked up."

"Then Della would have seen me," said Layton. "And there'd have been a bullet buried in the upholstery of the car. Then there'd have been a gun in my room, and you know there wasn't, because you went in and looked."

"There were no guns at all," said Lovatt. "There's a danged sight too many places around here to hide guns, to expect the murder weapon to show up in time to be any good. This murder's got to be solved in a few days."

"Because of the kid, I suppose?" asked Layton.

"Because I'm going to get shut of the lot of you," said Sheriff Lovatt. "I want this case cleaned up and the whole shebang of you out of Jefferson County!"

Layton flushed. "Well, you're mighty particular. What are you, king of the county, mister?"

"I suppose you could call it that," Lovatt agreed calmly. "I know I don't intend to have any truck with undesirable elements like you folks."

Mockingly, Tom Layton said, "I suppose you've heard of a little number they call the Constitution? It allows citizens a number of freedoms, like deciding where they want to live, and things like that."

"I expect I know as much about the Constitution as I need to, my friend," said Lovatt. "It was written by honest men, for honest men. Any time some scalawag begins bendin' it to cover his own mischief, then I say there's a time to let the Constitution lay, and pick up some other implement of justice to do the job."

"Such as?" Layton said, but his face was pale now.

"Such as the vagrancy laws," said Lovatt. "I happen to know you haven't got five cents to your name, except what you c'n mooch off

your sister an' your brother in law. I'll give you a choice of goin' to work on the county roads, puttin' up a five hundred dollar surety bond against becomin' a public charge, or gettin' out of Jefferson County by nightfall tomorrow."

Layton stared venomously at Lovatt for a long moment.

"At least," he said, "you don't want me for murder."

Now it was the sheriff's grin that was mocking. "No, I don't," he said. "But if you could kill me by thinkin', you'd be a murderer right this minute!"

**M**RS. CARPENTER came to the sheriff's office just before dinner time. The strain was tearing at her now; her face was old-looking, ravaged. Her first words to him were:

"Have you heard of the boy?"

The sheriff looked at her. "What did you expect?" he asked. "It's only been today, and nothing has been done about sending the money yet."

"There's something terribly strange about it," the woman said wretchedly. "There wasn't any truth to that first letter. Tony and I thought perhaps we could simply frighten Drake into sending some money, because he's so obsessed with the children. So we wrote that first letter. Drake's been so nasty about Tony's expenses—we thought we could use twenty thousand dollars, if it weren't too difficult—"

"And now there's a real kidnaping, using the same payoff routine, and you expect me to believe you aren't mixed up in it?" Lovatt demanded.

"But I'm not!" she said urgently. "It was just a—"

"Ma'am," said Sheriff Lovatt, "if there's anything lower'n a mother who uses a threat against her own baby to pry money out of her husband to give to another man, I never happened to run across it!"

She was past protesting as he hustled her down the long corridor to the back of the building and brought her face to face with her husband. For a moment there was a dragging, ominous silence. Then Drake Henderson's words burst forth.

"What did you do with him, you hellcat?" he shouted through the bars. "How can you dare put your own baby in trouble just to satisfy your greed. If I could get my hands on you, I'd—"

"Greed?" she screamed back. "Since when have you a right to talk about greed, you penny-pinching cheat, you four-flusher, you crook!"

"What did you do with the boy!" he said.



## SHERIFF LOVATT'S DEATH-WATCH

"What did I do?" The woman was raving now, her eyes were wild and dilated. "I didn't do anything with him, you utter fool. Tom Layton's got him, or you did it yourself! What did you do?"

He turned deadly serious. "Stella, so help me God, I had nothing to do with taking the boy! The postmaster at Salt Lake City happened to write me for confirmation of that first mailing arrangement you and Congreve cooked up. I knew you were trying to shake me down. So I went ahead and—"

"And killed him!" she screamed in his face. "You killed Tony, figuring it'd be blamed on kidnapers. And then you stole the baby so you could make me suffer!"

Dully, the man said, "I killed Tony, yes. It was made to order. I waited till you came back from your ride and shot him from the shrubbery, then threw the gun in the woods. I faked a confession that was full of holes, figuring they'd think I was protecting you, and wouldn't hold me very long on the charge. You know—double jeopardy—if I was released on that count they wouldn't be able to try me on it again."

"That ain't exactly the way double jeopardy works," said Lovatt briskly. "But anyway, I've got what I wanted to get out of you Carpenter."

They turned eyes to him that seemed never to have seen him before. Drake Carpenter said in the same dull voice, "All right, you've got the truth out of me, Lovatt. But for God's sake, what about the boy?"

"I thought you'd break down if I put enough pressure on you," Lovatt said with the hint of a chuckle in his voice.

"I wasn't worried about your damn' murder charge," said Carpenter angrily. "I had a right to kill Congreve, and I'll beat that rap when the time comes. It's the kid that's drivin' me crazy."

"You won't beat any rap after confessin' premeditation before a peace officer," said Lovat. "As for the boy, I had Del Moon take him the night of the killin'. I thought he'd be the best way to crack you, Carpenter, and he was. An' if you've got any ideas about countersuits, well, we'll call it protective custody."

"Right now I expect he's so full of fried chicken and black-eyed peas he couldn't be any happier at a circus."

His gray eyes darkened then, as he looked at the two. "Carpenter," he said, "I expect you'll be here some time. But the rest of the tribe I want out of this county within twenty-four hours. Where I'm sheriff, there's no room for trash!"

THE END



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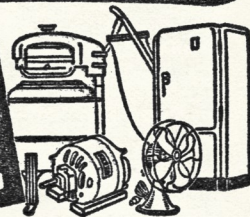
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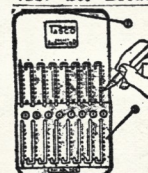
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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 6)

That mention of articles, was too good to miss. We asked Frank to do a short piece for this magazine, on some unusual aspect of crime-detection—and the following is one which we think you armchair experts might well go for.

Okay, Frank—take over:

**S**OME years ago I was in the lobby of a prominent Chicago hotel talking to the clerk when a suave, professorial type of man walked in. I said to the clerk, "Here comes a crook."

The clerk looked at me aghast. "Why, Mr. Taylor," he said, "how can you make a statement like that? He's one of our best— Have you seen him before?"

I hadn't.

And at the time, I couldn't analyze the hints that brought me to this sixth-sense conclusion that most detectives have when giving a stranger the once-over.

Since then I've gone into the study of people a little deeper and can give more objective explanation, when I suspect a man on sight.

The person I tagged in the hotel lobby was The Yellow Kid Weil—one of the slickest stock swindlers in the country. He was not the shifty-eyed, nervous or erratic type one associates with the common, ordinary run of crooks. The Yellow Kid had poise, complete facial control, and no doubt he had modeled his almost perfect pace after dignified and successful men.

That was the trouble. Ordinarily he could fool you. He'd fooled thousands of people, to the extent of huge sums of money. However, the detective who has come in contact with many odd people knows that people fall into types very easily. Their expressions, their carriage and especially their walk are significant.

If they are imitating some one in any of these particulars the fact stands out like a sore thumb. The average detective may not be able to explain what's wrong, but he'll know *something's* wrong. Let's analyze a few people from their walk, for instance, and see how they stack up.

To begin with, the professor has an absent-minded walk. He gives you the impression of never seeing any one, and the way the professorial type cuts acquaintances is well known.

He simply does not see other people. His walk in a familiar environment, like a campus, is leisurely. In a strange environment, or an excitable one, it is likely to be erratic; the direction of his steps will be wavering and may



## CRIME CLINIC

betray uncertainty, hesitation and indecision. In both the familiar and strange environment the "reflective attitude" is uppermost, yet in his walk he will unconsciously reveal these other peculiarities of his makeup. Besides, a professor's step is inclined to be modest or "soft."

A suave crook imitating a professor is just as ridiculous as a female impersonator. If he is clever, has a cultural polish, and is grounded in intellectual matters, the deception may be hard to detect at first. Indeed, many a master crook has been able to mingle with expert detectives and investigators without arousing the least suspicion.

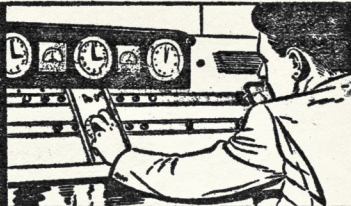
It's entirely possible to fool the best detective closeup, for here the play of personality and psychology comes in. Dillinger continually defied the police in his early days and got away with it. But he had a lot of what some psychologists call "personal magnetism." He had to have a lot of that to get out of jail with a wooden gun! Some crooks seem to have the same power over other people—police or suckers alike—as a snake has over a bird or a hypnotist over a weaker-willed subject on whom he demonstrates.

However, there was no mistake in the minds of the FBI men when they saw Dillinger walk away from the theatre at the fatal spot where he was shot. They were skeptical when they first saw him, and a little study of his expression and his walking during those fleeting moments reassured the FBI. Even if he wasn't Dillinger, they knew he was not an innocent man.

A crook with a professor's disguise coming into a hotel lobby creates exactly the opposite effects that a real professor does. Instead of having a reflective or absent-minded expression, he has a calculating expression. Like the professor, his head may be slightly inclined, but when he wants to look around he will use his eyes more than the motion of his head. The professor is apt to move his whole head, in jerks. In other words, the crook will remind you of a cat who is in a dark but familiar environment, while the professor will remind you of a clumsy Claude in a strange environment. Even when these conditions are reversed, and the professor is in his home environment, the expressions and movements of the body still conform to the natural personality.

The crook has steeled himself to be calm under any kind of circumstances. His step, if he is a confidence man, simulates the successful business man. He walks rather leisurely but firmly, as if sure of himself. He appears systematic, business-like. Yet most of this type have a walk that betrays a contradictory

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## DETECTIVE TALES

nature, a physical or mental weakness—an abnormality. They may strike their heel firmly in walking, which is the characteristic of a strong personality who has nothing to hide and, in the next few steps, they may strike with the toe, which denotes weakness. Those that do not have shifty eyes or the roving head, will have a habit of swinging along in a way that will enable them to take in most of the scene before them.

A normal person's walk is as clear-cut as his fingerprint. He will walk at a normal pace and go where he is looking.

Here's a few things to note about different kinds of people if you want to get a line on them:

Watch a person who you know is obstinate. In walking he'll rely more on muscular power than mental alertness. He'll rest his foot flatly and firmly on the ground, treading heavily and sluggishly. When he stands, it will be with feet apart, suggesting an arrogant pose. He will not walk where he is looking, but he will expect an apology from one who is when they clash.

The gentle person walks with slow steps; whether short or long they indicate the gentle or reflective turn of mind. But do not confuse this person with the loquacious gossip who has a tiptoe movement, symbolizing mystery and curiosity. Nor with the modest person whose soft step is nevertheless firm in its way and has nothing sneaky about it. The miser's step comes in this category, too, although he reminds one more of a novice in the pickpocket game. His walk is somewhat stooping or cringing, made up of short, nervous, anxious steps.

The lazy person scrapes along loosely with his heels and seems to drift from one side of the path to the other. A sickly person's walk is similar, although he has a tendency to drag his heels.

On the other hand, a wide-awake person walks with toes conspicuously out and has a long swing to his arms.

A timid person walks with indecision. On meeting another, however, he shrinks; upon approaching an obstacle he will always walk around and never step over it. An unstable person walks fast then slow and does not seem to have any special point or purpose in mind.

The list could be drawn out indefinitely. Perhaps you get the idea already and can identify the stride of several of your friends. If one compares the stride and the expression, the general impression is usually quite unmistakable.

In this connection the cruising squad cars are a distinct advantage to the police, for they



## CRIME CLINIC

afford the police a chance to study suspicious characters as they poke along. Then, when they get out to question them, they can compare, in their minds, the impression of their stride.

As a general rule crooks know their disadvantage, too. That is why they will scurry to a hideaway, even when they have no police records. The best of them, like Dillinger, crack in the end, and skulk away out of sight. They know that, in spite of their cleverness, none of them can shake that "suspicious" feeling which detectives can easily spot when they're on the lookout for it.

Of course, there are times when innocent people get pulled in for suspicious characters, but I'd lay you two to one that such instances are long shots in the lives of alert, experienced detectives. They will tell you, and truthfully, that they can easily spot a crook across the street.

In fact, a crook walks right into it every time.

To Frank—our thanks. And we'd like to do a little betting of our own, since we're willing to give odds that you would-be detectives, right now, will look up from these pages to check on the walking habits of your friends and the people around you. Come on now, be a sport and admit it.

Let's hear what develops, eh? Just in case you don't run into any criminals or detectives, there'll be a full complement of them in Detective Tales next month.

One of them whom we like very much is the latest character-creation of William R. Cox, many of whose detective stories have appeared in this magazine. From his vast store of knowledge of crime and criminals, Mr. Cox has compounded a robust and thoroughly refreshing type of detective yarn—with a detective hero who has far more to do than merely shout himself hoarse and shoot at fleeing fugitives. In this "different" story, Ted Granger turns detective again after a hitch in the service, to clear himself and the girl he loves—but who doesn't love him—of a murder charge—after she is dead! Surely there's a situation to test a keen private-eye—

Did we say Keene? That's right—Day Keene will be represented in the next issue also, with a long mystery novel about an amateur detective who becomes embroiled in a quickly-moving death race against time and the chair.

These are only a few of the many items on the murder-menu of crime-fiction—both short and long—which will be published in the June issue of *Detective Tales* on April 26th.

THE EDITOR.

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## DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 78)

as he came around the corner of the desk, he reached for me and wrapped those powerful arms around my middle, putting his big face against the front of my vest, his black hair right under my chin. He put on the pressure and the room spun, growing darker fast. I felt my rib basket crunching under those arms. In desperation I hammered at his head with the horseshoe, trying to chunk him as often and as hard as I could. The lights were almost out when his arms began to slacken. I got a big breath and patted him a good one. He slipped down slowly. When his face was at the right level I put my knee into it, hard. That flopped him over on his back. He rolled part way under the desk. I leaned down and clunked him once more for luck.

I didn't stop hurrying until I had taken handcuffs from one of the sleeping cops and fastened Tony's arms together over his stomach. His wrists were so big that I could just squeeze them shut on the first notch. They looked small on him, so I got another pair and snapped those just below the first pair. Then I looked to see what I could do for Buster and the boys. Buster was stirring a little, and so was the first cop. The second cop looked like interne bait.

Buster crawled onto a chair, peered around the desk at Tony, and started to ask questions.

I said, "Looks to me as though Tony buttered up Ryan's boys to sell Ryan out for a bigger cut of the take. They figured Ryan wouldn't play ball and let himself be eased out, so they picked me as a sucker to hang Ryan's killing on. This trussed-up slob was to do the job, and I was to take the rap, having been sucked in by his big story about being his witness in case Ryan tried anything funny. If you put the screws on Ryan's boys, I'll bet you get the whole deal."

Buster agreed, and after mutual apologies, congratulations, back slappings and comparison of wounds, we got some more boys and an ambulance. First they took the cop down, and then they all got together to lift Tony's stretcher. Buster took the cylinder with him, and the handkerchief from Tony's pocket.

I sat down again behind my desk in the sudden quiet of the office, trying to quiet by Vassar nerves, mentally tying a string on my finger to remember my date with the police the next morning, and keeping tabs on a growing appetite. I gingerly fingered the knots on my head. I was wondering whether or not to have a steak when, for some reason, I couldn't get my pipe to draw.

Eureka! There it was, wadded up and unscorched. I flattened it out on the desk and decided on *two* steaks.



## THERE'S MURDER IN THE AIR!

(Continued from page 52)

Whispering Kid and his boys, so I went home. I meant to duck out, but I got to thinking. She apparently hadn't called copper. Maybe she wasn't going to, and it was my word against hers. I took a chance."

"And she thought the Whispering Kid and his men were working with you," I told him. "When they trailed her, she thought it was to shut her mouth about the murder."

He said, "That's enough talk."

"Wait, one thing more. Why'd you kill Pete?"

He said, "You mean the trumpet player. I had to. He spotted me when I picked up Carmen. I knew he'd tell you."

He raised the gun and the cops who had been waiting in the kitchen came out. French fired first. The bullet wasn't aimed at them, but at me. It hit my shoulder, spinning me into the girl, then he went down as the boys in blue cut loose. The last thing I remembered was Mary kissing me. . . .

**C**ARMEN was present at the wedding. In fact she was the whole show. She was the kind that stole any show. After it was over and I'd gotten my voice and nerve back, she told me that someone was waiting to see me.

It was Gilbert, in the little room off the Justice's office. He said, "You didn't invite me to the ceremony but I came anyhow. I brought you a little present. You can have your old spots back—in fact, you can run all the juke boxes I control."

I looked at him, and I got a lot of pleasure out of giving it to him straight. "Sorry," I said. "I'm going to work. I'm selling time for one of the radio stations. It isn't a big job and it never will be, but the people I meet won't get me into trouble. My wife says that we don't want any more trouble. All we want is quiet and to be left alone. We want that for a long long time."

THE END

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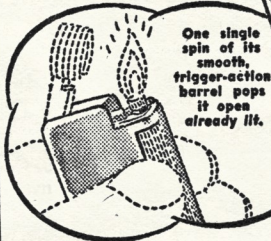
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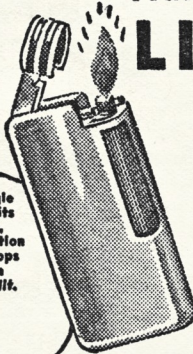
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