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TWELVE STORIES!



MAY

DETECTIVE TALES

12
STORIES

15
CENTS

DAY
KEENE
PARKER
BONNER
AND OTHERS!

MEET ME IN
DEATH ALLEY!

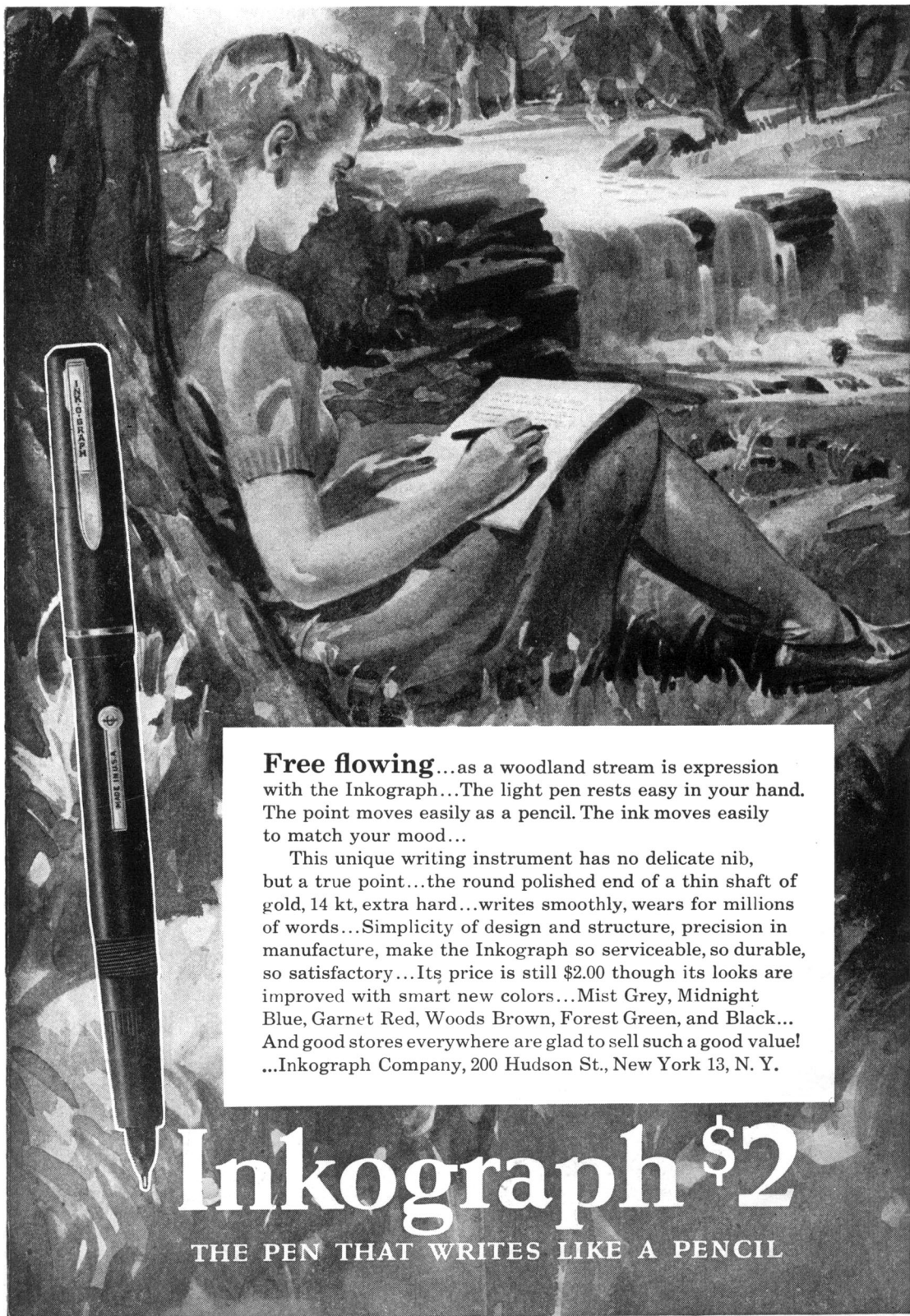
AN UNUSUAL CRIME SAGA

'by PETER PAIGE

HOTEL MURDER

'by FRANCIS K. ALLAN





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IN DISTRESS OFF CATFISH SHOALS.
RESCUE CRAFT . . .

JEEPERS! THERE
SHE IS!

JACK LEVEL AND LOU MCKIEL, EX-SEABEES,
ARE ON THE SECOND DAY OF A ROUGH
RUN DOWN THE COAST IN THEIR NEWLY-
PURCHASED NAVY "SURPLUS" BOAT, WHEN..

MY ENGINE'S DEAD! ARE YOU
THE RESCUE CRAFT?

NO, BUT I DO
KNOW ENGINES
HEAVE US A
LINE

20
MINUTES
LATER

WE'RE BLOWING
ONTO THE
SHOALS!

TELL YOUR DAD
WE'RE O.K., MISS.
THE ENGINE'LL
START NOW

YOU GOT US OUT
OF A NASTY FIX.
I WAS ABSOLUTELY
HELPLESS

CATFISH SHOALS
HAVE BEEN BAD NEWS
FOR MANY A VESSEL

COME ABOARD WHEN
WE ANCHOR. WE'RE
INVITED FOR CHOW

I'LL START SUPPER,
DAD, WHILE YOU
MEN CLEAN UP

SAY, THIS BLADE'S
A PIP. NEVER GOT
RID OF WHISKERS
FASTER OR EASIER

IT'S A THIN
GILLETTE
. . . AND
PLENTY KEEN

WE PLAN TO FIX
UP OUR TUB AND
START A FISHING
SERVICE

THAT'S A WASTE OF TALENT.
MY CONSTRUCTION FIRM
NEEDS MEN LIKE YOU

HE'S CERTAINLY
HANDSOME

I'M PUTTING IT STRAIGHT, MEN, WHEN I
SAY YOU GET REAL SHAVING SPEED AND
COMFORT WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE
THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN
THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. AND BECAUSE THEY
FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, YOU'RE
PROTECTED AGAINST THE SCRAPE AND
IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT
BLADES. ASK FOR
THIN GILLETTES



DETECTIVE

12
STORIES

TALES

15
CENTS

VOL. THIRTY-SIX

MAY, 1947

NUMBER TWO

Two Smashing Novels

1. **MEET ME IN DEATH ALLEY!**.....*Peter Paige* 10
—a cozy little rendezvous, where either you or me, Mack, will try on for size the shroud of that babe whose body can't ever be there!
2. **HOTEL MURDER**.....*Francis K. Allan* 74
—you should call it, and I'm going to make you tell why this screwball fleabag has a shiv-studded corpse in every corridor!

Hard-Hitting Crime Novelette

3. **THE WALLS ARE HARD AND HIGH**..*William Campbell Gault* 42
—but they taught me the cost of a murder-free name, so I set out to pay each past-due installment with the real killer's blood!

Six Compelling Short Stories

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—McGonigle opened his mouth and popped his own coffin in it!
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—that's stacked under the loft, so I've got to keep it covered all the rest of my life with my own sweat and blood!
7. **HELL-ON-WHEELS!**.....*Parker Bonner* 56
—is the name of my hack, Mamie, and it's Cousin Noisy with his big flapping yap has dealt us both in for a quick coffin pay-off!
8. **PLL SEE YOU DEAD!**.....*Larry Holden* 63
—is Brill's slogan. So, lay off, pal, unless you're ready to begin your post-mortem career!
9. **DANGEROUS CROSSING**.....*Robert C. Dennis* 68
—the sign read, in a masterpiece of understatement. I learned too late that I'd really crossed the meridian of mayhem!

—AND—

10. **MASTER MANHUNTERS**.....*Nelson & Allen* 41
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June Issue Published April 25th!

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION

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*A stranger to her heart!
... but she knew she loved him more
than anything else in the world!*



The dramatic story of a
girl in a man's world
who taught a killer the
real meaning of love!

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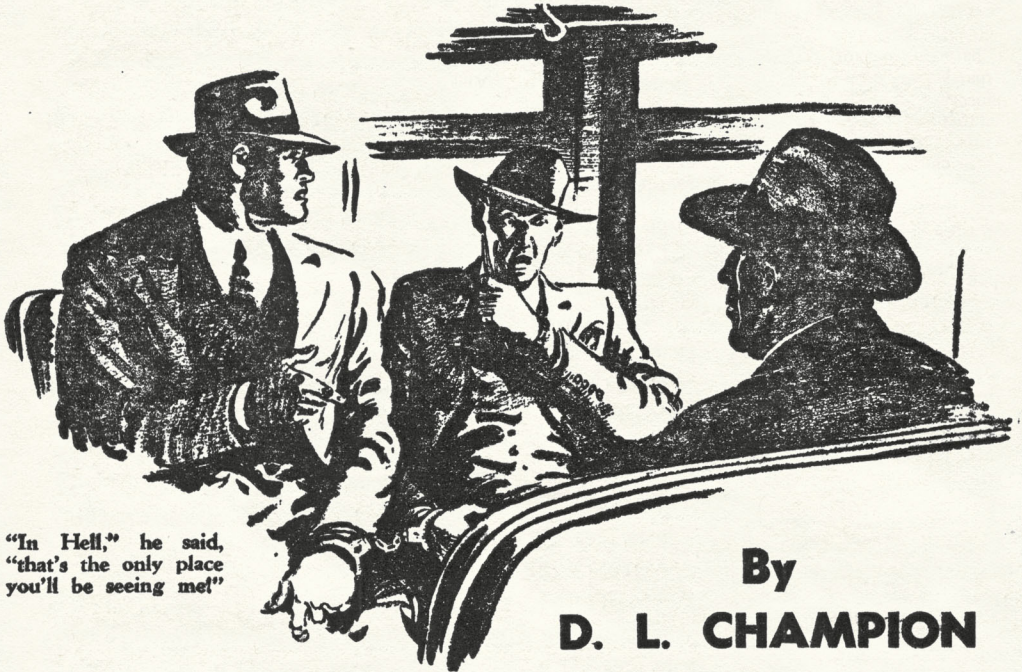
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GIANT KILLER



"In Hell," he said,
"that's the only place
you'll be seeing me!"

By
D. L. CHAMPION

Sealed Lips McGonigle opened his mouth and put his own coffin in it!

THE QUARTER of the city where McGonigle was born and bred was not noted for subtlety. Its wit was obscene and obvious—its irony laid on with a trowel. The nickname, Sealed Lips, which it had bestowed on McGonigle was one of its neater efforts.

McGonigle, it was whispered in the local saloons, had begun talking volubly at the age of fourteen months when he announced loudly that he could drink more lacteal beverage than any other infant on the block. He had been boasting ever since.

At seventeen the fact that he could not refrain from taking drunken and stentorian credit for a candy-store robbery had landed him in the reformatory.

When, twenty months later, he returned to his former haunts he had changed physically. He was leaner, sharper eyed and the lines of his mouth was more tightly set. Vocally, he had not changed at all. His voice was loud and constant.

During the next eight years, Sealed Lips McGonigle committed a score of robberies and three cold blooded killings. He served a

two year term on one count, obtained a hung jury on another and on four occasions managed to frighten witnesses into hiding. Once he gained a suspended sentence and once a moronic jury acquitted him outright.

Through it all he talked.

Naturally, there came a day when he talked too much. Though, considering everything, it came later in his life than anyone expected.

A gasoline station attendant was murdered during a holdup. The man was armed and apparently had drawn his gun on the robber. The police found an automatic gripped in the dead man's hand; they also found a misshapen bullet in his skull and a rifled safe.

Four hours after the first editions hit the streets, McGonigle began to act like a fourth rate actor displaying his scrap book. He bowed in all directions at once and took sole credit for the job.

He kept right on talking as a stool-pigeon exsinated himself from the barroom and he was *still* talking when the police arrived to take him in. Moreover, he did not shut up when Ballistics demonstrated that the murder

(Concluded on page 8)



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A Detective Tales SHORT THRILLER

(Continued from page 6)

bullet had been fired from a thirty-eight which came to light in a battered bureau drawer of McGonigle's furnished room.

If he was apprehensive during his trial no reporter remarked it. He revelled in the publicity. He posed for the photographers like a Congressman and issued interviews to the press which drove his lawyers to shrill and futile protest.

He smirked when he was sentenced to the chair and promptly signed a contract to relate his life story to a newspaper syndicate who was more addicted to comic strips than news.

Two months later when Detective-sergeant Heyworth escorted him to Grand Central station the larynx of Sealed Lips McGonigle remained unimpaired.

They sat in a worn green plush day coach, McGonigle's right hand chained to Heyworth's left. As was his custom, Heyworth discreetly dropped his top coat over the handcuffs which held them together. McGonigle grinned and shook the coat off.

He said, "May as well let 'em know who I am, sarge."

Heyworth shrugged. He had chaperoned many men on this final journey. Within all reasonable limits he was ready to give them their own way.

"Sure," said McGonigle in a loud voice, "may as well give the peasantry a thrill. I guess they never been so close to a guy who's knocked off twelve men before."

"Twelve?" said Heyworth. "Headquarters figures only four."

"Four?" said McGonigle as if someone had impugned his mother's honor. "They're crazy, sarge. It was twelve. I remember every one of them. I—"

He was interrupted as a man came into the car, nodded to Heyworth and took the seat facing them. He was a little man of indeterminate age. He wore a neat grey suit, a dark conservative tie and an air of innocence.

He said to Heyworth, "Good morning, sergeant. I didn't expect to see you today."

Heyworth nodded in McGonigle's direction. McGonigle grinned and said noisily, "I guess there's a lot of people on this train that didn't expect to see me. I'm McGonigle." He paused and added a trifle anxiously, "I guess you've heard of me."

The little man nodded. "Indeed, I have."

McGonigle's smile held satisfaction. "I guess you read the papers about the trial. But you know the newspapers didn't tell the half."

"Really?" said the little man politely.

"No, siree," said Sealed Lips McGonigle. "There was a fellow about three years ago. I killed him for four hundred bucks. A lousy four hundred bucks." He snapped the fingers of his free hand.

The little man's blue eyes were open wide. His expression was difficult to read but he seemed impressed.

"Yep," said McGonigle, "I've knocked off twelve guys. And I done it all by myself. Not like that punk, Capone, who hired his killing done. Twelve guys is a lot, ain't it?"

The little man nodded.

"I guess you never killed twelve guys, did you?" McGonigle went off into a roar of laughter.

The little man looked vaguely uncomfortable. He shrugged his shoulders and did not answer.

"And the cheapest job I ever did," said McGonigle, "was for two hundred bucks. Now how'd you like to kill a guy for that sort of lousy dough?"

The little man smiled vacantly. He stood up. He said nervously, "I guess I'll go along to the smoker for a cigar." He nodded to Heyworth. He caught the eye of Sealed Lips McGonigle and muttered, "Be seeing you, sir."

McGonigle's laughter was Gargantuan. "In Hell," he said. "That's the only place you'll ever be seeing me."

The little man walked away. In the doorway of the car he stood for a moment and regarded McGonigle with an odd and puzzled expression.

As he disappeared, Sealed Lips McGonigle turned to Sergeant Heyworth. He was vastly amused.

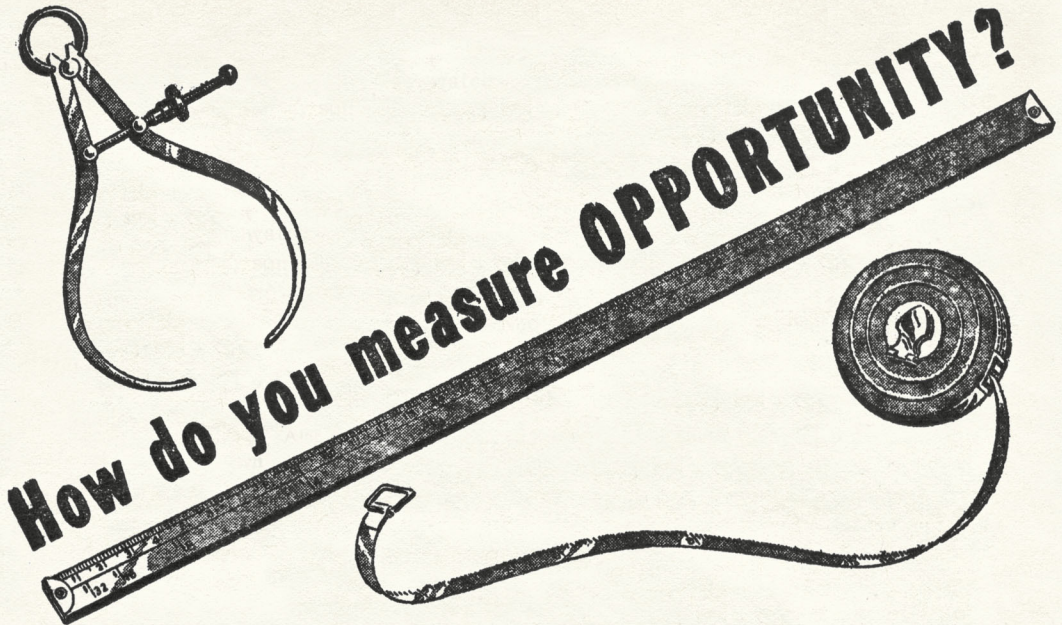
"Well," he said, "I guess I knocked him for a loop, all right. Did you hear me ask him if he ever bumped off twelve men? God, did you see his face?"

McGonigle was embarked on a spasm of laughter when Heyworth said slowly, "I forget the exact number. I think it's a hundred and nine."

"A hundred and nine what?"

"The little man. He's killed a hundred and nine men. His name's Heddant—the State Executioner," said Heyworth. He added gently, "He gets a hundred and fifty dollars for each job."

Suddenly, and for the first time in his life, Sealed Lips McGonigle was living up to his name.



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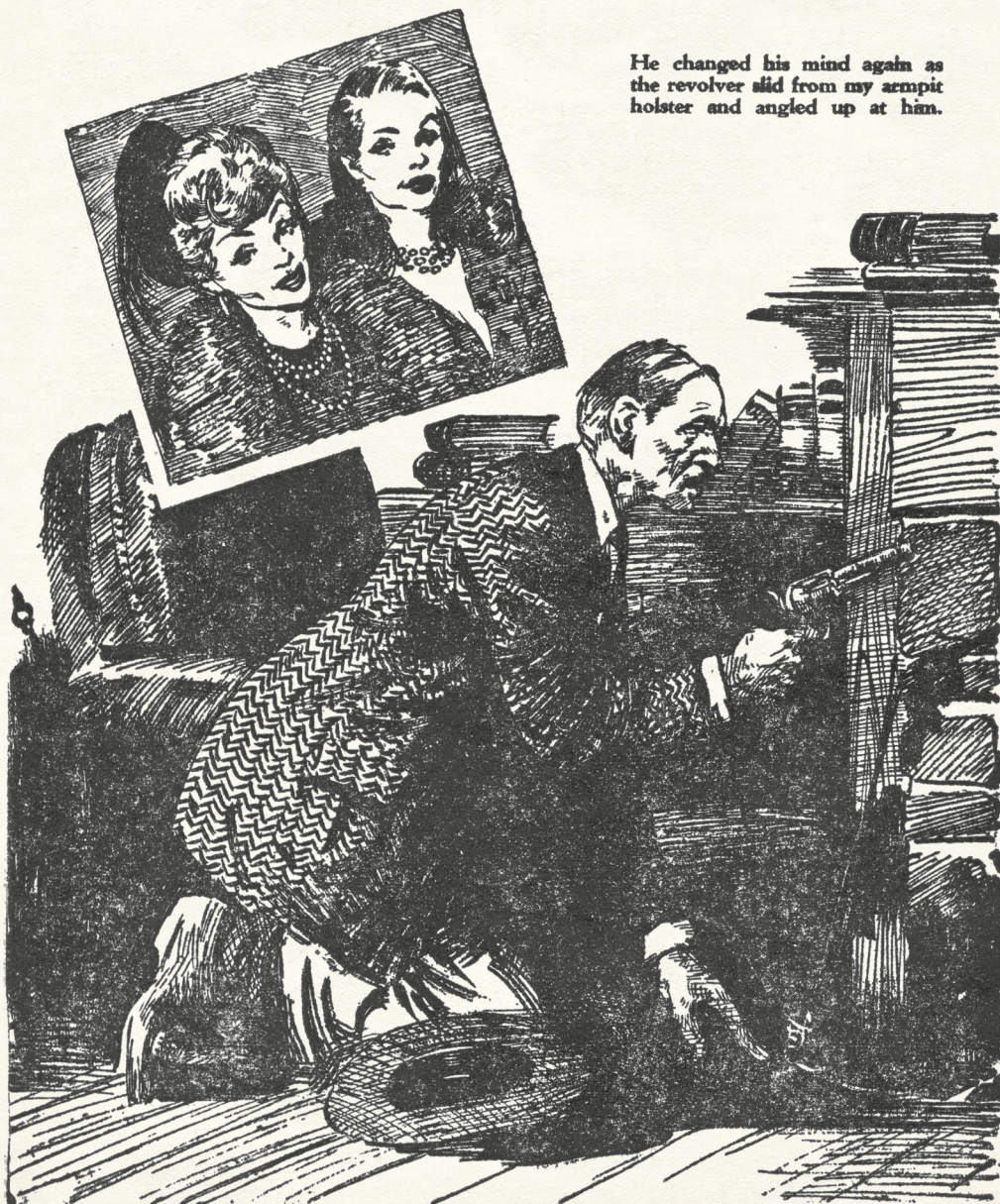
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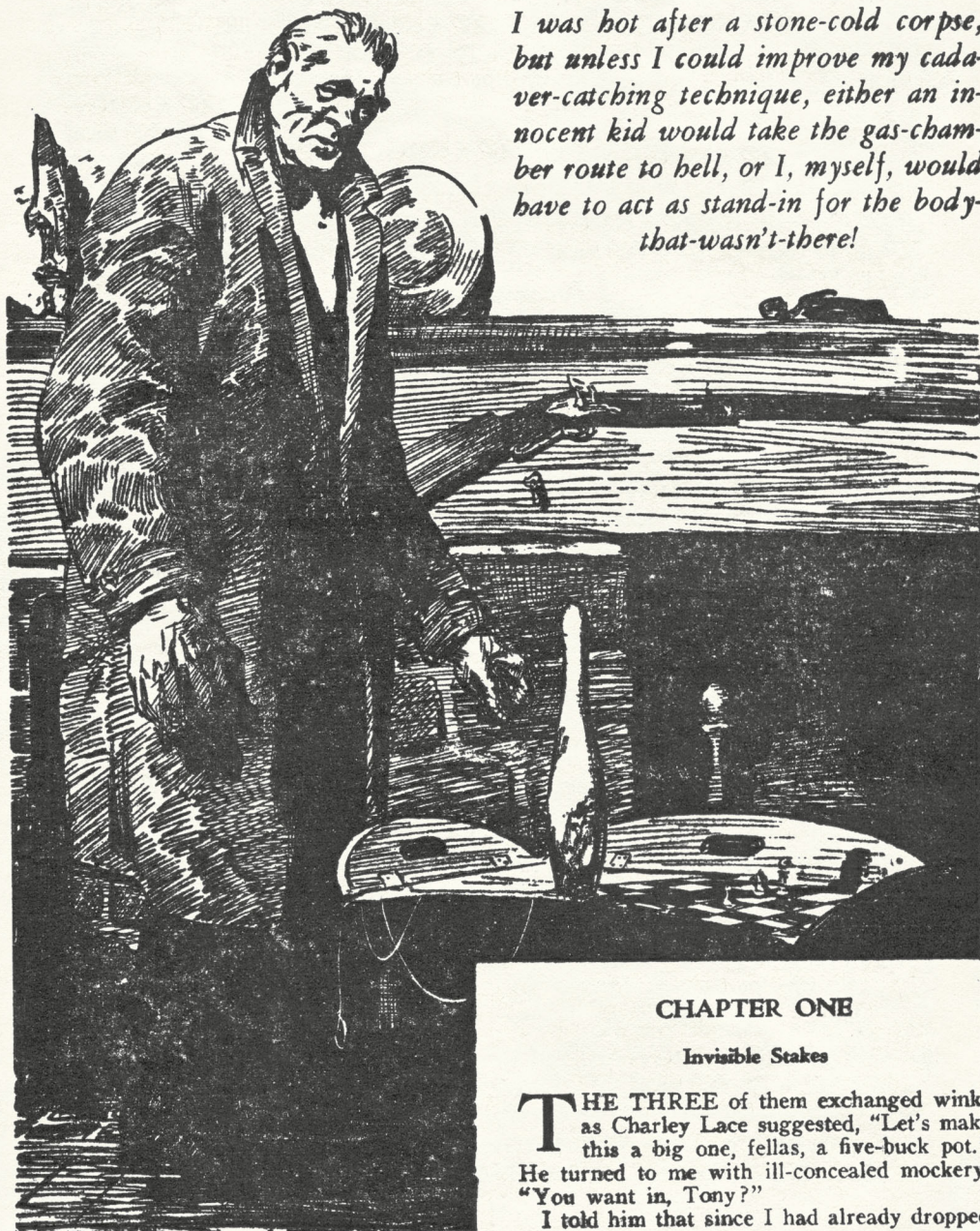
By PETER PAIGE

He changed his mind again as the revolver slid from my armpit holster and angled up at him.



DEATH ALLEY!

Feature-Length Murder Novel



I was hot after a stone-cold corpse, but unless I could improve my cadaver-catching technique, either an innocent kid would take the gas-chamber route to hell, or I, myself, would have to act as stand-in for the body that-wasn't-there!

CHAPTER ONE

Invisible Stakes

THE THREE of them exchanged winks as Charley Lace suggested, "Let's make this a big one, fellas, a five-buck pot." He turned to me with ill-concealed mockery, "You want in, Tony?"

I told him that since I had already dropped

ten dollars that evening another five might change my luck. Dominguez snickered audibly at my folly. Tom Berry shook his grinning face as if it was a little too deep for him and Charley exploded into outright laughter as he crayoned our four names on the score sheet: Charley. Tom. Hal. Tony.

Then he raised his ball from the rack, backed to the starting line and aimed the ball, stiff-armed, before his hips. He stepped out with his left foot as the ball swung back. One quick step and the ball swung forward again. It left his fingers as his left foot slid toward the foul line. It skidded past the maple and over most of the pine. It caught a yard short of the triangle formed by ten wooden clubs, hooked sharply left into the "pocket", the spot between the three and one pins. Ten pins toppled as one.

Dominguez pencilled an X in the first square next to Charley's name. Tom Berry hefted his ball. Ray Budd, manager of the alley, called down from his desk, "Tony Lark—phone!"

I said, "You fellows go ahead. I'll catch up."

I ignored their winks and went up through the little grandstand to the booth behind Ray Budd's desk. Their winks and grins were part of a job. I was Santa, a hayseed among slickers, the man Barnum had in mind, a bowling duffer who had the audacity to pit his money against the skill of Pacific City's three champion bowlers. But I played for invisible stakes and the girl's voice on the phone brought them to sharp focus:

"Tony Lark, are you crazy? Bowling tonight? Have you forgotten what's going to happen in the morning—?"

It went on, a girl's voice that had become a hoarse, screaming whip-lash. It was a voice that was ordinarily low and rippling. But it was out of control now, harsh and strident, tintured by hysteria, filled with terror and desperation.

I knew exactly what was supposed to happen in the morning; a man who was little more than a boy was to be escorted into a sealed room, left alone inside that room—while the air gradually filled with cyanide gas: the girl's brother, Jerry Tinker.

And I had undertaken to keep him out of that room. It was a job. The gold leaf legend on the frosted upper half of my office door said: Tony Lark—Investigations. The passage of some of the girl's savings across my office desk had made it my job. As simply as that.

She had purchased my time and talents and the months, weeks, days had finally telescoped into hours—and I was spending one of these hours playing a game in which grown men rolled a hard rubber ball at wooden clubs.

I said into the phone, "You've got to believe me, Stella. You've got to believe that Jerry's last hope is for me to go on bowling tonight with the people with whom I'm bowling."

A chunk of silence entered my ear, followed by a procession of low sobs. They still bubbled from the receiver as I broke the connection.

Ray Budd stopped me as I emerged from the booth.

"You're in fast company, Tony. Watch your step."

"It's the best way to learn how to bowl, isn't it—bucking experts?"

"You could learn other things. For instance, when Hal Dominguez offers you potato chips, the idea is to get oil on your fingers and make it harder for you to handle the ball. And Charley tips the pinboys enough to make it worth their while to kick a tenpin now and then. You can't see it from down there; but I've seen it from here. And you'll notice Hal only touches his chips with his left hand. See what I mean?"

I shrugged and went back to the game and looked at the score sheet. Charley had three strikes in a row. Tom Berry had a spare followed by two strikes. Hal had a split followed by two strikes. He shrugged at my glance, as if to say a split could happen to anybody, and told me, "Go ahead and catch up, Tony. Remember, pick up the spares and the strikes will take care of themselves." He winked at the others.

I selected my ball from the rack and commenced bowling.

JERRY TINKER said, "I don't want to talk to you. You have any questions, ask my lawyer. I'll talk when I get on the witness stand."

I said, "That's great. Your sister will go on paying me twenty bucks a day until your trial. Then I'll waste another week hearing your foolish answers to a lot of foolish questions. Then I'll start out on a cold, cold trail."

He was outraged. His expression knotted into all the fury of which his young face was capable. He had curly black hair and dark eyes that seemed almost black. He was lean and tanned and brittle looking. He was nineteen.

"Twenty bucks a day?" he choked. "Stella's payin' you twenty bucks a day?"

"She seems to think it's worth that to keep you out of the gas chamber," I pointed out mildly.

He sprang to his feet. He would have paced up and down, but the two of us practically filled his cell.

"Why's she have to do a damn fool thing like that?" he demanded. "Dames are dopes!"

I nodded. "Sure. But you're no dope. You're hep. You'll get on the stand and say you didn't kill Steve Granger. That'll go over big with the jury after the prosecutor finishes proving nobody else but you could have killed him."

The kid tightened into a statue. "I *didn't* kill him!" he spat through clenched teeth. "Anybody who says I did—"

"The district attorney says you did and he has a good case," I cut in gently. "Just listen to the sound of it and then you tell me how to break it down. His first witness will be a Mrs. Lunt. Mrs. Lunt is the landlady of the Alexander Hotel. She was in her room at eleven o'clock on the night of December third. Her husband and a couple of friends, the Reids, were also there. The four of them were playing contract."

"Someone knocked on the door and a man's voice yelled that there was trouble in room twelve. Mr. and Mrs. Lunt went up to room twelve together. The man who lived there was a quiet sort of eccentric named Steve Granger. He earned a sort of living setting pins in the bowling alley and spent his spare time quietly drinking himself unconscious."

"The door of room twelve was ajar. They pushed it all the way open and saw Steve Granger. They also saw you. Steve was motionless on his back on his bed with his skull crushed in so hard that the left eye had popped clear out of its socket. Now it dangled loose on red tissue. He was lying there and you were standing over him. In one hand you held a bowling pin. You held some money in your other hand. On the floor lay an open wallet from which the money had evidently been removed."

"I'm just telling you what Mrs. Lunt will tell the jury," I said as the boy started to explode. "Just listen and then tell me how you could prove her wrong. She saw you give her a wild look. You yelled at them to stand back, that you were getting out of there. You cocked the bowling pin over your shoulder and stalked toward them as you talked. It was pretty emphatic because the white face of the pin held gleaming splashes of wet blood. Mrs. Lunt ran screaming down the hall. Mr. Lunt backed away warily. You stalked him into the corridor. You still gripped that money in your left hand."

"The landlady's screams had filled the hall with startled roomers. As you followed Mr. Lunt into the hall, the guy who lived next door jumped you from behind. He's a recent marine and he was careful and you became unconscious on the floor of the hall in about one tenth of one second."

"He did a good job, because you were still unconscious when the police arrived. In fact, you did not regain consciousness until Doc

Schultz, the police surgeon, revived you. By then the police had the beginning of the story. Before I go into that, just let me tell you that the police evidence is even more emphatic than Mrs. Lunt's. Steve Granger had been dead only a few minutes before Doc Schultz examined him. He had been killed by the bowling pin and the only fingerprints raised from the pin belonged to Steve and you. Nobody but you had been seen in the vicinity of room twelve since Steve had entered it fifteen minutes earlier."

"The cops learned you set pins in the same bowling alley as Steve; you usually worked lanes three and four, while Steve handled five and six. From Ray Budd, the manager, and Herb, Bob, George, Dave and Alvin, the other pinsetters, the cops learned you had been needling Steve all during the week he had been working there. He was thirty-five, a wino and a vet with a psycho record. He wasn't bright. He was slow. You were bright and fast and young and cocky. You rode him all the time."

"They learned Steve had acted queer at the alley before going home to the Alexander that night. He had refused to handle something called a pot game. In fact, he seemed to resent something about that particular game—either the men who wanted to bowl in it or something else. He had been drinking and the words he yelled made no sense. He had come out of the pits waving a bowling pin and yelling. You came out after him and jumped him from behind and wrestled the pin away from him. Other people led him out of the alley. The manager told him to go home."

LATER, Ray Budd told you to go to Steve's home and find out what the trouble was about. Pinboys are hard to keep these days and Budd didn't want to lose Steve, slow and peculiar as he was. You went. Nobody saw you take a bowling pin along—but then nobody could swear you *didn't*.

"So that's the case. The district attorney will say you went up there, found him unconscious from drink, or conscious and drunk—it makes no difference. He'll say you saw the wallet, lifted the money out of it, about twelve dollars in singles, and when he came to enough to try to get it back you slugged him with the bowling pin."

"Your story, according to your sister and lawyer, is that you had walked into room twelve and found Steve dead and the bowling pin and bills on the bed alongside his body. You picked up the pin and bills just as the landlady pushed open the door. You grew panicky. You forgot about the money in your hand. Your only idea was to get away from there. You tried—until the ex-marine hit you from behind."

"Okay. It may be the truth; it's certainly reasonable. It would be natural for you to pick up the money and bowling pin; your work is picking up bowling pins, you'd do that much automatically. It would also be natural for you to get jittery and try to bull your way out. But the point is, that's just your statement. It exists without substantiating evidence. Now you tell me what evidence your sister and lawyer can produce to combat the witnesses and evidence in the hands of the district attorney."

Jerry Tinker sat on the end of his cot now. He sat with his elbows on his knees and his face in his palms. I lit my pipe and let him brood in peace. After awhile he looked up at me with a wry smile and shook his head.

"I can't," he said hoarsely. "There's nothin'. Just my word. I didn't kill him."

"Your sister believes that," I said. "In order to believe it, she must assume someone else killed Steve Granger. In order to find out who else could have done it she must do a job that calls for as much training as any other profession. It calls for an investigator. That's me. I got that way by spending five years as captain of this city's detectives and ten years in various jobs on the force before that. Do you think twenty a day is too much in a case like this?"

"I'm the dope, Mr. Lark," Jerry Tinker whispered. "I guess sis knows what she's doing. Ask me anything you want."

"Steve Granger," I said. "I want the works—everything you know about the guy."

"You just told me, Mr. Lark. A nut. A wino. He didn't have sense enough to handle pins right. He'd stand right behind a one-five-nine pick-up with a dynamite ball comin' and I'd yell at him to duck but he'd never pay me no attention. He should have dropped dead a dozen times, standing behind a deal like that. You know that, Mr. Lark."

"I know absolutely nothing about bowling."

"Well, the five pin is right behind the one pin. The nine is a little to the right and behind the five. A dynamiter is a guy who throws an eleven pound ball fast, a woman's ball. I don't even set pins for a rat like that. I just leave the rack down until he changes to a heavier ball or the manager comes over and educates him. If a fast ball hits the one pin square, the one hits the five and the five leans into the nine just long enough for the one to fly up. If the pinaroo ain't careful he gets it in the chin. It used to burn me up to see Steve act dumb like that and I'd needle him, but you couldn't get a rise out of that guy. He'd just give me a lopsided grin and pay me no attention, which burned me up some more. So I kept on needling him. That's all there was to that. Nothing personal."

I nodded. "Okay. How about after work?"

You ever buddy around with him at all?"

"Me?" Jerry Tinker was indignant. "I didn't even know where he lived until Mr. Budd gave me his address."

"Well, at work then. You ever talk to him there—besides needling him?"

"Not me. I only show up at the alleys on league nights or when they have a city tournament or pot games. I handle two alleys fast and get about two bucks an hour when good bowlers keep 'em rolling. You don't have much time for talk then. Sure, he'd say, 'Hello, Jerry,' and I'd say, 'Hello, Speedball.' But that's all. Other guys told me a little—"

"We'll get to that later. Right now all I want to know is what you *know*."

"That's it."

"Then take it to that last night."

"It was like any other league night. This was the scratch league and after they finished, some of the hotshots hung around for a five-buck pot game and—"

"Hold it, kid. What's a pot game?"

"Just bowling for money. Each man puts in five bucks and the top score takes all. Well, these hotshots got on five and six where Steve was setting. All of sudden Steve put the rack down and he wouldn't pick it up again. It didn't make sense. All week he'd been setting for dynamiters and double-ballers and now he was passing up the best chance a pinaroo has to make dough. For one thing, hotshots throw more strikes, which means fewer balls and quicker games and we're paid by games. And then the winner of a pot usually slides four bits down the gutter for the pinaroo. I've picked up as much as four bucks an hour setting pot games. But Steve wouldn't lift the rack."

"Did any of these hot-shots say anything to him to get him sore?"

WHY should they? They never saw him before and they probably didn't see him then. Nobody sees a pinaroo when he's in the pits. They were just standing around putting their names on a scoresheet and kiddin' around—when I saw Steve grab a pin and mount the crosswalk and pass me on the way to number one alley to get to the front of the house."

"He'd been drinking?"

"Muscatel. He had an old whiskey pint filled with it when he came on and it was empty by then. When I saw him grab the pin I knew it meant trouble, so I racked my pins and followed him. He was halfway to the front of the house when he started yelling and cursing."

"I never saw him mad before. He looked real mean. So I jumped him from behind and got the pin away from him. Mr. Budd ran down from the front and made him stop cursing."

ing. Other people came around and I watched 'em get Steve to the door. I took the pin back to the pit and set the racks on five and six for the pot game."

"You mean the pot game went on anyhow?"

"Sure. They always have at least one pot game after the scratch league finishes. They bowled a fast one this night. Then Mr. Budd told me Steve had went home talkin' to himself and asked me to go find out what the matter was. Mr. Budd had Steve's address on a piece of paper on top of the desk. He wanted to know if Steve was gonna come back the next day. So I—"

"Hold it, Jerry. When Steve was yelling and cursing at those hotshots, did you catch anything of what he said?"

"Nothin' that made sense. Something about a 'she'. Something about a dame writin' letters. Then he commenced cursin' and that's why Mr. Budd came up so fast. There was ladies in the seats, watchin' the bowling."

"Who were these hotshots, Jerry—the men at whom Steve yelled?"

"Hal Dominguez. Tom Berry. Charley Lace. They're about the best bowlers in Pacific City."

"Could you tell which one Steve was yelling at?"

"How could I?"

I didn't know.

CHAPTER TWO

Lady in Limbo

CHARLEY LACE threw a natural hook.

It was simply a matter of swinging his arm exactly as it swung when he walked. The ball left his three fingers of its own accord just as his left toe slid toward the foul line. When Charley saw it was hooking properly into the pocket, he leaped with his hands and feet spread wide, like a baseball umpire calling a runner safe on third. That was his version of "body English." Ten pins collapsed as one and he strode back to us with a broad smile. It was his fifth strike in five frames. The secret of his ball was rhythm and relaxation and he certainly was in the groove on this night.

Tom Berry got a three-ten split which he picked up the hard way, knocking the three into the ten. Hal Dominguez rolled his third straight strike, giving him a "turkey."

I tried to remember all the "dos" and "don'ts" as my ball swung: let the ball move of its own weight, keep elbow straight, walk slowly, keep thumb to the left, fix gaze on the tenth board from the right where the maple runs into the pine—follow through.

I stood with my fingers almost touching my

ear from the follow through and watched the ball hook neatly into the pocket for my first strike. I walked back into mocking applause and said:

"I just happened to think of it, fellas. Jerry Tinker goes to the gas chamber in the morning."

Charley Lace gave me a startled look as he balanced his ball before him. He returned his attention to the triangle of gleaming pins, went through the smooth motions of his delivery, followed through and made his "umpire" jump. But the ball refused to hook. It plowed straight into the six pin, taking the ten and nine with it for a score of three, his worst ball in a month.

The secret of Charley's hook was easy rhythm and utter relaxation . . .

* * *

Frank Svenson, Captain of Pacific City's Detectives, was taking elaborate pains to comb me out of his, and the department's, hair. He said, "Tony, if you want Doc Schultz' report, I'll even get him down here in person—but one quick look should be enough. I don't care how good you are at kill puzzles, not you or anyone else is gonna read anythin' but a busted skull in this kill."

"I just want a look," I protested mildly.

"Well, there he is."

My reaction was immediate as the morgue attendant slid the remains of Steve Granger into view. Frank had been right. One quick look was enough. Steve Granger had been a lanky blond with a bony nose, a wide mouth and glassy blue eyes. The right eye dangled loosely on blackish tissue. The forehead over the empty socket caved in like the dent you could make with your finger in the head of a celluloid doll.

"Okay," I nodded to the attendant.

I followed Svenson back to the office that had been my office. He sat in the swivel that had been mine. I occupied one of the other chairs and watched him mop his face with a blue handkerchief. He was a towheaded, fleshy man with gilt-edged teeth and tiny blue eyes that regarded me with suspicion.

"Satisfied, Tony?"

"Don't be stupid. I want to know about the guy who reported trouble to the landlady, the guy who yelled through her door that something was happening in Granger's room."

Svenson shook his head.

"A guy, Tony. Maybe one of the roomers. Maybe a visitor. You know how guys who hang around that kind of trap are. They don't want to tangle in any kill. It leaves a little crack in the picture, sure; but nothing to get in a sweat about."

"That's your opinion," I said. "Now tell me how that bowling pin got in Granger's

room. What have you got on that?"

Svenson's head shook again.

"Nothing anybody could prove one way or the other. The Tinker kid might'a brought it along or Granger could'a brought it home for a souvenir. It makes no difference. A little crack here and there, but most of it holds together solid. You tell me, Tony; who else could'a done it?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," I told him mildly. "Now this Granger, he'd only been in town a week. How about before that?"

"A drifter. This was his first job after the fifty-twenty club—and he started collectin' the week after his discharge. One of these psycho discharges. Before the army he lived in Santa Cruz, had a radio store there. Wife kept it going for a while after he was drafted. The army says it lost track of her in forty-three while he was in the Pacific. Her allotment checks started comin' back with no forwardin' address. Around that time he'd signed a divorce waiver but we can't find no record of a divorce.

"Santa Cruz says she sold the store and moved out of town in April of forty-three and that's as far as it goes. We've searched for other kin and found none. He dropped his G.I. insurance after the waiver. We'll have to bury him and that's about the size of it. Anythin' else?"

"I want to go through his personal effects."

"A ten-minute job for a boy scout," Svenson shrugged. "It's all down the basement, about enough to fill one small brief case. Help yourself."

I did. Aside from Steve Granger's solitary suit of clothes, what remained could have been stuffed in my hat. There were two changes of socks, one extra suit of underwear, a toothbrush—but no paste—a razor and shaving brush—but no shaving cream—and one cake of red soap which may have served as both for all I could tell. There was a half of a pocket comb, a pencil stub and the wallet that had been on the floor when Mrs. Lunt opened the door of room twelve. That was all.

I was about to toss the wallet back on the table and follow Svenson out of the basement when something prompted me to finger through it. I found a folded sheet of paper coated with brown from the cheap leather of the wallet. I unfolded it and discovered it to be the last page of a letter written in a large feminine scrawl.

It said:

... always told me that you would let me go if I found someone else and this is the real thing. This snapshot doesn't do him justice. He is not as goodlooking as you, but

he is older. He won't even see me anymore unless you sign the waiver and he wants me to keep writing to you after the divorce. You can see from the picture he is good and kind. So please sign, Stevie, and I will think of you always as my dearest, truest friend.

Always your friend,

Loretta

Frank Svenson spread meaty hands wide. "He signed the waiver in '43, Tony—"

"Sure, sure," I said. "So you'd have let me walk out without seeing it. The wallet was on the floor and open. The money was on the bed with Granger. That's the kid's story. Where was this letter?"

Svenson evaded my eyes.

"Aw, can it, Tony. It's cut and dried. You're makin' a few dimes outta it, okay. But don't throw us off just for the hell of it."

I said, "The letter should show in the homicide pictures. Let's see Stan Finlay and find out." Finlay was the police photographer, the little man whose camera recorded for posterity, and the prosecution, every detail of murder scenes.

But Svenson merely sighed and said, "Okay, okay. The letter was outta the wallet, on the floor next to the wallet. Ya happy?"

"No, I'm not happy. It mentions a picture, a snapshot of the guy for whom Loretta was ditching dear Steve."

"No picture," Svenson stated emphatically.

"Traces in the wallet then," I brooded aloud. "If Steve kept the letter he probably kept the picture. A cheap wallet like that, it might have left an impression, chemical traces. Let's take it to Olson in the lab and find out."

Frank Svenson said, "I hate you to little pieces, Tony. Okay, Olson already said it. Something that coulda been a picture was wedged next to the letter. Now ya happy?"

"I'm happier than I was," I grinned at him.

He worried about that. He was a routine cop and cop routine in homicide follows every trail to its end and this was a trail he had more or less neglected in face of the overwhelming evidence against Jerry Tinker. Now he envisioned the possibility, remote as it was, that this trail might lead to even more overwhelming evidence against someone else and it worried him. Particularly since he knew that his job could be mine again for the asking, a little gambit involving the commissioner's daughter, the history of which has been recounted elsewhere.

He put some of his worry into words, "Ya wouldn't be crowdin' me, would ya, Tony?"

"You know me, Frank," I grinned at him.

"That's the trouble," he scowled.

On which note we parted; just two of the boys anxious to attend one another's funeral in the near future.

SANTA CRUZ is a small edition of Pacific City, a resort on the northern tip of Monterey Bay. Its tourist cottages, motels, inns and hotels dribble over a crescent of hills into a valley full of business district. The address I sought was in this district, a radio repair shop on Front Street.

A gray-haired woman stood in the back of the shop. She looked up from the innards of a radio into which she had been probing with ohmmeter prongs. She peered at me through thick lenses which made her eyes seem as large as olives. I asked, "Are you the lady who bought this shop from Mrs. Granger?"

"Police?"

"Private."

"She in trouble? Is that redheaded hussy in trouble?"

"Her husband died in Pacific City. I'm trying to trace his kinfolk."

The old woman switched off the ohmmeter and approached until she stood barely a foot from me peering up into my eyes.

"Is it money? Did Steve leave any money?"

"Something like that."

She nodded. Then she shook her head. "If that don't beat all! When she hears about it, you'll find her quick enough, mister. All a tramp like her has to do is wear her dress an inch higher than her knees and you damfools fall over yourselves. With her it's men and money. The minute Steve went into the army all the local bucks were after her."

"Could you give me her address?" I had a five-dollar bill out, studying it.

"I wouldn't keep her address!" the old woman snorted. "Anyhow, I told her what I thought of her to her face and she wouldn't be likely to send me Christmas presents after that!" The old woman cackled at the memory. Then she angled a bony talon at me, "You want to find out about Loretta Granger, don't be asking any decent people, young man. Try the places a witch like that would hang around to meet her public, a honky tonk like the Lorenzo Club, that's about her style."

I tried the Lorenzo Club. It turned out to be a smoky little beer trap in the poorer section of Santa Cruz. It flaunted a sign in the window barring military personnel from the premises. The two girls who sat at the bar as I entered wore skirts too short, sweaters too tight, makeup too thick and eyes too bleared. The only other customer was a grizzled old gaffer at the far end of the bar brooding into a half-empty glass of beer.

On the fly-specked mirror back of the bar were pasted some nudes, an American flag, and a picture of the bartender in army uniform, vintage 1918, wearing a purposeful ex-

pression and PFC stripes. Someone had chalked on the mirror: *Kilroy was picked up by M.P.'s here*. Over the cash register was a small placard bearing the legend: In God We Trust. All Others Pay When Served.

The bartender's purposeful expression of 1918 had mellowed through the years into a saggy-jowled, flabby-lipped pout. He cocked his two chins at me. I said, "Beer." He removed the cap from a bottle, then poured from it into a foggy glass. His fingernails wore black tips. His apron was probably used to mop the bar when he didn't wear it.

He said, "Twenty thenth."

I laid a dollar bill on the bar and looked at him. He looked back at me. Then he said, "Tho I lithp. Tho what?"

"On you it sounds good," I smiled. He liked that. He smiled back at me. One of the girls told the other in a whiskey baritone, "The drink of water's fast, Mimi. Ain't he fast?" Mimi said, "He ain't fast. I can smell him from here. A copper." I shoved the change from my bill back across the bar and added a five-dollar bill to it and told the lisp-ing barkeep, "Buy them a couple of mickeys, chum, and tell them to keep out of our conversation."

The barkeep loved that. His grin grew wider, revealing wide gaps among his teeth. "We gonna have a converthathion, mithta?"

"What else can you do in Santa Cruz this time of day?"

He laughed out loud at this. He aimed his chins at the girls and asked, "The thame?"

"Ain't it always?" Mimi demanded.

He set two rum cokes before them, rang up seventy cents on the register, looked at my five-dollar bill, looked at me, then tucked the bill into his apron pocket and slid the remaining dime back to me. He poured himself a glass of soda, brought it opposite my beer, then stood there sipping the soda and eyeing me.

I told him, "This girl left town about four years ago. Mrs. Loretta Granger. About the time hubby answered his greetings she started playing the field. How I hear, she cut a caper or two across this bar. Loretta Granger. Remember?"

"Thoppothe I do? Tho what?"

I SHOWED him a clipping from the Pacific City Times. I showed him the license in my wallet. I told him, "Steve's dead. Left a few odds and ends. I'm working for the lawyer who's handling the odds and ends. If I can find the lady, she gets 'em."

The barkeep nodded and finished his soda. He called to the whispering girls, "You hear thith? Thteve Granger ith dead."

Mimi asked, "Who's Steve Granger?"

"You know, Mimi," her bar cousin re-

minded her. "That simple John who hitched to Loretta back in forty-two. Skinny blond goop with a face like a sick puppy."

"In forty-two I was with the Marines in Pendleton."

"Well, you know Loretta—"

"You mean that cat who said she went to the movies with Ted Volmer one night and—"

"That's her! Remember when she—"

The girls giggled off into a world of their own. I returned my attention to the lispng bartender. He nodded.

"Thath Loretta. Ain't thee her in yearth."

"Any idea where she went?"

"Thure. Pathific Thity. Thaid thee wath goin' to Reno an' then marry thith man from Pathific Thity. Travelling man. Alwayth comin' and goin'. Came in here onthe and Loretta went out with him. After that the girlth told me he wath alwayth takin' her to the better playtheth like the Palomar Thiracle. Then Loretta came in here one day to thay goodby. I never thaw her again."

"Would you recognize this travelling man again if you saw him—or a picture of him?"

"Maybe. He wath only in here one time. And that wath four yearth ago."

The girls were listening to us now. I asked the one who remembered Steve Granger if she ever saw Loretta with the travelling man.

"Only from a distance, honey." The girl giggled. "Loretta kept him out of sight; didn't want to lose him. They tell me he was a spender. She had somethin' good and she was takin' no chances. Not even with me—and Loretta and me used to be like this." She held up two fingers close together.

"I know," I said. "You're the one on top."

"Wise guy!" She started digging into a red handbag. "I'll show you me an' Loretta—" A torrent of tiny tintypes poured from the bag to the bar; the sort of pictures you get in those automatic photo booths. She fingered through them and came up with one showing two sailors, a light-haired girl and herself.

The sailors were grimacing in alcoholic humor. The girls tried to emulate toothpaste ads. The light-haired girl had small eyes set too closely together. She had large teeth in a wide mouth.

"How about giving me this?" I asked, holding the tintype. She snatched it back.

"Hey! That's the only pitcha I got of Loretta. I'm keepin' it for sentimental reasons."

One hour and five drinks later her sentiment was sufficiently diluted to transfer the snapshot from her purse to my pocket.

I spent the rest of the afternoon digging back into Loretta Granger's yesterdays. Most of the barkeeps remembered her as a freelance B girl. Two cab drivers remembered her very well, as did one letter carrier, a barber, three

uniformed patrolmen and a dentist. Nobody seemed to remember the travelling man, although most of them seemed to know she had run off with him. She had no kinfolk in Santa Cruz, no really close friends.

She was just another "fast" girl who had settled down briefly with Steve Granger, then reverted to type the instant he donned khaki.

On the morning of April eighth, in 1943, she had cashed a four-thousand-dollar check from the sale of the radio shop, closed her bank account, the one she had jointly with Steve Granger, drawing out almost seven thousand dollars—and vanished.

JERRY TINKER told me, "But you heard all I know, Mr. Lark."

I said, "Just the highlights, Jerry. In a murder investigation you want to get into the deep, dim places between the highlights. Right now I want you to remember exactly what Steve Granger yelled at those men in the pot game."

"I already told you. It was crazy talk. He was drunk. Something about writing letters."

"That's not enough. Let's dig into it. He was running up the lane from the pits toward the front of the house. He was waving that bowling pin and yelling. Where were you?"

"Runnin' outta the pits after him."

"I mean *exactly* where. The second he started yelling, how far behind him were you?"

"About three yards."

"Could you hear him over all the noise in the alley?"

"Sure. I was so close, it took me only a couple of steps to catch up with him."

"Was he running?"

"Yeah—no. When he started yelling he just stood there and waved the pin."

"In which hand was he carrying the pin?"

"His right—no. His left! He was pointing his finger with his right—"

"At the men in that particular pot game?"

"That's right, Mr. Lark. I don't know which one he was sayin' it to, but he—"

"What makes you think he was saying it to any of them?"

"Why, he was pointin' right at them. And he yelled, 'You wouldn't let her write!'"

Jerry's dark eyes snapped wide and I smiled at him.

"See how easy it becomes when you concentrate? It wasn't crazy talk after all. When you know a few other details it starts to make sense. Steve's wife had run off with a guy while he was in the army. She sent Steve the guy's picture and promised Steve to write to him even after the divorce. He either recognized one of the men in that pot game as the guy, or *thought* he did. He hadn't been getting the letters his wife promised to write.

He blamed it on the guy. He was drunk enough on muscatel to want to have it out with the guy. So he grabbed the bowling pin and started to the front and yelled, 'You wouldn't let her write!'

Jerry pressed a tight fist against his closed eyes.

"I'm a dope! I thought it didn't make sense so I didn't pay much attention to it. Wait a minute. It goes something like this: 'She promised to write. She promised to write and you wouldn't let her write after I signed!'"

Jerry gaped up at me, wide-eyed. "That's it, Mr. Lark! Then he started yellin' curses and about that time I got the pin away from him from behind and Mr. Budd smothered him from in front and walked him out of the alley."

I patted a slim shoulder. "Okay, kid. We're making headway. Now tell me again the names of those hotshot bowlers in that pot game."

"Berry, Dominguez and Lace."

CHAPTER THREE

Pass the Proof to Death

CHARLEY LACE walked back from the foul line wiping chalk from his fingers on the face towel he carried in his hip pocket when he bowled. "You made me buck," he scowled at me, "talking about that kid. Jerry used to set pins for us. Heck, the last thing he did before killing that other pinsetter was handle a pot game just like this."

"Did he?" I asked.

"Can that chatter, you guys!" Tom Berry said, hefting his ball. "It gives me the willies just to think of it."

Tom threw a curve ball, one that described a shallow parabola from his fingers to the pins, a difficult ball to control. Whenever it neared the pocket Tom reached over his head and yanked down on an imaginary string, his version of body English.

This time he ignored the string. The ball curved too sharply, missing the headpin and plowing into the fourpin, taking the seven and eight with it. Tom glanced back at me with disgust as his ball rolled back to the rack. He poised it before him and stood motionless for a longer time than usual. Then he swung it back, toe-danced his five steps and spun it down the alley.

This time the ball curved too shallowly. It hit the three pin, sweeping the board except for the one and two, his first miss of the evening.

"You and your gruesome ideas!" he scowled at me, returning to his seat.

The secret of Tom Berry's curve was poise and balance.

* * *

Hal Dominguez gripped my hand powerfully, motioned me to a seat across from his swivel at the desk and bellowed, "Lark? I seem to recall a Lark who was captain of—"

"Me," I cut in. "Now I'm private. I'm working for the defense in the Tinker case. There are some points you might help us clear—"

"What there to clear? I thought it was cut and dried."

"That's the general opinion. I'm fishing for other ideas."

A milky smile chased the habitual scowl from his tan face. Close-cropped graying hair fitted neatly over the face. The power of his grip had surprised me, coming from his medium height and slender frame. His voice had also surprised me, the booming tones of a barrel-chested giant. Now he handed me a third surprise as he bellowed, "Thinking of me as a substitute for Jerry Tinker in the gas chamber, Lark? Go ahead and fish."

"Nothing like that," I dissembled. "I'm just trying to reconstruct what happened that night. It seems Granger was yelling at some man sitting in the audience behind the alley where you bowled, a tall, thin redhead wearing a black shirt open at the collar. Nobody seems to remember the man distinctly; nobody who saw him recalled having ever seen him before. I thought you may have—"

Dominguez scooped the phone on his desk to his ear as it rang. "Culbertson?" he roared into it. "I want all three hundred cases delivered to San Jose by midnight tomorrow. I don't care what happened to your trucks. Meet that deadline or I'll tear up your contract. Okay, take it to court and to hell with you!"

He slammed the instrument back into its cradle and looked sharply up at me. "Lark, I saw no man in a black shirt, redhead or otherwise. When I bowl I concentrate on bowling. I didn't even notice the rumpus until it was almost over and Ray Budd was walking that guy out of the house. I never saw that particular guy before. I bowled one line after the league that night and then drove home. If you can make anything out of that, go ahead!"

"And to hell with me?" I grinned at him.

"Sure!"

He was full of vitamins and vinegar. He could afford to be. Dominguez Wines graced tables from coast to coast and he was Dominguez Wines in person. He lived in a sprawling house on Crest Drive that had been in his family for hundreds of years. He was known to lead a sedate family life, the family including five children of assorted sexes and ages. Broadly speaking, he could be considered a travelling man since he periodically visited

local offices of his firm up and down the west coast, and one of them was in Santa Cruz.

I said, "If you happen to recall some incident, a remark someone made or something you noticed and didn't think relevant at the time, let me know, will you?"

He bellowed that he would. I told him I might test his bowling skill some night and he roared that my money was as welcome as anybody else's. Then he crushed the bones of my right hand again and I wandered off in search of Tom Berry.

This turned out to be a two-day search. It ended when a voluptuous brunette who went by the name of Lois and met the public in the Redwood Photographic Studios wrinkled her nose in distaste and said, "He's due back this afternoon, Mr. Lark. In fact he should be here now."

"What's wrong with him?" I inquired.

She rolled soft brown eyes skyward. Then she puckered her brows in search of the right words. Then she giggled.

"He's got travelling hands."

"A wolf?"

"Twenty-four hours a day."

"He must get a lot of opportunities, travelling around as he does."

Lois rolled her eyes again in a grimace that signified that it was probably the custom of all virtue-guarding females for a twenty-mile radius to bar the doors and lock the windows when Tom Berry leered over the horizon.

Tom Berry turned out to be little more than a pallid grin. He wore a dove-gray suit, a white shirt, and dazzled the unwary eye with a necktie that would have paled a rainbow. He combed dark brown hair carefully back over a growing patch of nude scalp.

He swept through the front door and shouted, "Miss me, lover?" He dashed behind the counter and grabbed Lois. She wriggled from his embrace, but not until his lips, missing hers, planted a peck on her cheek. Then he clung to her arm as she wailed:

"Tom! Behave yourself! This man has been waiting twenty minutes to see you."

He angled that grin at me, still holding her arm. "She's got it, ain't she, brother?"

I conceded that the lady had it.

"You wanted to see me, brother? Anything wrong with the pictures? There is, don't give it another thought. We'll do it over free or refund your money if you're not satisfied."

"Pictures have nothing to do with it," I told him quietly. "An old friend of yours asked me to look you up. Lady in Santa Cruz. Mrs. Loretta Granger."

BERRY dropped Lois' arm as if it had grown nettles. His grin faded and returned. He aimed it toward the back.

"You don't want to creep up on a guy like that, brother. Let's go in there."

Berry carried his grin into the back room with me where it faded with worry.

"You're working for the law," he said, gripping my arm. "What happened to Loretta? I haven't seen her since back near Christmas in '42. Listen, this is under the old hat, isn't it, brother?"

I told him it was under the old hat.

He worried, "If Gert heard about that she'd drop me like a hot coal, and Gert's the only one who counts. All the rest is just to pass the time, see what I mean, brother?"

Knowing he had been wedded to a woman named Gertrude for the past seven years, I nodded that I saw what he meant.

He said, "That day in '42 was the last I ever saw of Loretta. You know how it is, we had a big row. And then she'd just married this fellow Granger."

I shook my head. "If you'd let me get a word in edgewise, Berry, I'd tell you I'm not connected with the law now. This is just social. Loretta mentioned you as a good bowler in this town. I'm interested in learning how to bowl. That's all."

His grin banished the worry from his pallid face.

"Hey, I didn't let you tell me, at that! How is Loretta? Still hitched to that kid? Don't seem like her."

"She divorced him and hooked some travelling man from this town."

Berry shook his grin in wonderment.

"A screwball from way back, a redheaded screwball. Why she—"

He went on to tell me various illustrations of her screwballishness. I brought the conversation around to Jerry Tinker and Steve Granger and we were both shaking our heads over the unpredictability of human nature when his chin suddenly dropped loose and banged on his chest.

"Granger!" Berry choked. "He and Loretta—?"

I left him muttering to himself. It was getting monotonous. I was in search of one Pacific City travelling man out of that fatal pot game and now I had two. Berry was a proof passer for the studio, end man of a photographic hit and run deal. First a crew of salespeople would hit a small town, line up prospective photographers at reasonable rates, hire a hotel suite for a later date, then move on to the next town. In due time the photographer would arrive, take the pictures and move after the road crew. Eventually the proof passer would arrive with samples and order blanks. His job was to follow the wedge into the clients' purses made by the reasonable rates with sales of duplicates, enlargements and color jobs. It was a good, honest job of

selling. The crews hit towns all over the Pacific coast, being on the road eight to ten months at a time. Tom Berry was a first rate proof passer—and Santa Cruz had been on his itinerary.

Now he grinned that I was always welcome to join him at tenpins. Lois, behind the counter, pleaded, "Are you going to leave me alone with that wolf?"

I left them chasing each other around the counter and spent thirty minutes locating Charles Lace in the Pacific City Bowling Alley where he was practicing the art of picking up "splits".

He turned out to be a medium-sized man with a tight, wiry frame, steady blue eyes and a receding hairline about which he frequently jested with a humor that failed to reach his eyes.

He said, "Lark? Pleased to meet you. Do you bowl?"

We exchanged a firm, quick grip. I told him I intended to adopt this sport which might become America's number one athletic pastime. He explained that a split was any two or more pins with a gap among them large enough to make the task of toppling all the pins with one ball difficult.

I mentioned I was retained by Jerry Tinker's defense to look into various trivia. He said he wished he could help Jerry Tinker, that he was fond of the boy. I told him there was one little item. I showed him the tintype of Loretta Granger, the one I had drink-bribed from the Santa Cruz B girl. He looked up at me from the picture and this time a wicked smile entered his eyes.

"You've been around Santa Cruz, hey, Lark?"

"You?"

"About once a month. I audit Greyhound books and Santa Cruz is one of my jobs."

"When'd you see her last?"

He winked. "If this'll help Jerry, okay. But keep it private, will ya?"

I promised.

"Two weeks ago," he said. The short hairs of my neck stood on end and I felt the flutter in my chest that used to precede an important arrest—until he added, "Fay's quite a dish, hey, Lark?"

"Fay?"

I watched his finger tap the face of Loretta's ex-drinking cousin. "Her."

"I mean the other girl, Lace."

His eyes blanked. Which left me on the same three-horned dilemma. Charley Lace, as Hal Dominguez and Tom Berry, had been married long before the eighth of April in 1943. All three were travelling men. True, only Tom Berry had admitted knowing Loretta, but then that could be a token of innocence as well as guilt.

I TOOK the next logical step. I gathered photographs of the three men from back numbers of the Pacific City *Times* and brought them to the lipping barkeep of Santa Cruz. His lackluster eyes reflected confusion.

"It wath four yearth ago. It could be any one of 'em—or thomebody elthe. I'm thorry."

Everybody else I queried in Santa Cruz was also sorry. Many of them identified the men, but none of those I interrogated could link any of my trio to Loretta Granger.

I spent three days returning to Pacific City. I stopped in every town, hamlet and filling station on the way and flashed the pictures and tried to stir memories aged four years. At the end of that time I told Stella Tinker to stop paying me. I had done all that could be done on a full-time basis.

Bowling became my hobby. At first I had to learn that when all ten pins toppled before one ball it was a strike. If it took two balls it was a spare. If two balls failed to get them all it was a miss. I learned a strike counted ten plus the total knocked down by the next two balls. A spare counted ten plus the pins gathered by the next ball.

I learned a medium speed ball gathered more pins than a very fast or very slow ball,



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a spinning ball was more effective than a straight ball, that the way your foot pointed and the angle of your shoulders to the foul line and the way your thumb pointed and the follow through all affected the speed, spin and aim of the ball.

It developed that some bowlers aimed at the pins, others at the reflection of the pins on the glazed surface of the alley and still others at a spot on the alley near where they drop their ball.

I learned that a head-on hit garnered more splits than any other, that the bowler must learn the peculiarity of each new alley, all of them varying in the way they affect the ball's spin, that old pins favored a slow ball and new pins a fast one.

The lingo became part of my speech. Two strikes made a "double" and three a "turkey." A strike in the one-three pocket was a "New York" hit, while one in the one-two pocket was a "Brooklyn" hit. An accidental strike in which peculiarly twisting pins hit other pins was a "tomato." If a ball rolled at two pins left the rear pin standing, that was a "cherry".

I learned that a pinboy's foot can manufacture a strike without a detection and that removal of the five pin by the pinboy—an omission hardly ever noticed by bowlers—makes a strike extremely difficult.

These are things I learned in the weeks that followed, weeks in which I built my average up from a hundred to a hundred and forty. In time I was accepted as another regular, "Tony" to dozens of other keggers, each of whom I addressed by his first name—including Charley, Tom and Hal.

My days went to other clients. I located a non-supporting father, collected five overdue bills, got a hotel register photostat for a divorce, stopped a shoplifting epidemic in a local department store by convincing a floor-walker his wife was a klepto. I handled three investigations for insurance companies and one for a national detective agency that had no local man available. When jobs brought me to Santa Cruz, or the towns on the highways between Santa Cruz and Pacific City, I flashed the tintype of Loretta Granger and the photos of Tom, Hal and Charley—but this was on the cuff.

In the meantime I went to a few dances with Tom Berry, ate some Sunday dinners with the Lace family and killed some evenings playing chess with Hal Dominguez, chess having turned out to be a mutual passion.

Things drifted along like this through the trial of Jerry Tinker. I heard the jury foreman say, "We find the defendant guilty as charged," and then listened to Judge Carlile pronounce the death sentence. And things drifted along for several weeks after that

while Jerry Tinker vegetated in San Quentin's death block.

And then one morning I was in Los Arboles on the trail of a bigamous barber I never did locate. Los Arboles is an apple-packing town of three thousand midway between Santa Cruz and Pacific City. I was chewing the fat with Sam Eagle, Chief of the five-man police force, and the talk had gotten around to my little photo gallery. Sam studied the police blotter of April eighth, 1943, and shook his head.

"Four traffics, two drunks and a knifing—but none of the names or descriptions tally, Tony."

"It doesn't have to be the eighth," I suggested. "The guy already had a wife at home, how I read it, and Loretta didn't know that and he may have lingered enroute to sow a few last minute oats before enlightening her."

Something about this caused Eagle to glance at me sharply. He riffled through the cards of his blotter file, selected one and brought it to me.

"Try this for size," he invited tightly.

I read it and whistled softly. Sandwiched between traffic violations was the following:

Female corpse discovered in brush at foot of Mission Ravine 10:30, 12th April, '43. Reported by Reuben Hernandez and Amelia Rubio of this city. All identification removed. Cause of death: fall from highway or blunt instrument. Disposition: transferred to county officers 13th April, '43.

"Then what?" I asked Sam Eagle.

"That's it. She'd been dead anywhere from a couple of days to a week. Weather had a go at her—it had been rainin' for a week—and animals—there'd been chunks eaten outta her. But there was enough left to see she was a sort of redhead. What made it click all of a sudden, I remembered she had eyes like the dame in your pic, a little too small.

"Aside from everything else, she was broken up from the drop. All her clothes were gone, even the rings off her fingers.

"The rain killed any traces on the highway if she'd been chucked from a car. Her prints never were matched and her description got people from as far as New York, but she never qualified. They finally buried her—but it's still open in the books."

"Loretta Granger," I said. "Had a radio shop on Front Street in Santa Cruz. A G.I. husband. She sold his store, pulled his savings and set out for Reno with intentions of marrying one of these guys—I think. Tell the sheriff and let me know, will ya?"

Eagle put it down in ink and we shook hands and I resumed my search for the barber I never found.

A week later Eagle phoned to say the dead woman's prints matched several found in various parts of the Santa Cruz radio shop—which tore the case wide open again.

Now I had a motive, a reason why a married man who played on the side, and played too rough, would resort to murder when a man appeared suddenly in his life and threatened to expose the murder of a woman nobody knew was dead.

All I had to do was narrow it down, either to Charley Lace, the auditor, or Hal Dominguez, the wine man, or Tom Berry, the itchy-fingered proof passer.

But by then young Jerry Tinker had only a few days of life remaining . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

The Score

HAL DOMINGUEZ threw a fast straight ball with uncanny accuracy. He took just two steps, then flung his arm forward. When he saw the ball heading for the pocket, he swung a fist and roared, "Get in there and work!" his version of body English.

Now he stood holding his ball and frowning at me. "You still fishing, Tony?"

"Don't you think it's a little late for that?" I shrugged.

"I think it was Socrates who answered questions with questions," he scowled.

"This conversation is getting too educational," Tom Berry interjected. "First Tony talks gruesome, then you talk Greek. Let's get back to bowling."

Hal Dominguez got back to bowling. He took his two quick steps, heaved the spheroid over the gleaming mineralastic, swung his fist and roared, "Get in there and work!" His ball smashed into the New York pocket and ten white pins tumbled into the pit for his fourth strike in a row. He swaggered back with a broad grin on his tan face.

The secret of Hal's delivery was intense concentration.

* * *

Frank Svenson said, "No! I don't care how much weight you drag in this town, Tony—it's no good for this. I can't bull into the private lives of three citizens just because a dead pinboy yelled something at one of 'em. Even if you can prove he did—which ya can't! All you got is Jerry Tinker's word and the jury made his word lousy. And after that ya got a rumor that this Loretta tramp ran off with a travelling man from here, but it doesn't have to be one of those three even if the rumor is correct, which it probably ain't. And goin' back to what Steve Granger yelled, he mighta been yellin' it at someone in the grandstand watchin' the bowlin'—or at

someone he only *thought* was the guy in the picture his wife sent him. See what I mean? All ya got is a bunch of maybes and that's not enough for me to dig into three solid citizens like these."

I said, "You've got to admit I've built a picture."

He nodded emphatically. "I'll swear out a affidavit if ya want; you can build better pictures outta hot air than any guy who ever wore a badge. But look at it my way once. The Tinker case is finished. I can't reopen it without ya gimme *facts*. All ya got is guesses."

I said, "They're good guesses. The kid goes to the chamber in a couple of days. This is his last chance to wiggle out of a bum rap. All I want is the power of the nightstick on Lace, Dominguez and Berry. All I'm asking is that you hold 'em overnight. You can hold someone on suspicion. All I'd like is to see 'em pass under a lie detector, just long enough to crack one of 'em enough to get a stay of execution. A couple of hours under a light and a couple more hours in the lie detector and I'll give you odds one of 'em will crack!"

Svenson rolled his tiny eyes toward the ceiling, then down at me again. "Facts!" he repeated with a great show of exasperation. "Bring me *facts*, Tony!"

He was right, of course. I would have acted differently in his place. As a matter of fact, I had—and that was probably why he sat in my old chair in the office that used to be mine.

I told him to break a leg at the first opportunity. He invited me to do as much for my neck. We had, as the poet said, words. But in the end I had to leave with the knowledge that Berry, Lace and Dominguez would go their unfettered ways.

A boy who the law said was a man was counting seconds in an iron cage. His sister was dying a thousand deaths each hour in anticipation of his last lethal breath. Their only salvation lay in my ability to produce facts that had become phantoms.

One of three men had committed two perfect crimes—and don't hand me that silly line about there being no perfect crime. They happen daily in every state of the forty-eight. Even if I knew which of the three was Loretta Granger's travelling man, there would be no proof—aside from an unlikely confession—that he murdered her, and even less proof that he murdered her husband four years later.

An unexplained windfall of about ten thousand dollars somewhere around the eighth of April in 1943 would possibly lead to proof—because the girl had that much on her before her body plummeted to the foot of Mission Ravine. But the trail of that money would take tedious tracking on the part of many men

beat 237!" Hal bellowed smugly. "I don't mind saying it, that's *bowling*!"

"Chess is something else again," I said. "I've got you stopped there."

"You've got me *what*?" The Hudson lurched. "Listen, Tony, the day you can beat me at chess—"

By the time he parked before my house he was on the verge of apoplexy.

"Come in," I invited mockingly, "and see if you can find guts to back that talk with dough."

"If I can find *guts*!"

He was in my foyer the instant the door was open, howling, "Where's that board? I give you twenty-five moves before you resign! I'll put the twenty I won in that last pot against your ten. Where you keep the board, Tony?"

"Living room," I told him.

I locked the door, slid out of my coat and followed him into the living room. He had flipped the wall switch. Now he stood looking down at the coffee table which stands before my divan.

He turned as I entered and that scowl was etched deep in the tan of his face.

"You've got an explanation for this?" he demanded.

He was referring to the objects on the coffee table: the bowling pin that had killed Steve Granger, the tintype I had caused to be made from a newspaper photo of him and the tintype of Loretta Granger, showing them together—and a police photo of Loretta Granger's nude and battered body at the foot of Mission Ravine.

"I have one explanation for it," I told him. "You probably have another. You'll write yours in longhand and then we'll keep Jerry Tinker out of the gas chamber."

He laughed at this. He said, "You're an idiot!" and he laughed as if it was all very funny.

Then he sat down from the impact of the tips of my fingers in his windpipe, followed by my knee in his groin, followed by the heel of my palm against his mastoid as he jack-knifed to protect himself. He sat on my wine-colored broadloom and blinked and breathed hoarsely. "You're crazy, Tony! You'll have to kill me! You'd never get away with this—!"

"I didn't get away with it last time," I said. "That was the time I was kicked off the force. But the man cracked. And you'll crack—"

I underestimated Hal Dominguez. His heels found my shins and I sprawled into a hard fist that filled my head with lightning and thunder. He missed with his other fist, trying to scramble to his feet at the same time. He

got to his feet, with me sprawled on the broadloom. He took an awkward step toward me, then changed his mind and took a step toward the door—then changed his mind again as the revolver slid from my armpit holster and angled up at him.

He started to smile—but it died on his tan face as he read the itch in my finger in my eyes.

"Use your head!" he urged as I found my feet, holding the muzzle of my revolver toward his chest. "You're wrong. But even if you was right there's nothing you can do about it."

"It'll be easier for you to write it out now," I said. "When a guy like you cracks he cracks all the way."

He stood there shaking his head as I circled until I stood between him and the door. I dropped the revolver on the broadloom between us. He glanced down at it and the smile crawled on his face again.

"I saw that in a movie, Tony. It won't work."

He was wrong. He swung at my chin—which was right. But the thunder was out of my head now and I slid under his fist and planted mine deep into the middle of him. He jack-knifed and that put his hand in reach of my revolver and he reached for it and my shoe caught his temple and he sprawled past the revolver to his face in the broadloom—which was exactly how it happened in the movie. I had seen it also.

I kicked him over to his back and unbuttoned his jacket and forced its collar back down over his arms, pinioning them there. I knelt at his side and pounded my fist into his belly until the tan of his face became a sickly blue. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Concentrate on Murder

I CANNOT say how long the phone had been ringing before I answered it.

"Tony! I've been calling and calling. You said there was a chance. You said—"

"Hold it a minute, Stella," I said.

I crossed the living room to where the Thing that had been a man was slowly crawling toward the door. I kicked hard at the base of his spine and he sank to the broadloom with a choking sigh. I rolled him over with my foot. He lay on his back panting. To look at him you would think he was still a man—but you couldn't see into his guts where everything had turned to jelly.

My revolver still lay on the floor but his only impulse now was to escape. He had tried walking. He had tried crawling, then bellying

across the broadloom. Now he lay supine on the broadloom and panted hoarsely while I returned to the phone.

I noticed the mantel clock in passing. It said two-thirty. But that did not seem to be significant now. I seemed to be moving through a timeless haze. Looking at the phone receiver I noticed my hand had left wet smears.

"Stella?"

"Tony! They'll murder him in three hours!"

"Easy, kid—"

"Stop babying me! If it's hopeless, tell me it's hopeless. After all, what can you do now?"

"You've got to believe me, kid. I'm working on it—"

"But three hours!"

There was a lump of time—three hours. I muttered something into the mouthpiece and broke the connection, leaving smears of wet on the hard rubber surface of the instrument. I walked to where the Thing lay on his back and planted my toe hard in the softness under his floating rib. He groaned a little.

This was felonious assault, barred and punishable by law. What had already been done was enough to put me behind bars for ten years, to forfeit my bond and cancel my investigator's permit forever. It is not a good way to find answers. It is a way the secret police of the slave states do it and it often gets the same answers from the innocent and guilty, proving its unreliability.

And the only assumption I had that Hal Dominguez was guilty of two murders was based on a dead psycho's curse and a broken body at the foot of a ravine and the words of a lisping bartender and a letter in a dead man's wallet and the way Hal Dominguez threw a hard rubber ball at ten wooden clubs.

And my only justification was the three lumps of time that stood between a man who was only a boy and his first breath of legal poison.

I sat on my divan behind the coffee table with its exhibits and lit my pipe with fingers that shimmied and watched the Thing on the floor until he raised his head and gaped at me with dark stunned eyes.

"Get up," I said.

He gaped at me.

"Up," I said. "Get up."

He slowly rose to his feet and stood swaying.

"Come here," I said.

The Thing that had been the bellowing braggart who owned a million bottles of good California wine stumbled slowly toward me until my heel found the softness under his belt. He collapsed beyond the coffee table.

After a long while those dark eyes were on

me again. I studied him carefully then.

"Get up," I said. "My revolver is just behind you. Get it and stand up."

He did this. It took time. He lay motionless after turning over and putting his hand on the butt of my gun. Then his fingers gripped it and he brought it around and rose slowly, pushing himself up from the broadloom, then raising my revolver and standing with it in his hand.

I rose and leaned over the coffee table and raked my palm across his swarthy cheek.

"You don't hand a man a gun barrel first," I said. "Hand it to me the way you hand a man a gun."

He puckered his brow in an effort of concentration. Then he used two hands to reverse my revolver, finally gripping its barrel and proffering the butt to me.

I took it and told him, "Sit at my desk, Dominguez. You'll find paper and my fountain pen waiting for you. Put it down in your own words, everything that happened between you and Loretta Granger—and then what happened when Steve Granger yelled at you in the bowling alley and you knew you had to kill him too."

I had to repeat this three times before the Thing that was able to hurl a straight ball with perfect concentration under all kinds of pressure stumbled to my desk, sat behind it, raised my pen and commenced to scrawl ink on foolscap.

By then the clock on my mantel said it was three A.M. It said four A.M. when Hal Dominguez raised dazed eyes from the scratching pen, shook his tan face slowly and croaked, "No!"

I reached over his shoulder and raised the five sheets of paper he had already filled with shaky scrawl. I felt no elation, just that what happened had to happen. His writing was not coherent; a mere jumble of words and phrases, and it started like this:

Loretta Loretta Loretta

On the second page, down near the middle, was scrawled:

... so stockholders would find deficit eight thousand two hundred fifty one dollars Loretta twelve thousand and more in red leather purse started bleeding after hand in ... screaming hit her too hard out of Buick raining dress shoes rings pink things push ... in garden digging car washing trading for Chrysler ... covered deficit ...

On page five I hit the jackpot:

... on paper on Ray Budd desk Steve Granger room twelve Alexander lying face down on bed King pin on dresser sat up

recognized ask how you know showed picture from wallet swing King pin once in hall hear steps see Jerry Tinker room twelve hear voices other door knock yell trouble in room twelve drive home Maria . . .

That was as far as he had gone. Now he sat rigidly and faced me with blurred eyes and shook his head slowly from side to side and croaked, "No!"

I knew Maria Dominguez was his wife, that what had broken through now was probably reluctance to describe intimacies between him and her.

"Sign it as far as you've gone." I said. "We'll leave Maria out of it."

I left him at the desk and carried the five sheets to the phone and waited while the operator rang the number I wanted. The hands of the mantel clock had crawled to four-thirty. After awhile Frank Svenson's sleepy voice flowed into my ear.

"Tony," I told him. "My house. Fast! Bring Judge Carlile—Major Bowry—Commissioner Campbell—anyone who can get the governor to stop the execution. I have the facts, Frank. Right here in my house. On paper and in person. But make it fast!"

He made it fast. It seemed that most of Pacific City's officialdom had crowded into my house, crowded around the Thing that had been the cocky Hal Dominguez of Dominguez Wines, read the gibberish on the five sheets of foolscap, listened to his stumbling, automatic answers to their incredulous questions, listened to the picture I had constructed from a dead psycho's curse, part of a letter in his wallet, a woman's corpse at the foot of Mission Ravine, a lisping barkeep and the way the Thing toppled ten clubs with a hard rubber ball.

I can recall little more than blur after that. I remember going to my bathroom to be sick twice, remember noticing the knuckles of both hands were raw and bleeding. I have a vague recollection of someone telling someone else to order a detail to dig up Hal Dominguez' garden, the garden in which they later found the rotted remains of Loretta Granger's clothes and the three rings they eventually traced through jewelers in Santa Cruz to Steve and Loretta Granger.

I recall Stella Tinker sobbing in my arms and someone asking, "Will this hold up in court?" And someone answering, "That's another question. Right now it's enough for a stay of execution if we can reach the governor in time."

And the voice of Judge Carlile on my phone, "This is Judge Carlile of the Superior Court of Pacific County. I tell you you've got to

awaken the Governor! It's a matter of life and death!"

And later Frank Svenson's guilt-edged teeth were bared at me. Sweat gleamed on his face. "You'll get away with it, Tony!" he croaked hoarsely at me. "I think you'll get away with it! But how could ya take such a chance? Ya told me yourself it boiled down to three of 'em. How could take such a chance on Dominguez all of a sudden?"

"His game," I said.

Frank regarded me blankly.

"His bowling game," I elaborated. "It calls for deep concentration. Most bowling games call for concentration and balance and poise. And tonight when I brought up the subject of young Jerry in the chamber, Tom Berry and Charley Lace bucked and cracked—while Dominguez rolled his best game in a month."

"I don't get it," Frank muttered. "It don't make sense. You said yourself he didn't get rattled—"

"That's what tied it. The guy who had enough moxie to push Loretta off a cliff when she started screaming and then stayed cool enough to strip her clothes and rings off so they'd have trouble identifying her—you think he'd rattle easy? Or the guy who could pick a name off a paper on Ray Budd's desk, follow it to a hotel room, listen to an answer and bust a skull, then take advantage of Jerry Tinker stumbling into the kill by yelling through the landlady's door about trouble in room twelve—that was a human icicle. Charley Lace fell to pieces over the idea of Jerry in the chamber. Tom Berry's game falls apart if you give him a sour look. So who did it leave?"

"A human icicle," Frank muttered thickly. "Yeah. But you broke him, Tony—"

"Just like Hitler chewing rugs. Get someone to tell it to you in psychology. It would have been harder with Lace or Berry, they're too soft, they'd just bend. It takes a real hard guy to crack wide open. Dominguez just bowled himself into the gas chamber."

So that was it. The governor was awakened and Jerry Tinker was reprieved fifteen minutes later. He's back at the old stand now, setting pins in alleys three and four.

We still have our pot games about two nights a week and I've started winning my share of them—but that might be Tom and Charley thinking how close they came to being alone with me in my living room instead of Dominguez. Their games have fallen off.

I was wrong about one thing. Hal Dominguez never reached the gas chamber. He never even came to trial. They found him one morning hanging from the top of his cell by strips of his shirt he had braided into a noose.

THE END

By **KEN LEWIS**



I kept staring at that beautiful cold body of hers . . . trying hard to believe it.

SHIV GUY

Rosita, Rico and I had a slick shiv act that thrilled even the jaded Hollywood crowd who loved it and screamed for more. They got it when my educated blade pinned a shroud on Rosita—then boom—eranged back to cut my own heart out!

THE OLD wooden steps crawled down the cliff's face to the highway and beach at the bottom. Originally they'd been used by bathers from the swanky Del Norte Hotel above. But two years ago some dame with a skinfull had missed the top step, and when they found what was left of her on the pavement below, they condemned the steps as too steep for safety. So now they just kind of hung there, like a dead vine that nobody bothers to remove.

From where I stood on the ninth step from

the top, it looked like a long way down in the moonlight. Almost two hundred feet . . . The handrail had completely rotted away there, and it made me dizzy, just thinking about it.

But it wouldn't bother Rosita, I thought. Not as long as it got her to Rikki that much faster. I could almost see her footprints in the dust on the steps beneath me. I knew all about those "walks in the moonlight" she took, "to help her sleep" . . .

"Well, I warned her," I thought. "I told her if she ever went down there again, it would be

the last time." I turned around, hefting the hammer, and started back up to the hotel.

Bunger was waiting when I stepped out of the service elevator. His fat cheeks were pink and his voice was high. I knew he was worried about the hotel cancelling our contract, if I didn't start showing up in time for the act. It wasn't the money with him, so much. He was just one of those guys who has to be in the big time swim.

"Well, if it ain't the great Rico in person!" he said. "Where the hell you been? You barely got time to change!"

"Relax," I said. "When the band starts playing, I'll be out there helping earn forty percent, the same as always. And don't call me Rico!"

The act was billed as *Rikki, Rosita and Rico*. But the Rico was strictly atmosphere. My name's Pete Koravek and I come from Chicago. It used to burn Rikki up, me being able to flip a shiv as good as he could, and him born to it and working at it since he was five. I was the one that looked like a knife-thrower, too—tall and dark with black curly hair and four-inch sideburns. Rikki had blond hair and blue eyes and a build like an acrobat.

I tried to keep the hammer behind me as we started for the dressing rooms. But Bunger saw it, and his fat little eyes narrowed.

"What's that for? You taking up carpentering?"

I gave him a look. "This is just insurance," I said. "In case your little talk with Rosita didn't pan out."

His eyes jerked and his voice got even higher. "For God's sake, Pete, don't blow your top now! Not after she's promised to be good!"

"Yeah? She never kept a promise in her life."

His mouth was opening and closing like a goldfish now. He could see his world of bright lights and glitter go crashing to smithereens. "So help me, Pete! She's in his room right now, kissing him off! From now on she's strictly a sister to him!"

I gave him another look. It was hard to believe, but not as hard as it should of been. I guess because I wanted to believe it so bad. "How'd you do it, Billy?" I said softly.

He grinned, but I could see he was still shaky. The act meant too much prestige to him as manager, for him to let anybody bust it up without a struggle. "I just pointed out the percentage to her," he said. "How solo knife flingers are a dime a dozen, and if she run off with him she'd wind up in some two-bit tent show. But a precision act like we got, with two top artists clucking shivs at her in unison—brother, that's got it! That's what buys mink coats and champagne cocktails!"

"And she went for it? Just like that?"

"Sure. She's no dope. You don't think I'd let a piece of fluff like her louse up them Hollywood nibbles we been getting, do you?"

I felt better. I felt swell. Just so I kept her, I didn't care how. Anybody but Rikki, it might have been different. It might not of drove me half out of my mind this way. But not him; not that big stink, always putting on airs and making me eat his dirt, because I come from Chicago and my old man stuck pigs for a living, while his family was playing before the crowned heads of Europe. She wasn't going to run out on me for a guy like *him*!

"The little tramp," I said. "It sounds just like her."

"Yeah. Now gimme that hammer, Pete."

I grinned and shoved it into my dressing table drawer. There wasn't time to take it back to the service closet where it belonged.

"There's a tack in my shoe," I said. "I got it for that. Now get out and let me dress."

THE ACT was the last thing in the floor show, and the roof garden was always packed for it. Lots of people who didn't stay at the hotel drove down from Hollywood to catch it. Rosita and Rikki were already standing in the door to the dance floor, waiting to go on, when I got there. They both seemed kind of nervous and excited.

Rikki had on those black spic pants with the red sash and sandals, like me. He kept fiddling with the knife racks. He wouldn't look up. But Rosita made a little face at me.

She always looked like a million bucks in the black bra and tights that matched her hair, and the milk-white skin in between. But tonight she looked even better, with the extra color in her cheeks. I didn't know if I'd kiss her or beat her when I got her back to the room. Both, probably. That's the way it was. How can you tell if a girl like her will make you love her or hate her at any given moment?

The band went into its fanfare, and she pushed through the door. The act was like this: First she'd run out all alone in that next-to-nothing costume and pose in the spotlight, with her back to the black velvet covering the cork backboard. Then, while the crowd was still trying to catch its breath after that, Rikki and me follow, pushing the knife-racks, and line up behind them across the dance floor.

The band would pick up the routine, and we'd begin to toss shivs at her in time with the music. Both together. Like clockwork. Starting at the ears and working down—so one would land on each side of her at exactly the same instant. It was beautiful.

The knives were all exactly the same. Big blades. Sharp points. Hollow handles with weights in the end, to balance them. But Rikki insisted on keeping them in order, so we'd

throw the same one at the same place every time. He was superstitious. That's what the racks were for, to keep them in order.

We worked fast, grabbing them by the points and flipping them all in the same motion, so they turned over once on the way. They hit with a smack you could hear above the music, and they looked and they sounded wicked.

They were. I got the first one off okay. But the instant the second one left my fingers, I knew it was bad. You know, when you've chucked as many of them as I have. Like a big league pitcher knows when he's got a wild one coming up, just by the way the ball slips over his fingertips.

I tried to yell, but my voice choked up in my throat. And the next thing I knew, there was the handle sticking up out of her little black bra, and she was beginning to fold.

The music petered out and everything went dead quiet for a second. I guess the crowd thought it was just part of the act. There wasn't any curtain to pull, and Rikki and me just stood there, staring. It was too much to believe, that a thing like this could have happened.

Then Billy Bunker came running from the side door where he always watched the act, and knelt down beside her. She was lying on the floor now with one leg doubled under her, and he lifted her wrist. His little round fat face turned the color of putty, and he motioned to the M. C.

The M. C. cussed under his breath and jacked up the P.A. mike. "Is there a doctor present?"

A guy in a grey pinstripe suit stepped from one of the tables. Rikki and me followed him over. He listened for her heart, and lifted one of her eyelids.

"My God!" the M.C. whispered. "We can't leave her here!"

The doc straightened slowly. "She can be moved."

The band started playing again, hot and loud, and between us we picked her up and carried her into my dressing room. The M.C. left for the dance floor, running, and I heard later he'd told them she was "resting quietly." Anything to keep the customers happy.

He was right, at that. She was resting quietly. She was dead.

It was like a nightmare. I kept staring down at that beautiful cold body of hers, and trying to believe it. Trying to believe she wouldn't be around any more to needle me. To make me sweat every time she looked at another man. To laugh in that special way when she knew she'd hurt me. Or cry, when I managed to hurt her.

Trying to believe I'd never wake up in the night again, and reach for her and find her

gone, with the bed still warm where she'd been. She'd be gone, all right. But the bed wouldn't be warm. It would be cold. Cold as death. . .

Later, after the autopsy, they told me the knife had sliced off a piece of her heart. It was funny, in a way. Because I'd of sworn on a stack of Bibles she didn't have one. But now, here in this room, I just kept staring.

It was too much for Rikki. He got down beside her and cried like a baby.

The doc went out—to call the cops, I guess—and Bunker kept running around and wringing his hands and yapping that we had to keep calm.

"It was an accident," he said. "Remember that! Play it that way, Pete, and the cops can't touch you. . . Rikki, you just keep still. We can get another girl and another contract, but knife-men like Pete ain't so easy to come by!"

I shook myself. "You're damned right it was an accident!" I said. "If you think I'd do it this way on purpose, you're crazy! I got too good a reputation with a knife for that."

"That's right! Remember that, Pete! Just stick to that, and nobody gets hurt!"

Rikki stood up and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. His mouth was working.

"Nobody but Rosita, you dirty pig!" he said. He hung one on Bunker's jaw and knocked him kicking.

Bunker sat up and wiped his mouth. His face was white and his little pig-eyes were pale. "That's right," he said. "Go ahead. Blow your top. Only just do it now, before the cops get here. That's all I ask."

So Rikki got hold of himself and shut up.

THE COPS were a cocky young lieutenant named Ross, with a build like a chorus man and a tan like a beach guard, and a little bald-headed sergeant named Sweeney, with overgrown adenoids and a cast in one eye. Ross did the talking, but Sweeney seemed to do the detecting. After the photogs and print men had left, he stood looking down at the body while Ross asked us our names. Then he asked us her name.

"Rosita Koravek," Bunker said.

"The wife of the guy that threw the shiv?" Ross turned to me. "Any trouble between you and her lately?"

I started to shake my head, but Sweeney said, "Wait a minute. What's this, down underneath all this powder? Bruises, here on her back."

Rikki gave me a look. His face was like stone and his eyes were burning. I was glad he didn't have a knife in his hand right then. Behind Ross's back, Bunker was shaking his head like crazy for me to shut up. But I didn't see any way out of it. I shrugged.

"Okay," I said. "So we had a fight last night, and maybe I lost my head and slapped her around a little. But it didn't mean nothing—we made it all up this morning. She'd been asking for it, and she knew it."

Sweeney sighed. "I give your bedroom the once over, while the lab boys was busy in here," he said. "She had her things all packed in a bag. Toothbrush and all. You mean to say you didn't know she was leaving you?"

I was sweating like a drunk in a turkish bath, and my throat felt like sandpaper. "She always kept her stuff packed up like that," I said. "It was a habit she had, from being on the road so much."

Sweeney went to the door, and two morgue attendants came in and pulled the knife out of her and laid it on the couch, alongside the two full racks that had been brought back from the dance floor. Then they wrapped a sheet around her and put her on a stretcher and carried her out.

It did something to Rikki. I guess he just couldn't stand it any longer, after that.

"She was going to run away with me!" he blurted. "Tonight! He told her he'd kill her if she ever tried to leave him! But she was going to wait till he was asleep, then sneak out and down those old steps to the beach out back. I was going to meet her there in the roadster and we'd head for Mexico—" His voice broke.

I looked at Ross. His eyes were as cold as a stuffed trout's. "That's a dirty lie!" I yelled, "and he knows it! She was giving him the brush-off, but good! Ask Billy here, if you don't believe it!"

Bunger looked pretty sick, but he nodded. "That's right, Lieutenant. She told me about it before the show. She'd decided to stick with Pete, and not bust up the act."

"So why should I try to kill her?" I said. "Out there, in front of all those people? Damn it, I tell you it was an accident!"

But Ross had already made up his mind. He shook his head. "You'll do," he said, "till

a better one comes along. Okay, Sweeney—the cuffs."

Sweeney didn't say anything for a minute. He was sitting on the couch with his eyes shut, balancing a knife in each hand. He sighed.

"Maybe he didn't mean to do it, at that," he said.

Ross's voice snapped. "Don't tell me you'll buy that accident yarn!"

Sweeney opened his eyes. "No," he said. "It wasn't no accident. But maybe this guy thinks it was."

He took the knife with the bloody blade and began to turn the big shiny knob at the end of its handle. The solid steel knob that acted as balance weight. You could screw the knobs in or out to adjust them. He screwed this one all the way out.

Then he tilted the hollow handle just enough to let a little gray mealy stuff run out of its end.

"Beach sand," he said. "The handle's loaded with it. It made this shiv heavier. Give it the same flip as the others, and it would land a good six inches lower."

I GOT it then. Part of it. I saw how she'd been killed. And I saw a couple other things, too.

"Them knives belong to Rikki!" I said. "He keeps them in his room when we ain't using them! He's the one insisted on us always throwing them in the same order, too! He said it was bad luck to mix them up. . . He's been meeting Rosita nights on the beach—I guess that's what give him the sand idea. So when he found out she'd decided to stick with me—her, the wife of a pigsticker's son, making a monkey out of the great Rikki Serano—he decided to fix her wagon, but good! I see it now.

"Here's something else: that second knife was the only one that would do it! Drop the others six inches from where they was supposed to land, and they'd only nick her a little,

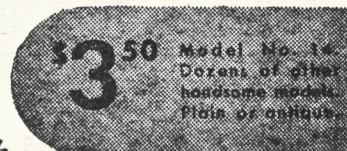


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at the most. But that second one—that was supposed to hit the board right above her left shoulder, close to her neck. Drop that one six inches, and you can see what happened!”

Everybody was looking at Rikki now. His face was dead white and his lips were curling. “He’s lying,” he said. “I don’t know what she told him to keep him from beating her again. But I do know she was going with me to-night. She told me so, just before the show.”

I let my lips curl back at him. “Ask Billy,” I said. “He’s the one talked her into staying, because of the act.”

He whirled on Bunger. “What kind of lousy frame is this?” he said. “You know damn well she wouldn’t even listen to you. You told me so yourself, when you tried to talk me into staying.”

Billy was looking sick again. He was hunched back against the dressing table, and his eyes were pale and his little fat cheeks looked pasty.

“I—I don’t feel so good,” he said. “My heart. . . The pills are in my room—”

I guess I should have got it, right then. But I didn’t. I was all mixed up.

“Go ahead, Billy,” I said. “Tell him. Just what you told me. Tell him she wouldn’t run out on me for no damn prima donna like him!”

Billy licked his lips. He was shaking all over, “I guess I better go get them pills—” he said.

He started for the door, but I reached out and grabbed him. “Damn you,” I said. “*Were you lying to me?*”

He kept staring at the rug and kind of sagging. He wouldn’t look at me.

“What else could I do, Pete?” he whined. “You come barging in with that hammer in your hand, and I knew you was going to use it on Rosita. I had to do something to stop you from doing that. To calm you down, at least till after the act—”

Ross got between us and pushed me back. I let him. Nothing made sense any more, anyway. I heard the hall door scuff shut, but it didn’t register. I was too busy trying to get it all straight in my head.

Rikki was glaring at me again. “I hope they take their time in the gas chamber, Pete,” he said. “I hope they feed it to you slow. . . You’d been planning to kill her ever since you found out about her and me, hadn’t you? You sneaked in and gimmicked that knife yourself, while I was out. So you could lay it on me if the cops didn’t go for your accident story.”

I shook my head. “No,” I said numbly. “It wasn’t me. But I guess I know who it was all right, now. . . All he could think about was the act. The big-time Broadway offers and Hollywood nibbles we’d been getting. He was mad for that whirl. Only she was trying to bust it up. Trying to get you to run away

with her. So she had to go. It was simple.”

His eyes were hollow. “My God!” he said. “That thing he said, before the cops got here: ‘We can get a new contract and a new girl.’”

I nodded. “Sure. Pretty babes are a dime a dozen. But where could he find a new shiv-man like you or me? He was right about one thing. If we’d all kept our mouths shut and stuck to the accident story, the cops wouldn’t have touched us. They’d of bluffed a little, and then turned us loose. But you had to pop off and make Sweeney suspicious. So he got to comparing knives.”

He nodded. “I guess Billy didn’t count on a break like that. He figured to watch his chance and empty out the sand before we used that knife again, and nobody would ever be the wiser. We’d go to New York, change the billing, and find a new girl. And before long we’d be back at the top again.”

“Yeah. Good Lord, where is he? These dumb cops have let him go!”

“He just went to his room to get his heart pills,” Ross said.

“Pills, hell! He’s healthy as a horse! He never had a heart attack in his life!”

WELL, IT’S funny what a guy will do when he’s scared. Scared all over, like Billy Bunger was. He wasn’t in his room, of course. And when we piled into the only elevator that was running at 3 a.m., the operator said he hadn’t seen him, either.

“Then he must still be in the building,” Ross said. “All we have to do is cover the ground-floor exits, and sit tight.”

But I had my own ideas about that. So when we reached the lobby, I faded back and headed for the rear service door while the rest of them was still questioning the desk clerk. I’d remembered the flight of fire stairs that run all the way up to the roof garden.

There was a full moon that night, and it didn’t take me long to spot him, once I’d got outside. It must have been quite a job for his little short legs to cover twelve flights of fire stairs, so I guess we got down almost as soon as he did. Anyway, he was running along about twenty yards ahead of me, toward the top of them old wooden steps that led down to the beach. He didn’t have a car of his own, and there wasn’t much chance of finding a taxi at that hour. But there was a bus stop on the highway at the foot of those steps, and he figured no one would think to look there.

I followed—not trying to catch up, just wanting to be in on the kill. I knew what was coming, and I could have yelled out and warned him right then. But I figured he deserved what was going to happen to him. Rikki or me, it might have been different. We’d loved her—we had damn good reason to

(Continued on page 97)

It was a perfect set-up for a guy as hot as Ed . . . The remote farm, the buried farmer—and only the dumb, half-paralyzed old woman to stand between him and the lush life he wanted in far-off Rio!

IT AIN'T HAY, BROTHER!

By DAY KEENE

FOUR DAYS had passed since he'd killed Marko and some of the butterflies in Ed Jaeger's stomach were beginning to fold their wings. Some of them, not all. He still had several obstacles to hurdle. It stood to reason that sooner or later some member of the sheriff's posse would stop at the lonely back-country farm to inquire if he had seen him.

Ask if he had seen himself. The thought amused Jaeger. He laughed, and wished he hadn't. His whole body was an aching boil. The past three days of farming had been hell. He had forgotten it was such work. A man no sooner finished one thing than there were a dozen other matters waiting to be attended to.

He turned uneasily on the hard straw mattress as a cock crowed in the growing dawn and hard fingers of light began to probe the cracks in the ancient farmhouse, the cracks

through which the wind had whistled all night long. And then there were always the chores. A man, Jaeger decided, who took up farming for a living should have his head examined.

Unable to sleep he swung his bare feet to the cold floor and shuffled across the planking to the wash stand in one corner of the bedroom. There was no running water. There were no electric lights. There was nothing except a barnful of hungry animals waiting to be fed, milked, and cleaned up after.

"I've changed my mind.
I'm not going—you are!"



"Damn such a life."

He dabbed his hands in the bowl, wet his face, then lighted a kerosine lamp and studied his reflection in a cracked mirror as he dried his beard on a sour-smelling towel. His eyes were sunken and inflamed by the wind. He had an eight days growth of beard, the same color thank God as Marko's. He had nothing to fear on that score. Before he died, Marko had admitted he had no intimates in this new community. He knew none of his neighbors and wanted to know none. Very well, he was Marko. Jaeger sniffed in distaste. He even smelled like Marko—like a cow barn. How any man could choose such a life of his own volition was something he would never understand.

He forced himself to don the filthy overalls and shirt which hung on the foot of the bed. Marko's rubber boots felt cold through the holes in Marko's ragged sox. Well, it couldn't last forever. In another week, two weeks at the most, he would be on his way again, safe this time in the role of Marko. This way, it would be a cinch.

Maybe he'd send for Connie. Maybe not. It might be best to sever all ties with the past. It wasn't Marko who was dead, it was Ed Jaeger. There were lots of pretty girls in the world. And all a man with money had to do was crook his finger. You just had to know the angles.

Slipping into Marko's smelly sheepskin coat, he paused to scowl at the bedroom wall. True, the old lady presented a problem. But not one too difficult for Jaeger. Her life hung by a thread. It wouldn't be hard to snuff out the little remaining life. And now he was in this far the devil knew that one murder more wouldn't matter.

The thing to do was to keep his mind on the bulging brief case buried under the filth of the chicken run. He had killed two men for it, three men including Marko. He hadn't dared to count it as yet. It was still as Connie had handed it to him before slipping out of the car on the outskirts of East St. Louis. But a quick glimpse at the top sheaves of bills had assured him they were twenties. There was at least a hundred thousand dollars in the case. And it was his. Connie and Mack could whistle for their share.

Ed Jaeger was dead. He didn't have to split with anyone. Chuckling at his own shrewdness, Jaeger clumped into the lean-to that served the farmhouse as a kitchen and put a kettle of oatmeal on to boil for the old lady's breakfast. It all just went to show that if a man used his head he could get away with murder.

God knew he had. He had. The caper proper, at least as concerned Marko, had begun four days before. . .

SOMEWHERE in the vast silence a cock crowed twice. The pelt of the rain increased. It dripped in great globules down the bullet-riddled windshield of the car.

His face as gray as the early morning, Jaeger regarded the growing light uneasily. His eyes were rimmed from lack of sleep. His body was numbed with fatigue. Still, he had to go on—and he couldn't. Nor could he stay where he was. After the caper at the corners the local law would soon be combing the backroads for a bullet-riddled blue sedan.

He still wondered why they had tried to stop him. Even if Connie or Mack had ratted, the law had no way of knowing he was traveling in a blue sedan. He had covered his trail too thoroughly. The blue sedan was the fourth car he had stolen since leaving East St. Louis.

He roused himself with an effort. But the law hadn't gotten him yet. He didn't mean that it should. Rolling up the cuffs of his natty gray flannels, he stepped out into the rain and sank promptly in mud to his ankles. The soft shoulder of the road was even worse. The sedan was hopelessly mired. It would be impossible to extricate it without the aid of a tow car.

Cursing softly he climbed back into the shelter of the car and sat sodden, hungry, shivering, undecided as to what to do. The picture had changed. The alarm was out for him now in this immediate vicinity. He couldn't steal another car, even if he could find one. Heading west had been a mistake. He should have holed up in Chicago. He knew his way around a city but it had been years since he had seen any more of the country than could be glimpsed from the window of a speeding car enroute to Miami or some other gambling spa.

The country had always been poison for him. He'd hated the sight of a farm since he'd worked as a boy on his uncle's place south of Gary. He had been mad even to consider his cousin Marko's new farm as a hideout. But he had—and here he was.

He couldn't see them for the rain but he knew that smoke was already rising from the chimneys of the houses dotting the nearby countryside. Farmers were early risers. Booted men, the fools, his cousin Marko among them, were sloshing down muddy lanes and across filth laden barnyards to feed their cattle, do their milking and slop their hogs. More, farmers were great ones to see their children had an education. By eight o'clock, despite the mud, horse drawn if need be, there would be a school bus on the road.

Its driver would report the blue sedan from the first phone he came to. No. One thing was certain. Whatever he did, he couldn't stay where he was.

Jaeger took the road map from the glove compartment and located the pencil dot that

was Marko Jaeger's new farm. A shame the law had tried to stop him. If they hadn't he would be safe at Marko's by now. The farm couldn't be more than thirty miles away by road, less than a half-hour's drive. It was closer to forty across country, allowing for the small villages he would have to detour around on foot. He remembered that much about the country. Farm folks didn't see many strangers and every stranger was suspect.

But if he could reach Marko's unseen he was certain that Marko would hide him, if not for the sake of their boyhood friendship, then for a price. The Jaegers were all alike in that respect. If there was enough money in a gamble they all would take a chance. A shame Marko had turned farmer. He had been a fairly clever box man as a youth. There were few safes he couldn't open.

Putting the road map in his pocket, Jaeger wiped the wheel of the car from force of habit, made certain he had reloaded his gun, picked the bulging brief case from the seat, and struck out across country through the rain.

What followed was nightmare. It rained incessantly. Twice, dogs chased him. Once he was fired upon as he attempted to seek shelter in a farmer's barn. He saw armed men frequently but as far as he could tell he was never seen. As one day became two and two days three, some of his almost forgotten country lore returned.

HE REMEMBERED moss grew on the north side of trees, that wading up a creek for miles would throw dogs off his trail, that cedar boughs made a fair mattress, that milk could be gotten from cows if one was patient and hungry enough to milk them into a paper cup made from a twenty dollar bill.

Milk with a few early green berries was the only food he had. He didn't dare to buy or beg. His life depended on not being seen.

It was dusk of the fourth day when he reached the water-filled lane leading back from the shiny new mail box on which the name M. Jaeger was stenciled. A few swollen looking sheep grazed indifferently in what once had been a garden. A sway-backed mare and a half dozen lowing cows stood huddled for shelter under the eave of an equally sway-backed barn. The farmhouse wasn't much better. An ancient clapboard affair, it stood on a muddy, treeless knoll, half of its windows boarded, its ridge pole sagging under the weight of the rain. A dim light straggled feebly through one window but Jaeger could see no one.

His hunger a roaring fire which was undampened by his sodden clothes, Jaeger forced himself to wait for full darkness to swallow up the farm. Crouched in a clump of aspen, he survived himself. He didn't look much like Ed Jaeger. His snap brimmed hat drooped

around his ears. His one button gray flannel suit was a bramble-torn, mud-splattered rag. His shoes were two lumps of mud. He had a four days growth of beard. He looked, he decided, more like a West Madison Street bum than he did like Ed Jaeger, big shot.

But he still had the bulging brief case and his gun. He fondled it with a muddy hand. If Marko would hide him for a month, allow him to cool off, he would make it worth his while. There was more money here than Marko, or nine out of any ten farmers for that matter, would see in his normal lifetime.

A battered pick-up truck splashed up the road and turned into the lane. It was Marko, much the same as Jaeger remembered him. The family resemblance was quite unmistakable.

Jaeger followed the truck with eager eyes. No one came out on the porch to meet Marko. There was no sound of voices inside. Good. Marko was currently without a wife. Even Aunt Tonchka Mikha, Marko's mother's sharp-tongued maiden sister who had kept house for Marko, and Marko's branch of the family, for years, must have died. If not, she would be jabbering. Jaeger grinned. Aunt Tonchka was never one to withhold her tongue, or a strap for that matter. Many a clip she had given him as a boy.

A sudden nostalgia for the old days choked him. He should have kept in touch with the family even after he had gotten into the big money, perhaps sent a few dollars home from time to time. Why he wouldn't even have known Marko's new address if he hadn't chanced on Uncle Dimitra in an Akron bar.

Night fell with the swiftness of a swooping hawk. The yellow light dribbling out the window of the farm house grew brighter. A lantern bobbed between the back door and the barn. There was a musical jingle of milk pails, the squeaking of a sliding door. The lowing of the cattle ceased.

Jaeger got swiftly to his feet and stumbled down the lane to the barn. *Marko had to hide him. He had to.*

The lantern hung on a peg in the wall and Marko, his forehead buried in a Jersey heifer's soft flank, sat on a three-legged stool, a milk pail clutched between his knees and milked rhythmically.

"Marko," Jaeger called from the door.

The other man's fingers paused in their business. He got slowly to his feet, one hand reaching behind him. When it reappeared there was a shotgun in it. "Who calls Marko?" he demanded.

Jaeger showed himself in the cow-shed doorway. "It's me, Marko. Ed."

The barrel of the shot gun wavered but remained leveled on Jaeger's belt buckle. "Well, I'll be damned," the man behind it said

softly. "So it's been you who has been driving the sheriff's posse nuts. They're running around like squirrels in a cage. You were the guy in the blue sedan who shot it out with the boys at Swinton's Corners."

He seemed more amused than concerned.

"Yeah. It was me," Jaeger told him. "I had to shoot. The damn rubes tried to stop me. But what's the idea of the gun? Is this a way for you to treat an old friend, a relative?"

Marko considered his reply. When he spoke his voice was cold. "We're cousins, yes. But since when have we been friends?" He hesitated, leaned the shogun against the stanchion again and resumed his milking. "No. If you've come to me for help, I'm sorry, Ed. You'd better climb back on your horse again. I don't wish you any bad luck. But you can't stay here."

Jaeger came farther into the barn. "But I have to, Marko. You have to hide me. It means the chair if I'm caught. I killed two guys in that last bank stick-up."

The bearded farmer showed his first interest. "How much did you get?"

"I haven't counted it yet," Jaeger boasted. "But I got plenty. And I'll pay you plenty to hide me."

A moment of silence followed broken only by the rhythmic *sudd sudd sudd* of the streams of milk in the pail. There was regret in Marko's voice. "I'm sorry, Ed, believe me. But I can't do it. I have a sweet little set-up here and I don't dare to risk it." He added, as an after-thought, "But I'll stake you to a meal and some dry clothes if that will help you any."

"Thanks," Jaeger said hotly. "It so happens I can use both. But are you sure you're not putting yourself out?"

"Even doing that much for you I'm putting myself out plenty," Marko said stolidly. "No one knows me out here, not even my nearest neighbor. I'm just the hard working Hunky that bought the old Gleason farm and I want things to stay that way."

"Five thousand if you hide me a month," Jaeger offered.

The tempo of the *sudd sudd* in the milk pail slackened. "I'm tempted," his cousin admitted. "But the answer is still no. I've too much at stake here, Ed." He seemed about to confide something, changed his mind and finished lamely, "Be a good guy and scram. Look. I'll even let you steal my truck. And I swear that I won't report it."

Jaeger studied the other man's bearded face in the yellow glow of the lantern. Marko was tempted but frightened. "Ten thousand if you hide me a month," he raised his offer. As he spoke he unstrapped the brief case, took out the top sheaf of bills, strapped the brief case again and held out the sheaf to Marko. "Cash

on the barrel head. You can buy a real farm for that much money."

Marko glanced at the sheaf of bills. "There's only a thousand there."

"I've plenty more," Jaeger boasted. "For old time's sake. How about it, Marko?"

Marko sighed and resumed his milking. "I'd like to, Ed. Believe me. But the answer is still no. I can't afford to hide you. But you can have the truck, and welcome. And if you'll wait until I get through here I'll give you a meal and a change of clothes."

Weak with hunger, exposure, and fatigue, Jaeger leaned wearily against the wall. He *couldn't* take no for an answer. He couldn't go on, no matter what he had to pay for safety. He stood staring at his cousin's bearded face, wondering how much would tempt him. It was then he had the idea. Marko was stubborn. All Jaeger's were. They were also alike in many other ways, size, coloring, and features. Why pay anything for safety? Why not make Marko pay? What was it he had said—?

"No one knows me out here, not even my nearest neighbor. I'm just the hard working Hunky that bought the old Gleason farm and I want things to stay that way."

THE MORE he thought of it the better Jaeger liked the idea. But he would have to be clever about it. Marko had a shotgun. "Okay. If that's the way it has to be," he seemingly acquiesced, "I don't suppose I can change your mind."

Marko seemed relieved. "You can be three hundred miles away by morning," he assured him. "No cop is going to stop a farmer in a truck when he's looking for a hot shot like Ed Jaeger. And with the dough that you have in that case, say, boy, you'll be sitting pretty."

Jaeger wondered whom Marko was trying to kid. He would never sit pretty again, not with two murder raps against him. But he could at least better his position. And he intended to. "Yeah. Sure," he agreed with Marko.

After the cold and rain, the barn was warm. He found it difficult not to doze as he waited for Marko to finish milking. Several times he caught the other man looking at him oddly. Both times Marko said, "Believe me, I'm sorry, kid. I wish I could do more."

"Forget it," Jaeger told him.

When Marko had finished he insisted on carrying one of the pails to the house. The lean-to that served as a kitchen was even warmer than the barn and Jaeger realized he would have to act swiftly. Once food and dry clothes had relaxed him it would be difficult, in his present physical condition, to tense himself to the point of killing. Comfort was a narcotic he couldn't afford.

He watched Marko pouring the milk into the separator and felt almost sorry for the fool. As Marko, wearing Marko's clothes, farming Marko's farm, he would be Marko. No one would bother him. Even if the law should call, looking for Ed Jaeger, no rube sheriff would recognize him in a bearded Hunky farmer. The more he looked at Marko the more he was pleased at their resemblance. He had planned wisely after all.

There was a pot of gruel spluttering on the stove beside a huge iron spider. "Slice some sidemeat," Marko called. "I'll be through here in a minute. Then we'll talk this over some more. Maybe I can figure out something before you go."

It was Jaeger's turn to say no. He laid the brief case on the table and slipped his revolver from its holster. "No," he said quietly. "I've changed my mind. I'm not going. You are, Marko."

Caught with a half emptied milk pail in his hand, his shotgun ten feet away, Marko stared at him stupidly. "You're crazy, Ed. You wouldn't do a thing like that." Sweat stood out on his forehead in beads. "No, Ed. You couldn't. I'll hide you."

"You're damn right you will," Jaeger said, and pulled the trigger.

There was a lot of sound, but little blood. Marko clapped one palm to his forehead, set the milk pail on the floor, took two quick steps toward his shotgun and, collapsing, fell half through the screen door leading to the outer cement stoop.

Jaeger dragged him the rest of the way out into the rain then shouldering the body with an effort carried it to the barn and covered it with hay. Tomorrow he would bury it properly. He would also wash the stoop of any blood that might remain, then perhaps kill a chicken on the spot. It was the small neglected things that upset the best laid plans.

Returning to the house he found dry clothes in a little bedroom off the lean-to and changed into them gratefully. They were ragged and

smelled of the barnyard, but they were dry. Now all that remained to be done before taking up his life as Marko was to bury the brief case. He decided on the chicken run. A little moisture wouldn't harm the money. He didn't intend it to be buried long. A little farm life would go a long long way. A few weeks of it would be sufficient.

THE RAIN smoothed over the hole he dug in the run and obliterated most of the signs of digging before he had fairly filled it in again. Tomorrow the chickens huddled on their roosts in the hen house would do the rest. He hoped he could do as well with Marko's body. He was certain that he could.

Back in the kitchen he stared at the bubbling gruel. Since boyhood gruel had been one of his particular aversions. He disliked the sight and smell and taste of it. Even hungry as he was it nauseated him. Surely Marko didn't eat the stuff. Then he remembered Marko had mentioned side-meat. He found a slab of it in a small stone buttery off the lean-to and cutting off huge slices dropped them into the spider and was savoring the smell when he became conscious he was not alone.

There was a sharp rapping somewhere in the house. In his fear he confused the direction of the sound and swung to face the outer door, his revolver in his hand.

"Who's there?"

The rapping had ceased. There was no sound but the drip of the rain. Then the rapping began again. This time he located the sound and walked toward it cautiously.

Her eyes as bright and sharp as ever, Aunt Tonchka sat in a wheel chair in the shabby living room, a stout cane clutched in her right hand. She started to rap it on the floor again, saw him, and stopped, recognition widening her eyes.

Jaeger backed from her anger instinctively, then realized her eyes were all of her that moved with the exception of the hand that held the cane. He waited for her to speak.

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She didn't. Nothing came from her lips but a series of frightened mewings. Then through his fog of weariness Jaeger remembered Uncle Dimitra saying—

"Poor Tonchka. She who always worked so hard. At her time of life, a stroke. Surely it is more than she deserves."

His finger, tightened on the trigger of his gun, relaxed. This wasn't a problem that could be solved by shooting. He could pretend to be a farmer. He could impersonate Marko. But he couldn't explain away the disappearance of a paralyzed woman of seventy. This was something he would have to think out.

"Don't worry, Aunt Tonchka," he assured her. He returned the gun to its holster. "I'm not going to hurt you. I didn't want to hurt Marko. But Marko wouldn't hide me. And I'm in a jam. A bad one."

The aged eyes asked a question.

"I had to, Aunt Tonchka," Jaeger lied. "Marko was going to turn me over to the law. But don't you worry about a thing. I'm going to stay here, see? And I'll treat you even better than Marko did. That is if you play ball with me. You understand?"

She blinked her eyes twice. Jaeger hoped that twice meant yes. He was certain it did when the hand that held the cane laid it across her lap and a fragile, bony, finger pointed to her mouth.

"Sure. I get you," he said, relieved. "You want your gruel. I'll get it right away, Aunt Tonchka."

A half hour later, his own hunger unsatisfied, the side meat in the spider burned to a cinder, he was still spoon-feeding the old lady. Smacking her lips over every nauseous spoonful, she ate for what seemed forever. . .

THAT HAD been four days ago. Now, this morning, as he salted Aunt Tonchka's oatmeal, Jaeger came to a sudden decision. It was fine to tell himself he was smart, to keep his mind on the bulging brief case buried in the chicken run, but this couldn't go on much longer. He couldn't stand another two weeks of being dog tired all the time, of wearing sour-smelling clothes, of milking, shoveling, following the sway-backed mare, waiting on Aunt Tonchka mouth and body. He couldn't stand another week. He doubted he could stand a day.

Take the old lady out of bed . . . attend to her needs and dress her . . . put her in her chair and feed her . . . feed the stock and chickens . . . milk . . . turn the separator . . . clean it . . . hitch up the mare and plow . . . unhitch the mare . . . feed the old lady more gruel . . . hitch up the mare again . . . unhitch her . . . feed her and rub her down . . . milk . . . separate it . . . clean the stables . . . bed the stock . . . put more gruel to boil . . . feed

the old lady . . . take her out of her chair . . . attend to her needs . . . undress her . . . put her to bed. . . . The thing went on endlessly. He wondered how Marko had stood it.

And the hard work was just beginning. Now he had plowed the garden to cover Marko's grave he had to keep right on plowing. Nothing stood out so boldly as one small cultivated plot in one hundred and sixty acres of fallow land.

No. He had to do something soon. Perhaps today. Aunt Tonchka's hold on life was small. A pillow held over her face for a few minutes would loosen it entirely.

She seemed to sense his trend of mind and ate warily, her sharp eyes sweeping his face from time to time. He would do it this noon, he decided, when she took her afternoon nap. Then if the sheriff wouldn't come to him, he'd go in search of the sheriff.

"My Aunt Tonchka Mikha just died of old age," he'd tell him. "Do I report it to someone? Or do I just bury her?"

That was the trick. Play dumb. Hunkies weren't supposed to have much sense. The sheriff might come to the farm. He might not. There would be no real reason for him to come. Old ladies died in their sleep every day. But by reporting her death he would quench any suspicion of foul play. And if the sheriff did come to the farm there would be nothing for him to find. Jaeger surveyed the plowed plot with pride. He still could plow a straight furrow. And if he should come, all the sheriff could tell around town was that the new fellow, Jaeger, who had bought the old Gleason farm was one hard working Hunky.

"He has his garden all plowed," he'd say, "and is well started on his 'vetch land while the rest of you guys are wearing out the seats of your britches claiming the ground is too wet to work. You have to hand it to those foreigners. No wonder they get ahead."

A wry smile on his bearded lips, ignoring the rapping of the cane, Jaeger bolted the last of his coffee and clumped out onto the porch. As soon as Aunt Tonchka was buried he would sell off Marko's stock, dig up the brief case, climb into Marko's truck and head west in search of a wife. At least that would be what he would tell anyone who might ask. He was lonely now his aunt had died. And if he never returned, no one would come in search of him. He'd just be that Hunky farmer who got lonely and moved away after his aged aunt died.

The more Jaeger thought of the set-up the more it intrigued him. As far as he could see it was perfect. He was next to the last of the family. There was no one but Uncle Dimitra to prove he wasn't Marko. And Uncle Dimitra lived in a perpetual alcoholic fog. As Marko, he could go to Mexico. And as

Marko, a retired farmer, no one would ever question where he got his money. He eyed the chicken run thoughtfully, wondering how much was in the case. It would be nice to know. Tonight, after he had reported Aunt Tonchka's death, he would dig up the money and count it.

But right now he had to plow. He could plow at least another two acres before feeding the old lady her last gruel. He straightened his back with an effort and limped wearily toward the barn noting enroute that the pigs were out of their pen again, the water-tank in the barnyard was empty, and the high wind during the night had ripped off the granary door. Always something more.

Another exasperation awaited him at the stable. He had used the last of the hay Marko had forked down into the passageway between the cow ties and the horse stalls and had to climb the stairs to the floor of the barn and the mow. It seemed unnaturally still in the barn proper. The only light came from the louvers and the middle crack in the big sliding doors. A wagon, a hay rake, a manure spreader, and an ancient buggy occupied one side of the floor. Hay completely filled the other half of the barn, rising in a sheer wall. Annoyed, instead of climbing the ladder to the mow, Jaeger jabbed his fork into the sheer side hoping to tear loose enough feed to last the animals for the day.

THE MOW was less solidly packed than it looked. Instead of meeting resistance the tines plunged into the hay half way up the handle only to snap off as they encountered something solid. There was a scraping of tines on steel and a muffled tinkling of glass.

Puzzled, Jaeger stared at the broken tines, then began a new assault on the hay only to break off swearing as he heard a car bumping down the lane. Pitching the broken fork up in the mow he hurried to the door and peered out through the crack.

There were three men in the car, all wearing the wide brimmed Stetsons that seemed to be uniform with local law. There was no mistaking who they were. The long awaited deputation from the sheriff's office had arrived.

He peered at them through the crack. Their visit would change his immediate plans slightly. But he had nothing to fear. Perhaps it was all for the best. Tonchka couldn't talk. She had never learned to write. The sheriff would see for himself that she was alive and well-cared for. He would also see she was very frail and couldn't possibly last long.

Pulling open the sliding door, Jaeger walked down the muddy packed earth ramp to meet the men.

"Oh. There you are, Jaeger," the oldest of the three men greeted him. "I don't believe

we've met. I'm Sheriff Harry Wade. And these are my two deputies, John Corson and Sam Hepple."

"Call me Marko," Jaeger said. He shook hands with each man in turn. All were earnest, simple, souls. He had known that they would be.

"Live here by yourself?" Wade asked.

Jaeger explained he did not, that his Aunt Tonchka Mikha had kept house for him for years. He shrugged. "But now she is old and confined to a chair and it is I who must care for her."

The sheriff eyed him with new approval.

"Nice job you've done here, Marko," Hepple said. He nodded at the orderly barn-yard. "This place was a mess when Gleason had it. Hmm. See you have your garden plowed and a good start on your hay land." He elbowed him good naturedly. "Guess you aren't the man we want."

His mouth dry, Jaeger said, "The man you want?"

"It's nothing for you to worry about, Jaeger," Sheriff Wade assured him. He pushed his hat back on his head. "But it's the damndest thing that ever happened in this county. You haven't seen any strangers, have you?"

"No," Jaeger said truthfully.

"But you did hear about the shooting some nights back?"

Jaeger said he had. "You shot at a man in a blue sedan."

"Did our best to kill him," Sheriff Wade admitted. "You see we thought it was this other man."

Jaeger was wary. "This—other man."

"Yes," Wade said impatiently. "You see the watchman over at Pomona was positive the cracksman who looted the bank safe there a week ago last night got away in a blue sedan. That's why we were stopping all blue sedans. But damned if this one fellow didn't put up a fight. He was long gone of course but we found his car the next morning over on Simpkin's Pike."

"I hit it three times," Hepple beamed.

He didn't come this way," Corson said sourly. "I still think some tourist picked him up."

"He isn't important," Sheriff Wade admitted. He explained to Jaeger. "You see we know he's not the same man who cracked the Pomona safe because that lad opened another safe in Redbank two hours later the same night. And the night constable over there positively identified his car as a blue Buick while the one we shot up was a Chrysler." He pointed at the pick-up truck. "Is that the only car you have, Jaeger?"

His pulse pounding, Jaeger said it was.

Sheriff Wade shifted his belt so that it

rested more easily against his hip. "Don't let us being here worry you, Jaeger. We're just checking on every car in the county. You see we want that safe cracker, bad. He and the Redbank night constable shot it out. And the constable died this morning."

His throat tight, Jaeger said, "Oh."

Hepple added, "It was the sixth safe he'd robbed in three months. No mistaking the workmanship."

Jaeger forced himself to ask, "But this other man, the one in the blue Chrysler. Who was he? What had he done?"

YOU HAVE me there," Sheriff Wade admitted. He straightened his hat on head. "He could have been anyone of a half dozen men we have received wanted circulars on recently." His grin was friendly. "Including a lad by the same last name as yours by the way. An Edward Jaeger."

Hepple chuckled and elbowed Jaeger's ribs again. "No relation is he, Marko?"

Jaeger's grin was sickly. "Not as I know of. What's he wanted for?"

"Bank robbery," Wade told him. He didn't seem very interested. "But the last word that we had they've cleaned up that case fairly well without him. The two bank tellers he shot pulled through and the Akron police recovered all but a few thousand of the loot when they picked up a Mack and Connie Something in a hotel room there." Wade chuckled. "According to their story they pulled a fast one on your namesake. Switched briefcases in the car, giving him one stuffed with paper with a few sheaves of bills on top."

Jaeger tried to laugh with the three men and couldn't.

Hepple elbowed him again. "Crime doesn't pay, eh, Marko?"

It was all Jaeger could do to keep from striking him. No wonder Connie and Mack had been so insistent they split.

Deputy Corson returned from a cursory examination of the barn. "A wagon and a buggy," he reported to Wade. "But no blue Buick."

"Just routine," Hepple said. "Like the sheriff said, we're checking every farm in the county. That blue Buick has to be here somewhere. We've had blocks on the roads for a week."

Sheriff Wade nodded at Jaeger. "With your permission I'll pay my respects to the lady while we're here. I should have been out before. We're always glad to welcome real farmers to the county."

Jaeger followed closely on his heels, one hand on the gun in his pocket.

"Respects, madame," Wade tipped his hat to Aunt Tonchka.

"She's had a stroke. She can hear you but she can't talk," Jaeger said.

Wade shook his head. "A shame. And you have the care of her, too, along with your farm work, eh?"

Jaeger said that was correct.

"Marko, here, treat you all right?" the sheriff made conversation.

The greedy blue eyes blinked twice.

"That means yes," Marko said.

"I'm sure he does," the sheriff answered his own question. "You have a good hard working boy. He's made a real farm of this place. And now I've had a chance to meet him I'm going to drop by from time to time to see how you are making out. I'll try to get some of the women folk to come too and sit with you now and then. Would you like that?"

A faint smile on her twisted lips, Aunt Tonchka blinked she would.

"She knew. She knew all the time, damn her," Jaeger thought. *"And now she knows she has me hooked. She knows I don't dare to kill her."*

The old lady pointed to her mouth.

"Must be hungry," Hepple said, "Surprising how old folks like their vittles." He beamed at Aunt Tonchka. "You remind me of my mother's sister, ma'am. Bedridden she was for years but Aunt Becky ate hearty and made us all jump around right up to her ninety-sixth year."

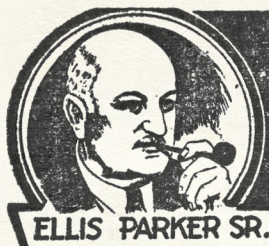
The sheriff led the way back to the stoop where he insisted on shaking hands with Jaeger again. "I mean it. I'm glad to have had this chance to meet you, Jaeger. And if you should spot a blue Buick I will appreciate it if you get in touch with me."

Jaeger promised he would and leaning against the porch upright he watched the sheriff's car bump up the lane. He was almost sorry to see it go.

Damn Marko for a rotten stinker. No wonder he had refused to hide him. Now he was Marko. For the sake of a brief case stuffed with paper he had thrust his head into a noose.

Worse, he had harnessed himself to a plow. He knew where the blue Buick was. A man could bury a brief case. A man could bury a corpse. He could even bury the loot from a half dozen safe jobs where it was very unlikely another man would ever find it. But there were few places one could hide an eight cylinder motor car. He had never thought of it before but keeping it covered with hay was one of the best ways that Jaeger knew of. He would have to grow a lot of hay. His neck depended on it.

Inside the shabby farm house Aunt Tonchka's cane rapped sharply on the floor. Wordless, Jaeger entered the lean-to and put a fresh kettle of gruel to boil.



ELLIS PARKER SR.

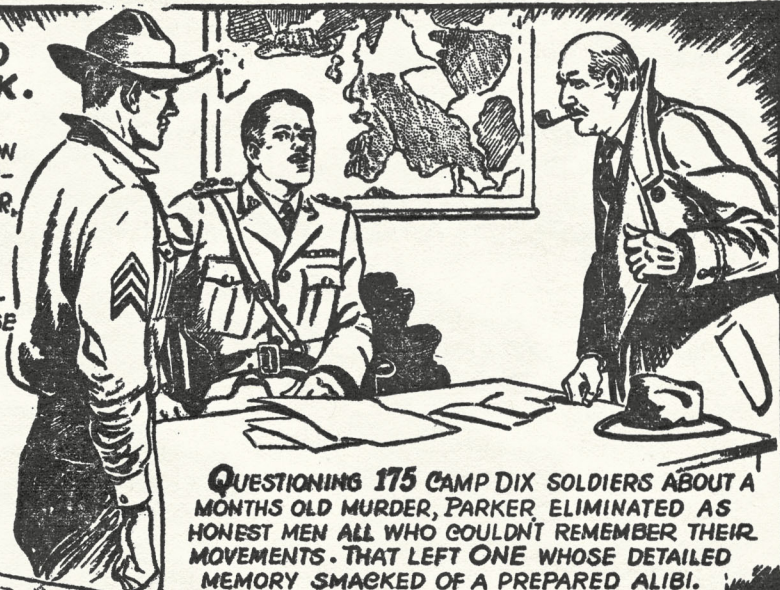
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THE WALLS ARE HARD AND HIGH!

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By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

After two years on the far side of those gray stone walls, I learned how to buy back a murder-free name: First, add up the total in wrecked and doomed lives—then pay every past-due installment with the real killer's blood!



CHAPTER ONE

Paroled From Hell!

THEY were behind me, now. For the first time in over two years the gray stone walls were in back of me. I was outside at last. For some reason, I turned and gave them a last look. They looked the same on this side; they looked like hell.

Jud said, "Tommy—" and took my hand. He tried a smile. "How do you feel—I mean, *how* is it, not being in that—"

"I don't know," I told him. "I don't feel

anything, yet. Let's get moving out of here."

We walked down to his car and got in. I didn't look at the walls; I kept my gaze away from them with an effort. The motor coughed and purred, and we started to move off.

Something stirred in me and I had to look again; some masochism forced me to take one last look. *Never*, I told myself, would they get me inside again. No matter what happened. And nothing would happen—nothing

I could prevent, at any rate. That was sure. Jud's eyes were on the road. He had a half smile on his face.

"What's funny?" I asked.

His eyes didn't leave the road. He's a careful driver. "Nothing's funny. I'm happy. I got you out, didn't I? You're my friend, aren't you? You're out of the clink, and I've another little victory over Steele."

Steele was the D.A. Steele had tried to nail me for murder, and had succeeded only in pinning a manslaughter charge. Jud had gone to the governor, after that. Jud's my lawyer, and my friend. But he hasn't much tact.

I said, "I'm never going to forget the way you worked, Jud. There isn't anything you can't have for the asking, from me, any time."

"Sure," he said. "I know that."

We were coming into the outskirts of town now, into the remembered hum of traffic and the familiar streets. It was fall, my favorite time of the year. I shouldn't have felt as depressed as I did, but I remembered the gray stone walls.

Jud cut over to one of the cross-town arteries.

I asked, "How do they feel about me, Jud? What do they think?"

He said nothing for seconds. Then, "What do you mean?"

"I mean my friends. Do they think I'm guilty? Do they think I—" I didn't finish.

"I don't know," he said. "I *know* you weren't guilty. But I don't know about the rest." He paused. "You've a reputation for violence, Tommy. They all know about your temper."

"Yeh," I said. "I see. I—left my temper back there. I'd almost forgotten I had one."

WE WERE in the heavy traffic, now. We were going past the twenty story building that formerly housed my office. I looked up at the windows, but my name wasn't there, not any more. Sports promotion had been my dish, mostly fights. I'd had two years as a professional pug, after college, before discovering it wasn't for me. I'd had three as fullback with the Bears before they discovered I wasn't for them. But promoting I'd taken to. It was really very simple—give them what they want. I'd seemed to have the faculty of knowing what they wanted.

Jud must have seen the glance. "You can get another office," he said. "Your trade isn't so tony. You'll get along."

"You don't know the boxing commission," I said. "They're hard men to live with. And I've quarreled with them before."

"You've quarreled with a lot of people," he said. "The commission wouldn't have any respect for you if you didn't. Don't worry, you'll get along."

"I'll get along," I said. Sure. Hell, yes.

There was a frown on his face now. "Tommy—easy does it, right? Don't go blasting away your temper."

"Check," I said, and thought of the walls. "Easy does it," I agreed. "Drop me here. I'll get a room at the Belmont."

"I thought," he said, "you were coming home with me. Your clothes are there. Brenda's been expecting you."

Brenda's his wife, and Grade-A. I hated to disappoint her. But I said, "Not tonight, Jud. I want to be alone. There are some things I have to think out—alone."

"You're on parole," he said. "You've got to be very careful. Steele's just waiting for a chance to—"

"I'll be very careful," I promised.

He pulled into the curb, and stopped the car. He looked at me fully, now. He said, "Tommy, what happened to Jane was an accident. *Nobody* was responsible for that. They happen every day, accidents like that. There isn't anything you can do to remedy that."

"I know that," I said. "I'm no fool, Jud. At least I'm not fool enough to do anything as crazy as trying to play cop. I know how I stand with the law." I looked away from him. "I didn't love her enough to seek revenge, Jud. I never really loved her as much as I should."

"Okay," he said. "Go get a room, now. Get a shower and some good food and some sleep. I'll call you tomorrow."

He drove off, and I stood there on the curb. What had happened to Jane had been an overdose of sleeping tablets, but it hadn't been an accident. She'd died by her own hand, of her own volition. She'd been my wife.

And her-lover, whom I hadn't known, had died, too. Killed by a car. *My car*, the police said, and the D.A. said, and with *intent*, they insisted. But not the jury. All men, the jury, and maybe they remembered when I'd been an All-American fullback, or maybe they'd thought of their own wives. Jud had done a job; he was fine, fine.

Jane had died because her lover had spurned her, and I had deliberately killed her lover, the D.A. said.

Jimmy Burke was behind the desk at the Belmont. I'd known Jimmy when he was an amateur welter. He put a big smile on his face for me. "Tommy Cochrane," he said, and shook my hand. He didn't quite get the smile into his voice.

"A room?" I asked.

"Natch," he said. "Shower or bath?"

"Shower," I said, as he handed me a guest card to sign.

I had one bag which Jud had packed with a few clothes and toilet necessities. The bellhop took that and led the way to the elevator. I should have felt free, by now, I told myself. It's all past. What do I care what they *think*?

It was a small cheerful-room, looking down on the Avenue. It wasn't anything like a cell. But I opened all the windows, just the same. I wanted the sound of traffic, outside, the street noises.

I was just finishing my shower when someone knocked on the door. I wrapped a towel around me and opened it a crack.

It was a thin man, with a thin smile. He wore a dark blue suit and his hat was cocked on the back of his head. The house dick, without a doubt.

"Well—?" I said.

"Just checking up," he said. "Mind if I come in?"

I opened the door wider, and went back into the bathroom, to get some clothes on. When I came out again, he was sitting on the bed, his hat in his hands.

"Nothing personal, you understand?" he said.

"I'll try to," I said. "And before you ask, I'm clean. You can phone my lawyer, if you want confirmation of that. You can phone the warden."

"Sure," he said. "Just thought I'd let you know who I was, and if you have any trouble, bring it right to me. Lots of people think they can settle their own troubles. Better to depend on the law."

I thought of pointing out to him that he wasn't the law. But I didn't. I said, "Right. I don't want any trouble with anybody."

He rose. "Good. Well, luck—"

I nodded. I felt like telling him to go to hell, but I just nodded.

He closed the door behind him.

Three years ago, I hadn't taken any lip from house detectives. Three years ago, all I got from them was deference. I wished, now, that I'd gone to Jud's as he and Brenda had planned.

How long would it last? How good were their memories?

I saw the picture again in my mind of Jack Sloan's body in the road, and I felt the shock through the steering wheel as the tires passed over him.

If it had been a gun—if I'd been accused of stabbing him. . . But a car, running over a man with a car . . . They'd never forget that.

And neither would I.

I ATE in the hotel dining room. I saw some people there I knew slightly, but I'm not sure they saw me. In any event, they didn't recognize me. "The walls are still there," I thought, "between me and the people." The People vs Thomas Cochrane. It was something I couldn't fight. It was something I couldn't endure.

"Be very careful," Jud had warned me, and I had promised I would. But I had to get through those walls.

I went out and sat in the lobby a while. I smoked and read the evening paper and tried to tell myself that I was lucky, that I was free and fairly young, that people wouldn't remember it forever. I tried to tell myself that it was a test of friendship, what had happened to me, and I was lucky to know who my friends were, now. All these things I told myself and believed none of them.

I called Dianne Lewis from a lobby phone booth.

When I told her who it was, there was a silence on the wire. Then, "You're— Everything's all right?"

I didn't answer that. I asked, "Would it be possible to see you this evening? I'd like to talk with you."

Silence, again, on the wire. The wall, again. Then, "How quickly can you get here?"

"Right away," I told her. "There's a cab stand in front of the hotel. I'm at the Belmont."

"All right," she said. "In ten minutes?"

"In five," I promised, and hung up.

There was a cab stand but there weren't any cabs there. I went down to the corner hoping to nail one there.

Four of them passed me with the flag down. Then I saw one sliding to the curb up in front of the hotel. I got there just in time to see a couple climb into it.

I got one, finally. How many minutes later, I don't know. I said, "See how fast you can get out to fifty-third."

He looked at me coolly. "They got laws in this town, mister."

He stayed well within the law. When I got out, I paid him just what the meter showed and not a penny more. "That's for being a good boy," I explained, "for staying within the law."

It was an apartment building, a two story, four apartment place of red brick, looking respectable and undistinguished. There were four names on the lower lobby mailboxes, and one of them was *Dianne Lewis*.

I pressed the button next to her name, and was at the door when it buzzed. Up a flight of steps to the second floor, and there was a door open.

Her door, but it was currently framing a man. A big man, and young. Blond, and blankly handsome. Not so young, I saw, on closer inspection. He was already getting a bit paunchy; he must have been in his early thirties.

"Beat it," he said.

My right hand balled, then relaxed. "I came to see Dianne Lewis," I said quietly.

"You can't see her. You've caused her enough trouble already. Run along, mug."

I didn't move away. I said, "I want to hear her say that."

He looked from my head to my heels and back again. "You hunting trouble again, Cochrane?"

I shook my head. "No. It's the last thing I want. But don't make any mistake about it, Blondie, I've got more trouble than you can handle."

He took a step forward, and I waited. I don't know what I would have done, if, at that moment, her voice hadn't broken it up. "Come in, Mr. Cochrane," she said softly.

She was standing behind him in the doorway. She had her auburn hair up in a new hair-do and that warming smile was on her faintly freckled face, and in the blue eyes. She didn't look like a show girl, at least not the kind I knew. But she was.

I went past the blond, who said nothing, through a hall and into a bright and comfortable living room. The blond came along, whispering to her.

She indicated a chair, and I sat down. She offered me a cigarette from a clear plastic box, and I took it.

The big lug went over to sit near the window while she took a chair almost directly opposite mine. She said, "I suppose you've been wondering how much more I knew."

I nodded. "I never got a chance, during the trial, or afterward, to thank you. I'd like to thank you now."

Her head inclined almost imperceptibly toward the man at the window. Then she said, "There's nothing more I can tell you, Mr. Cochrane. Not a thing."

Her eyes were trying to tell me something else. Her eyes were trying to tell me, I think, that there was nothing more she could tell me, *in front of him*.

I looked down at the cigarette in my hand and over at the blond. I said to her, "You're all right, aren't you? You're getting along all right? There's nothing I can do for you?"

The man at the window said, "She's getting along all right. We're engaged, if it's any of your business, Cochrane."

I saw the ring on her finger then. I said, "I hope you'll be very happy." I rose.

He sat where he was while she came to the door with me. She said, "Good-night", in a normal voice, and whispered, "Wait for my call, at the hotel. Belmont?"

I nodded, and said, "Good-night. And thank you for all you've done."

I went down the steps and out into the night. It was chill outside; it was football weather. I walked up toward the Drive, and a coupe pulled out from the curb about fifty feet behind me. I didn't think much of it at the time. It passed me, a light green business coupe, and drove on toward the Drive.

I was remembering how Jud had brought this Dianne Lewis into court as a surprise wit-

ness. She'd been a friend of Jack Sloane's. She'd established the fact that Jack was making a play for my wife; but more important, she'd testified that I hadn't known of it, that I had no reason to kill Jack Sloan.

That had established the frame in the minds of the jury. Jack was tied up with a lot of shady enterprises and it was easy for the jury to picture his death as an underworld killing. Jud had painted that picture for them very skillfully. Jud pointed out that Jack was probably dead even before I ran over him. The coroner had been doubtful about that; all the jury needed was a reasonable doubt.

I had plenty to thank Dianne Lewis for. And it bothered me to see her getting tied up with a drip like that blond. It bothered me more than it should.

I waited on the corner until a cab came along. As I climbed into it I saw the green coupe again, parked a hundred feet or so on the Drive.

"Belmont Hotel," I told the cabbie and turned to watch out the rear window.

After we'd gone a block I saw the lights of the green coupe cutting into the traffic.

I must be important to someone I thought. There's a tail on me.

The cabbie said, "Tomorrow the Giants play the Bears. That's going to be some game, huh? That MacAfee, and Luckman and Osmanski. Them Giants'll have their hands full."

"They play a lot of ball, those Bears," I admitted.

"You oughta know, huh?" he said, and his grin was reflected back at me in the rear view mirror.

I looked directly into his mirrored eyes. "I ought to know," I agreed. "What's the pitch, junior?"

CHAPTER TWO

Dressed to Kill

HIS grin was still there. "No pitch. I'm on your side, Mr. Cochrane. You got a lousy deal, I always said."

Out of the night, finally, a friend. Out of the millions, out of nowhere . . . "Call me Tommy," I told him. "All my friends do." I found his name, directly below his picture. "Mike, you going to be busy, tonight? Could I hire you?"

"Sure thing, Tommy," he said.

"There's a green coupe following us," I said. "Don't shake him now. Later, I'll want you to. Can you do that?"

"A pipe," he said. "Where we going now?"

"Back to the Belmont," I said, "to wait."

"Boy," he said, "just like in the movies."

"I wonder," I mused aloud, "who in the

hell is interested enough in me to follow me around?"

"This is a town," Mike said, "full of nosy people."

We went back to the hotel. As I got out of the cab I said, "Park around the corner, if you can, about a half block down. I hope you've got something to read. It might be a long wait."

"I got a detective mag," he said.

I pretended to pay him off, and went into the hotel.

The man in the dark blue suit with the pushed-back hat was sitting in a huge leather chair near the desk. He was picking his teeth, and missing nothing.

I told the clerk, "I'm expecting a call. I'll be in the lobby."

It was the night clerk, a thin, pale youth. "Yes, sir," he said. "I'll tell the operator."

I took a chair as far from blue-suit as possible, and lighted a cigarette.

I could feel his eyes on me, even from this distance. A fat, tall man in a cheap tweed suit came through the front door and headed for the elevators.

I don't know why I took special notice of him, but I did. And I saw blue-suit get up from his leather chair and follow him.

Time passed, as it will. Traffic moved by outside. From the small radio behind the desk came the dim sound of dance music. The elevator door opened again and the fat man in the tweed suit stepped out and headed for the door.

A few minutes later I looked up into the face of blue-suit, the thin face with the thin smile. He was chewing on a cigar.

"Waiting for someone?" he said.

I stared at him. "Is that a part of your duties, asking a question like that—of a guest?"

He colored faintly. He said "Sorry. I was trying to be friendly. I figured you could use a friend."

"I'll pick them, myself," I said. "Who's your fat pal?"

His eyes were hard. He rolled the cigar in his thin mouth and said nothing.

"I'll bet he drives a green coupe," I guessed. "He working with you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, and I knew he lied.

"Maybe you do and maybe you don't," I told him. "But speaking of friends, one of mine happens to be the man who owns this hotel. Would you like to have me talk to him about you?"

He was really coloring now. The hardness was gone from his eyes. "Look, Mr. Cochrane—you got me wrong. I never—"

"Who's your fat friend?" I repeated.

He hesitated. "He's—a dick."

"You're lying," I interrupted him. "No private operative would wear a suit and drive a car as conspicuous as his. Come clean. Get wise, and save your racket here."

"Honest. That's what he told me he was. He had a buzzer. I didn't tell him anything I shouldn't. He told me he's helping the D.A. I didn't figure he was lying." The cigar was in his hand now. "I wasn't trying to cause you any trouble, Mr. Cochrane."

"Okay," I said. "Forget it."

He went away looking uncomfortable. He'd have a hard job finding another berth as soft as this, I was willing to bet.

The clerk said, "Your call's on the wire now, Mr. Cochrane."

It was Dianne. She said quietly, "Schmidt's Drug Store, corner of 54th and Diversey." The line went dead.

I went out and down the street to Mike's cab. Mike was sitting in front, smoking. I gave him the address and he nodded.

The cab was just coughing into life when I saw the green coupe up ahead. We went by it in second, breezing. We were a block off when it cut out from the curb.

Mike slewed into an alley mouth, tires screaming. He came out the other end, and doubled back. The alley behind was dark as we came out.

"Nice work," I said.

He was grinning again. "I figured it out while I was waiting. You'd never think I only went through third grade, would you?"

We had no further conversation on the trip to 54th.

Schmidt's Drug Store was one of those big places, one of those all-night places that sells everything but drugs. Mike parked around the corner on the darker side street, and I went in.

Alarm clocks and hair dryers and dolls and footballs and radios. A long counter and some booths, and a row of magazines along one wall. I went down along the row of booths until I came to the one occupied by Dianne Lewis.

SHE was wearing a green three piece suit. She was wearing a white silk blouse, and very little make-up, except for lip rouge. The light freckles were visible under the faint coat of powder.

"You're like a breath of fresh air," I said. "You should be a sensation in your business."

"That's what they told me back in Elm Grove," she answered. "They were wrong, Mr. Cochrane."

When I sat down, she said, "I had some trouble getting rid of Freddie. He's very possessive." Her hands were on the table. The ring, I saw, was gone.

I said, "If I lost you a fiancé, I'm sorry I ever looked you up. I've caused you enough

trouble already, Dianne. I am very sorry."

Her smile was dim. "I think it must have been his money. I couldn't really love such an—oaf, could I?"

I shrugged. I wanted to say, "I hope not," but I didn't.

She said, "You wanted to know about Jack Sloan?"

I nodded.

The waitress came and we ordered coffee and toast.

When the waitress was out of ear-shot, Dianne said quietly, "I know he dealt in narcotics. I know he had a rather exclusive customer list of women, wealthy women. He was very successful with them."

"Do you know who he worked for?"

She shook her head. "I went out with him a few times before I learned about his—his business. He was talkative; he didn't hesitate to use his customer's names freely. But I always had the idea he was working for himself."

"And that's all?"

She nodded. She must have read the disappointment in my face, for she added, "Don't you think it would be better to forget about what happened? You're free, now—and—"

"I'm not free," I told her. "I'm free of that place, but not of public opinion. It's—I have to make them see—" I gave it up.

"You're trying to do something you're not equipped for," she argued. "That's a job for the police."

I changed the subject. "Isn't there *anything* you can tell me? Some remark he made, some place he visited, when you were with him, or—"

"Wait—" She was suddenly thoughtful. "There was one thing."

I waited.

"A tobacco store," she said hesitantly, "on the corner of Vine and Ellington. It's in a poor neighborhood and I remember remarking at the time that he could afford better tobacco than that. Oh, it's probably silly—"

She paused.

"Go on," I urged her.

"Well, it was just an intuition—I mean, the way he smiled, I guessed it wasn't tobacco he'd gone there for. I don't know why I should have thought of it, only after I'd learned his business—"

"It's a lead," I told her. "It's better than nothing." Then I asked her, "Do you remember a tall, fat man as one of Sloan's friends? A gent who's addicted to loud clothes and drives a pale green business coupe?"

She shook her head. "I didn't know Jack Sloan nearly as well as you're imagining, Tommy Cochrane."

I grinned at her. "Don't be putting thoughts in my head besides the ones already there.

And how about dinner tomorrow night?"

"One thing at a time," she said. "What thoughts are in your head?"

"Only that they were right back in Elm Grove. About seven be all right for dinner?"

She looked doubtful. "Freddie will be back. Freddie's always coming back. I hate to discourage him too much."

"I'll be a wealthy man, myself, some day," I said. "Don't overlook me."

"Rat," she said.

"Seven?"

She sighed. "Seven."

"And now," I said, "I'm going to take you home. I'm going to take you to the back door."

She looked at me curiously. "Back door—?"

I nodded. "Because somebody will be watching the front. The big man, in the green coupe."

She paled.

"Frightened?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Sorry you decided to help me?"

She hesitated, then shook her head. The gray walls got dimmer. I said, "Go in the back door. Don't turn on any lights. Go directly to bed. Everything's going to be all right. Believe that."

"I believe you," she said—and there were no walls at all.

We went out to where the cab was parked. I said to Mike, "This is Dianne Lewis. This is my other friend, Mike."

Mike said, "How d'ya do," to her, and grinned at me. "We're doing all right, boss."

I told him what I wanted.

"There's an alley back of that apartment," he said. He looked at Dianne. "The back door usually locked?"

She shook her head.

WE DROVE to the apartment and up the alley. Mike cut the lights and I walked up the back stairs with Dianne to her door.

"Good-night," she said, looking up at me.

"Good-night," I said. Our faces were very close; her lips were very close and I bent my head.

Her lips weren't there, on arrival. She had the door open and she was smiling at me. "It's a little early for that," she said. "Good-night, Tommy Cochrane."

The door closed.

When I got back to the cab, Mike asked, "Everything settled, boss?"

"No," I told him, "nothing's settled. How about tomorrow? You want a job, for the day?"

"Sure. Only—look—why don't I take a leave of absence for as long as you need me? I got a car that'd be better to use—"

"Okay," I said. "I've got a car, myself, in

storage—but I don't like to use it. It's the one—"

"Yeh," he said. "Sure. I'll pick you up at the hotel in the morning."

"Check."

He drove me back to the hotel. All the way, I kept thinking of Dianne. Why not? I told myself. She's a very pretty girl. But I knew it was more than just that. I've known lots of pretty girls, too many pretty girls. I began to dislike Freddie.

Blue-suit was still up when I came into the lobby. After I'd picked up my key at the desk, he followed me over to the elevator.

"No hard feelings, Mr. Cochrane?" he opened with.

I shook my head.

"Mapes was here checking," he added.

Mapes was a detective out of the D.A. office. I said, "I hope you gave me a good character to him."

"I sure did, Mr. Cochrane. I guess I know which side my bread's buttered on, huh?"

I smiled at him. I was glad he knew that much. I was also glad he didn't know my friendship with his employer was limited to my getting him some tickets, occasionally, to sell-out fights. I hoped he wouldn't find that out for a while.

I had a dream that night. I was on a hill, an auburn hill, and it was fenced all around; I was a prisoner on the top. Jud, with a pair of wire cutters, was trying to cut through the fence. His wife, Brenda, was helping him. I don't usually dream, but this was the first night in a long time I'd had a soft bed. It might have been that.

The phone rang in the morning and it was Mike.

"Come on up," I said, "and watch me shave."

He was wearing a dark suit, a bit tight across his shoulders. Mike's about as wide as he's high. He was wearing his grin, as usual. "The missus thinks I'm nuts," he said. "I just told her I was taking some time off; I didn't tell her why."

"Maybe we're both nuts," I answered.

"Yeh," he agreed. "Neither one of us looks much like a gumshoe."

He'd already eaten but he had a cup of coffee while I ate in the hotel dining room.

Then we drove over toward Vine and Ellington.

It was a warm day for fall and on warm days this neighborhood has an odor. The river for one thing, and factory smoke for another.

There were some rooming houses along Ellington and a cheap restaurant and a hand laundry. On the corner of Ellington and Vine was the tobacco store—the Vine Smoke Shop.

We were pulling toward the curb to park

when I saw the green coupe up ahead of us. Fatso was in it; he was pulling away from a vacant spot on the curb directly in front of the Smoke Shop.

Mike saw the same as I did and looked at me questioningly.

"Stick with him," I said, and he nodded.

Traffic was heavy on Ellington, loaded with trucks, but we had no trouble keeping the coupe in sight. When it cut over on Lincoln, we had to drop behind.

We kept three cars between us and the coupe all the way along. When it turned off on Sherman Boulevard, we dropped still farther behind. Mike's car is a coach of a popular make, and there must be thousands just like it. But we took no chances.

The coupe traveled way out on Sherman almost to the drive. Then, in front of a huge house set well back on a terraced lawn, it stopped.

The big man was at the front door of the house as we drove past. He had his back to us.

Mike slowed the coach after we were a half block past. "I'll park down a side street," he said.

I shook my head. "Let's go back to the Smoke Shop," I told him.

He swung around in a U turn and headed back.

"It can't be," I thought. "It doesn't make sense. I can't believe it. I won't believe it."

Mike said idly, "I wonder who lives in that house? We could look it up, boss."

"They're friends of mine," I said.

Back to Lincoln, to Ellington and to the neighborhood of smells. Mike parked the car about a block away, and walked with me to the Shop.

The place smelled of tobacco and dust. There were a few carton displays of cigarettes, a variety of half filled cigar boxes and a thin, sour-faced man in a starched tan shirt and bow tie.

I said, "I'm looking for a fellow named Jack Sloan. I used to be one of his customers before I left the city, but I haven't seen him since I came back."

He looked at me, and he looked at Mike, and he looked at his nails. Then he looked at me again. "If you wanted to see Jack Sloan," he said evenly, "you'd have to dig him up. He's dead."

"Oh," I said. "I hadn't heard—"

"Save it," he said. "You just finished a couple of years in the clink for killing him. Who you trying to kid, Cochrane?"

I said nothing. Mike said "Why don't we work this jerk over, boss? He looks like he'd bend easy."

Tan-shirt didn't look scared. He favored Mike with a glance, and then his dull eyes

came back to meet mine. "You don't want any trouble, Cochrane. You can't afford it, not while *this* D.A.'s in office."

I reached over and slapped his face. I saw the walls but I saw red, too.

He didn't move. There were the marks of my hand on his left cheek, and the dullness was gone from his eyes. They glared at me. "You make a lot of mistakes" he said. "That was one of them."

"Who's the big man?" I asked him. "The one who drives the green coupe?"

He used some words I won't repeat. Then he said, "Why don't you ask him? I'll have him call on you."

"Do that" I said. "He knows where I live."

He nodded. "He'll be in to see you."

"If he doesn't come," I said, "I'll be back to see him. I'll bring the cops along. We'll see whose side the D.A.'s on."

For the first time I thought I saw apprehension in his eyes. Then he said "Why don't you wait until you talk to the boss?" He paused. "That would be the smart way to play it."

CHAPTER THREE

A Reefer a Day . . .

WE LEFT. I said to Mike, "Let's go back to that house on Sherman Boulevard."

He nodded absently. He said, "We should have roughed that guy up, boss. We'd have found out something, I'll bet."

"He's just a stooge," I said. "The big man's the one to see."

"Yeh," he said, "but the skinny guy looked easier to handle."

The green coupe was gone when we got back to Sherman Boulevard. Mike killed the motor and said, "I'll wait in the car."

I went up the walk to the front door.

When the door opened, Brenda stood there. "Tommy—" she said, and bent forward to kiss me on the lips. "Why didn't you stay here last night?"

I'd known Brenda a long time; it was through Brenda I'd met Jud. She was dark and smooth and intense. I ignored her question. I asked, "Is Jud home?"

She shook her head. "He had to go out of town last night. Some business about a will." She was studying me now; she seemed to be suddenly on the defensive.

I held her gaze steadily. "Then the man didn't see him, the big man in the green coupe?"

A pause. Then, "No—no, he didn't see Jud." Another pause, and her chin lifted defiantly. "He came here to see me." She stood aside. "Come in, Tommy."

I went in. The house was dim and cool a

model home in Swedish modern. In bleached woods and soft colors, it was an effective background for her.

I took a seat and she offered me a cigarette which I refused. She lighted one herself and didn't look at me as she asked, "Was it because of—the man you came to see me this morning, Tommy?"

"I came to see Jud," I said, "because of the man."

"Why?" She was looking at me directly, now.

"Because the man's been following me for some reason. Because he's tied up with Jack Sloan, whom I'm accused of killing."

She was pale. She was staring at me. "He's been following you? Why?"

"That's what I came here to find out," I answered.

She was putting the newly-lighted cigarette out in a huge, green glass ash tray. She stomped it methodically, mechanically, her eyes thoughtful. Then she looked up to meet my gaze. "All right, Tommy, I'll let my hair down. You won't tell Jud?"

She waited for my answer with resignation on her oval face.

I said "I won't tell him anything that isn't concerned with me."

"That's what I mean," she said and shifted her gaze away. "This man, this Lundgren, came here to blackmail me." She paused as though waiting for some comment from me. I made none.

"I used to know Jack Sloan. I introduced him to Jane. I used what he had to sell. So did Jane, Tommy." Her voice was almost a whisper. "Marijuana, Tommy. We both quit it after a while. But I couldn't quit Jack Sloan." She paused, to take a deep breath. "I loved him." She put her head down into her hands.

"And Jane, too?" I asked quietly.

"I guess so. Yes—Jane, too—"

The walls, again. This was no story for the police. Brenda was my friend. Jud was my friend. This was a story that would blacken my wife's memory. All walls are not of stone.

Her voice again hoarse, almost inaudible. "Lundgren has threatened to tell Jud. It's all over, now, but he wants money."

"This Sloan," I said, "seemed to have the carriage trade. I imagine there are other women just like you that Lundgren's blackmailing."

"Only if they've quit," Brenda said. "He's satisfied with his regular profit—until they quit—if they quit."

"Look at me, Brenda," I said.

Her head came up slowly. Her eyes were wet.

"Tell Lundgren to go to hell. You can't pay off a blackmailer. There isn't enough

money in the world to pay off a blackmailer. Don't give him a dime until you hear from me."

There was some hope in her voice, now. "You think, perhaps— You're going to see him, Tommy?"

I nodded. "I'm going to see him on some business of my own." I rose, and she stood up with me. I said, "Why don't you tell Jud?"

She shook her head. "He'd—he'd kill me, Tommy." Then she turned pale and put the back of one hand to her mouth.

I went to the door alone. She was still standing there in the living room when I went out.

Mike said, "Anything?"

"Too much," I said. "Let's go back to the hotel."

He said nothing more.

If I'd loved Jane more . . . If I'd been more patient . . . But no, one man's love wasn't enough for Jane. She'd been a good wife—for three months. Still if I'd been more patient, if my temper hadn't been so violent . . . In any event, it was too late to do anything about it now.

Mike said "Think I'll call the missus from the hotel. She'll be wondering about me."

"Call her," I said. "Always call her when

you're away. A good wife's about the greatest blessing a man can know, Mike."

He looked at me curiously.

I thought of Brenda standing in her modern living room, the back of one hand to her mouth. I remembered the startled look in her eyes. I remember how hard Jud had worked to set me free.

But Jud wouldn't frame me. Besides, Jud had been away that night.

Jud wouldn't, but somebody had.

I'd lived in Grenview then. A nice home set back from the road with a winding gravel drive leading up to it. Jack Sloan's body had been on one of the curves of that drive. I hadn't even seen it, because of the shrubbery screening the curve. I hadn't seen it until my car had passed over it.

H E'D BEEN killed by a car. My car, the D.A. said, and intentionally. My car, perhaps, the jury admitted, but not intentionally.

Mike said, "Here we are," and I came out of my reverie.

Blue-suit wasn't in the lobby this morning. But the big man in the tweed suit was. This was a different tweed than that of the evening before. This tweed was even louder.

Mike said, "Want me to stick with you?"

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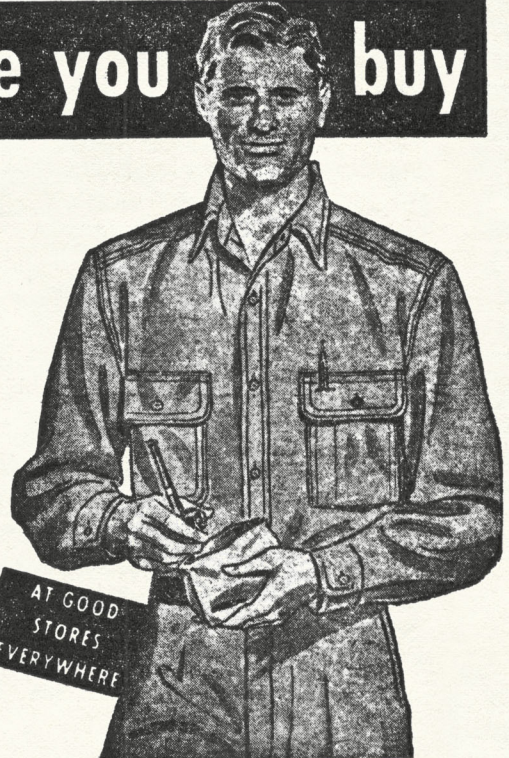
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"Go make your call. I can handle this," I told him.

He looked doubtful, but headed for the phones.

Lundgren rose as I came near. He said, "Mr. Cochrane?"

I nodded. "And you're Lundgren."

Surprise showed in the brown eyes. "You know me?"

"I know a lot about you," I told him evenly. "I think I know enough to put you where you belong for a long, long time."

The brown eyes were appraising me, broad face placid. "What are you talking about, Cochrane?"

"Narcotics—blackmail—murder."

"Words," he said.

"That's what a lawyer works with," I said. "That's what got me out of the jug. Just words, a lawyer's weapons. That's what might put you where I was."

"Let's go up to your room," he said. "This is too public."

"Suit yourself," I said. "I've no secrets. I let the police department make my deals." I paused. "Or my lawyer."

"Let's go up to your room," he repeated.

I looked him up and down. "How do I know I'm safe? How do I know you won't pull something?"

"Do I look that dumb?"

"You look dumb enough. You sure messed yourself up this morning." I turned toward the elevators. "Okay, let's go."

Mike wasn't back from his phoning yet and the two of us went up alone.

In my room, he appropriated the only comfortable chair and lighted a big cigar. He settled back as though he was in for a long session.

I said, "About the dumbest thing you could have done was trying to blackmail Mrs. Travers. Her husband's the best lawyer in this town."

He shrugged. "So what?"

"So she's going to tell him about your threat. She's going to tell him everything. And if he doesn't get you twenty years, I'm crazy."

Wariness was in the brown eyes now, but the voice was steady. "It's her word against mine, about the blackmail."

"Against her word *and mine*," I corrected him. "I was there and I heard it all."

He leaned forward. "You're lying."

"Maybe. And maybe I'd lie under oath for her. Did you think of that?"

The cigar had gone out. "What's your angle, Cochrane?"

"What's yours? Why were you following me?"

No answer from him.

"Because you killed Jack Sloan? Because

you were worried when I went to see Dianne Lewis? Maybe you thought I'd learned something."

"You're crazy," he said. "Sloan was my key to the mint. He had the contacts with *all* those society broads. Why in the hell would I kill him?"

"I don't know," I said. "You're the only guy I've got so far. You want to give me somebody else?"

"Sure," he said. "Jud Travers. He could have found out about Sloan, and not said anything to his wife. He's out of town enough; maybe he's got a girl friend, huh? Maybe he doesn't care about his wife."

"If he didn't," I pointed out, "he wouldn't kill Sloan. Come again, Lard. Jud was out of town *that night*, too."

His beefy face colored. "Watch your language, Cochrane. You know my name."

I could feel the redness clouding in my brain. I said, "There isn't anything you can do about my language. When I get tired of talking to you, I'm going to kick a hole in you."

He started to get up and I waited. He started to get up, and then changed his mind.

There was a knock at the door and I said, "Come in" and Mike came in. He was grinning. "Didn't you bump him yet, boss?"

"Not yet," I said. "I'm saving him for the law."

He looked from me to Mike and back again. He said, "Strictly minor league. I hope you guys don't think I'm scared."

The redness grew, and I thought of Brenda. I thought of Jane, and Dianne. I remember getting up, but I don't remember hitting him.

When my clarity came back, Lundgren was down, with blood all over his mouth. Blue-suit stood framed in the doorway.

Mike was still grinning.

Blue-suit said, "What in hell's goin on around here?"

The red became gray and the gray was a wall.

Lundgren was getting up, slowly.

I said to Blue-suit, "You ought to know. You and this grease ball probably cooked up that little blackmail pitch together. You should lose your license on this, shamus. I'll really work on that."

"I'm not in with him, Mr. Cochrane. What makes you think I'm in—"

"He's got the run of this place," I told him. "He's a dope peddler and a blackmailer and a murderer, but you'd think he was the star boarder around here."

LUNDGREN had a handkerchief out and was wiping blood from his mouth. The fight was out of him. He said, "I'll make a deal."

Blue-suit looked at me.

"Call the cops," I said.

Mike moved toward the phone.

"Wait," Lundgren said, and put a hand on my arm. "Look—I'll leave you alone. I'll leave all of them alone, the Travers and that Lewis girl. You'll never see me again."

"And you'll tell me who killed Jack Sloan?"

"I don't know. That's straight."

"Then why are you following me?"

"I was afraid you'd want to find out. I was afraid you'd dig into the rest of my business."

Blue-suit was still watching me. So were Mike and Lundgren. I'd come out of this very well. "Okay," I said. "Beat it."

He left, but Blue-suit still stood there. I said to him, "How much did he give you to get the dope on me? Or are you working with him?"

"Nothing," Blue-suit said, and he didn't sound so frightened any more. Maybe he figured he'd heard enough to keep him safe. He turned and walked out.

Mike looked at me and I looked at Mike.

Mike said, "Well—" and shrugged.

"You think Lundgren's our baby, Mike?"

"Sure, don't you? But he's got something on these friends of yours, hasn't he? There isn't anything you can do about that."

I remembered Lundgren's words—"Sloan was my key to the mint".

Mike asked, "Will you be wanting me any more, boss?"

"I sure will," I told him. "Just as soon as I put in a call to my girl." I had just decided that would be her status, if possible.

She was home, fortunately. I said, "Could I see you for a little while?"

"Now?"

"Now."

"Freddie's here," she said. "You won't mind Freddie, will you? He wants to make up. He wants to apologize to you."

"Send him home, please," I told her. "If you don't discourage him now, he'll be bothering us after we're married."

A silence and then, "What was that word you used?"

"Married," I repeated. "We *are* going to marry, aren't we?"

"Each other?"

"I hope."

Another silence. Then, "I'll give it some thought. Should I ask Freddie if he wants to sell you that ring?"

"Just send him home," I told her. "Tell him you have to go to work, or something. I don't like him."

"All right, dear," she mocked me. "I'll be waiting."

Mike was shaking his head when I hung up. "You sure make quick decisions, boss. This

marriage is nothing you want to jump into."

"You're happy, aren't you?" I asked him.

"Well, yes." He was chewing his lower lip. "But I was happy *before* I was married, too." He paused. "And wealthier."

We drove over to Dianne's without any further dissertation on marriage.

She was wearing a pastel green jumper, and a milk-white blouse. She was wearing a small smile.

"Darling," I said, and held out my arms. "It's been a bad day at the office. Console me."

My arms remained empty. She said, "Why did you want to see me, Tommy? There was something besides that. You haven't forgotten what happened, have you?"

"I haven't. I never will." I thought of the place and felt a chill. I asked her, "Why did you ask that?"

"Because I'm worried. Because I think you'll always have me worried. Can't you forget about it? Can't you stop digging into the past?"

Mike said, "Pardon me, but I think I'll go and check the oil." The door closed behind him.

I stared at the closed door and then at Dianne. "I don't understand," I said.

She shook her head. There was moisture, I could see, in the blue eyes. "In court," she said quietly, "and since you've—come back, you're so—so violent. You seem to be rushing into disaster. Can't you settle down?"

"I suppose I could," I said. "Sit down. I'd like to tell you something."

She stared at me for a moment and sat down.

I told her about Brenda, but not by name. I told her about my wife and Lundgren and Jack Sloan, the whole sordid, vicious story, just as it had been revealed to me. When I'd finished I said, "I was framed, you see, to distract the police from the real reason for the killing. Since I got out, I've been bothered again. And you don't want me to fight back?"

"The police—" she said.

"The D.A.," I pointed out, "was perfectly happy with me as a suspect. He still is. I'd like to give him someone else."

She took a deep breath and asked, "Now, what do you want from me?"

"Names," I told her. "You said that Jack Sloan banded some big names around. They were women's names?"

She nodded.

"Do you remember any of them?"

She looked down at the rug on the floor. "One I particularly remember—Mrs. Valencia Jones. I think she was Jack's best customer. She wanted to marry him. She wanted to marry anybody."

She was still looking at the floor. I rose

and said, "Thanks." I waited, but she didn't look up. I felt sick and defeated and lonely.

It wasn't until I got to the door that she asked, "Aren't you going to kiss me goodbye?"

A LARGE home, Spanish-style. Stucco, with a huge fence enclosing the grounds and a black iron gate in the middle of the front expanse. It was the overdone home of the grass widow, Mrs. Valencia Jones.

I knew her. I'd met her around town. Her black hair was parted in the middle and her large, almond-shaped eyes had too much mascara and pancake make up to help hide the advancing years. She still had the doubtful allure of being easy to get. She still had most of the money which had won her husband.

We parked some distance from the entrance, on my hunch. Jack had been his key to the mint. Who was his key now?

We waited. We smoked and gabbed about the Bears and the Packers and the Bomber. It was an ideal fall day, not too warm, not too cold, and the afternoon sun reflected pleasantly off the white stucco wall across the street.

Some time later, a tan convertible turned in at the gate.

It was too far to tell for sure, but I said, "I'll be damned."

"You know him?" Mike asked.

"I think so," I said. "I can't tell from here. But follow him when he comes out again."

We waited for what seemed like two hours and then the convertible reappeared and headed east.

We followed, staying well behind. We followed it all the way down to the Belmont Hotel where it stopped.

Mike said, "He's probably going in to see you."

"Okay," I said. "Get Blue-suit, the house dick. Phone Mapes, at the D.A.'s office."

Mike said doubtfully. "You that sure?"

I was getting out of the car. "Nothing's sure," I said. "But it's a hell of a hunch."

He was standing at the desk when I came into the lobby. The clerk said, "Ah, here you are, Mr. Cochrane. You have a visitor."

He was smiling. "I was lucky to catch you, wasn't I?"

"No," I said. "You were unlucky. Let's go up to my room."

Apprehension was in the eyes, as he studied me. He said, "Let's."

Mike was walking to the lobby phones as we got into the elevator.

In my room, he took the comfortable chair and lighted a cigarette.

I said, "You killed Jack Sloan, didn't you?"

No surprise in the eyes. "I thought you

did," he said casually. "It's all over now, at any rate."

"You took Sloan's place," I went on. "You killed him and took over his customers. You put his body in my driveway, knowing—knowing what you did through Sloan. You've the same contacts with these wealthy, degenerate women. You were frightened when I looked up Dianne Lewis. You're Lundgren's present key to the mint."

"Even if all these things were true," he said, "what difference would it make now? Hasn't enough damage been done? You want to bring all that filth out into the open for the public?"

"Just tell me," I said, "that you killed Jack Sloan." I could feel the blood in my brain; I could see the red mists, and I fought them.

"To hell with you, sucker," he said.

The red melted and poured through my head and I went for him. Once, I heard him grunt and then I could feel his throat under my fingers. I could feel and hear, but I was beyond thinking. I heard him start to curse, and then to babble . . .

Clarity, and Blue-suit again. Mike had me by the hair and was dragging me off. Blue-suit said, "I heard enough to hang him, if he isn't dead already. I guess even a hotel dick's word is good in court."

He wasn't dead. By the time Mapes arrived he was conscious and strong enough to go down right to headquarters.

* * *

It was early winter. The Bears had just sewed up the title, and I turned off the radio. I looked over at Dianne, Mrs. Thomas Cochrane to you.

She said, "Wish you were still with them?"

"Once in a while," I admitted. "Nothing like a cleated foot in the face now and then to let you know you're living."

She was silent. Then she said, "Did you read the paper today?"

I shook my head.

"Freddie got life," she told me. "That friend of yours saved him from the chair."

"Jud's a good lawyer," I said.

She shook her head. "But why would he want to save *him*?"

I nodded, and lied. "I've no idea."

She shook her auburn head. "It's beyond me." The small smile again. "Do you think Freddie's only interest in me was caused by fear? Do you think he was watching me because he thought I knew more than I did? Or do you think he really loved me?"

"He must have loved you," I said. "Who could help loving you?"

The small smile was a big smile and she came over to sit in my lap. "Tommy," she said. "Oh, Tommy—oh—"

THE END

ODDITIES IN CRIME

by JAKOBSSON and WAGGENER



Probably the liveliest demise of any hoodlum in history was the reward of one Lucky Mahony who flourished in England up to the latter part of the last century. Sentenced to be hanged for murder, Mahony and his friends plotted, and by dint of bribing the guards and causing a commotion at the then public hanging, the latter succeeded in propping up their chieftain while he dangled at the end of his rope, supposedly for the edification of all. The result was that Mahony passed out from suffocation, but did not die. His friends cut down the "corpse," revived him—and Mahony howled in glee.

Alarmed at the racket he was making, one of his pals clouted him with a stick—and Mahony died. His killer was hauled into court for murder, and the judge threw out the case!

There were big doings at the Missouri State Pen—a gang of cons were building a dead end for that last mile: a gas chamber. One of them, Robert West, told his fellows, who were admiring his handiwork, "I think I'll go out and kill somebody and then they'll get to use this thing on me." He did—and they did. His victim was Mrs. Vivian Davidson, for whom Robert West, 22, carried an unrequited torch.



Lucy de Matha used to reign as Paris' beauty queen—oh, something over a half-century ago. As a stage actress she made and threw away a couple of fortunes and was living in poverty years ago when the last of her suitors called.

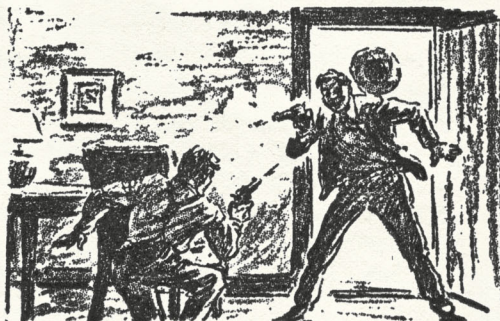
She had been thinking. She was tired of the squalor about her, tired of her fading beauty—her only wealth lay in her golden memories. She didn't, she told authorities, want to be bothered with current sweethearts.

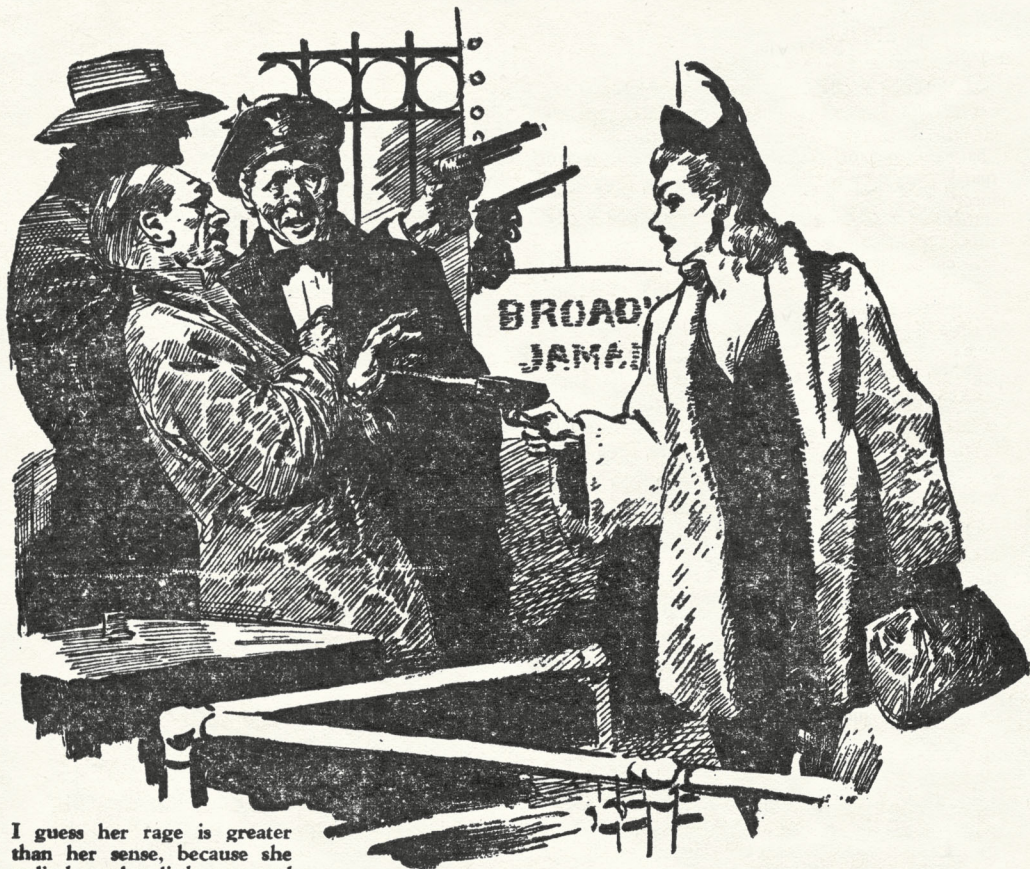
So, when the knock sounded on her door and a familiar voice asked for entrance, she drew a gun and fired through the door—thereby giving herself another memory!

The spirit of horseplay is still pretty rugged out Dallas way. Not long ago Pete Williams was pulled into headquarters there for killing Charlie Miller, an acquaintance.

"Shucks," Pete said, "we were just foolin' around. I went to Charlie's place and told him to leave my girl alone an' he said he wouldn't. So we just got to shootin'."

Eight of Charlie's bullets, by police count, missed Pete!





I guess her rage is greater than her sense, because she unlimbers that little gun and takes a crack at me.

HELL-ON-WHEELS!

By PARKER BONNER

MAMIE, like I'm telling you, it is not like you've been saying for the last half hour at all, and I am just waiting until you run out of breath so I can explain to you what happens when I meet this cousin of mine from this hick town of Chicago.

I have not been out with a blonde, at least not because it is my wish. Everything which

happens is strictly inadvertent and not by my plan at all. I am a victim with circumstances, and you can say that again.

And also, it is not true that when I pick this Noisy off the train, we start out to paint the town and forget the swell corned beef with cabbage dinner which you are preparing.

So, will you please get it out of your cock-

"Honest, Mamie, I do not have a single doubt that the bracelet and the character who removed Brandy Jim are both riding in the rear of my back. Frankly, I wish they were in almost any other heap, because my cousin Noisy and his big flapping yap has dealt us both in for a coffin payoff!"

eyed head that I am taking him places to which you can't go, or seeing things which is not fit for a woman to look at.

I do not run around with a blonde, I do not swipe an emerald bracelet, and I have not killed no one, although I admit I have been tempted but plenty in the last few hours. Them stories in the evening papers are filaments of the newshawks' imaginations.

It all starts when I pull into the cab stand on the side at Grand Central which is where I tell Noisy I will meet him. I'm some late and he is standing against the wall, looking a little dazed and uncertain, but when he sees me he gives a big yell and I get out and we shake hands and pound each other on the back, making like relatives are supposed to make when they see each other for the first time in some years.

Well, the starter is a big guy and he is not impressed by our reunion so he says that I gotta move the can out because I am blocking traffic and holding up business, so I pitch Noisy's bag in back and tell him to get in the little jump seat which I have fixed before the meter, and I am planning to give him a fast ride around Times Square and up Broadway because I understand he drives a hack in Chicago and I wish him to see how we conduct things in the big town.

But just as I am settling into the seat and ready to pull forth, Noisy lets out a yelp, and I think he is sick or something, but it is merely because he has spotted a man in a tan overcoat who just appears.

This man is carrying a bag and I know right away he is from out of town although I cannot tell you why.

But Noisy has the door open and is on the sidewalk, waving both his arms and finally this joe in the overcoat sees him. He does a perfect double take, and for an instant I think he is going to turn and run in the opposite direction, and I do not blame him because Noisy is making such a fuss that I am embarrassed to even be with him.

"Mr. Nolan," he shouts. "Hey, Mr. Nolan. You want a cab? Over this way."

This Nolan looks to me like a customer who knows the answers no matter which town he happens to be in.

Noisy gets into the little front seat and twists around so he can face the customer and

he keeps right on flapping his mouth without even a pause for breath.

"Mr. Nolan is one of my best customers," he says, "and every day back home I haul him from Randolph Street clear out to Arlington, and now and then he gives me a horse which wins and I clean up. It is one of his horses which pays for this trip."

I GIVE Nolan a polite grin in the mirror, but he pays no attention. He is studying Noisy, and if anyone looks at me that way I am going right now and have some conversation with my insurance man because there is no friendliness in his face. It is a kind of yellow, and there is hair sticking out from his ears, and his mouth looks like one of these cold catfish I see on the ice in Fulton Market. It turns down at the corners and he is certainly not in a sociable mood.

"Where to?" I say, wishing to be rid of him as fast as possible.

He transfers his stare to me, and mumbles an address on Thirty-fourth. I put the cab in gear and get away from there, just as the starter is about to lose his mind.

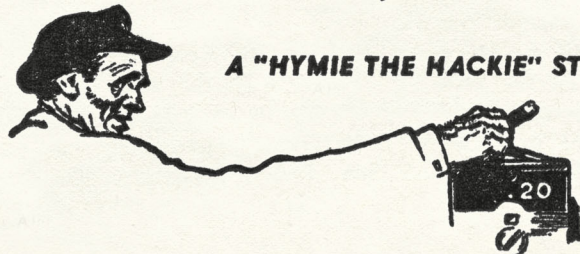
But Noisy does not notice Nolan's lack of joy. He keeps right on talking. "Funny to see you here," he says. "The last time I see you I am putting you on a train for Saint Louis."

I watch Nolan in the mirror with one eye while I am watching traffic with the other. "Forget it," he says.

"Yeah," says Noisy, not paying any attention. "I put you on the I.C. for Saint Louis which is only two days back, and now, already here you are in New York. You might say it is a small world, or you get around."

"Your memory is too good," growls Nolan, and the words sound like a warning to me. But this yap cousin of mine goes right ahead with his patter.

"Funny," he says. "You ain't the only Chi boy who goes to St. Louis. I read in the paper this morning that Brandy Jim is down there, and that furthermore, he gets himself knocked off and is very dead when they find him. And all there is on his person is an Arlington mutuel ticket which is not worth having, but which has a name and an address wrote on it. The address I do not remember, but the name is Dolly which is a coincidence."



A "HYMIE THE HACKIE" STORY

"What's that?" says Nolan, and he sounds as if he might be choking.

But still Noisy keeps his mouth flapping. "Why," he says, "positively the last time I drive Brandy Jim is on the afternoon of the day which I put you on the Saint Louis train. I pick him up in the Loop and he has a broad with him, and I am some surprised to see that it is the broad Dolly which you take to the races now and then."

"You drove them?" The words are so low I can't hardly hear, but it is like pouring ice water down my back and I want to reach across and kick Noisy hard, but I can't because both feet are busy with the clutch and the brake and such.

"Sure," says Noisy, "and I am some surprised because they are happy and gay. I ride them clear up to Winnetka."

"That tears it," Nolan is sitting in a corner of the back seat with both of his hands out of sight in the pockets of his benny, and although I cannot be certain, I have heard that boys from Chicago are accustomed to carry large pieces of hardware in their coat pockets.

Besides which, I have read in the morning paper how this Brandy Jim gets himself knocked off in East Saint Louis and the paper refers to him as a big time gambler and burglar who the police are searching for here and there.

It seems he was connected with a slight job in a spot called Lake Forest in which an emerald bracelet and some other trinkets are missing and the cops are some disappointed when they find Brandy Jim's body but no sign of the bracelet.

At the instant I do not have the slightest doubt but that the bracelet and the character who removed Brandy Jim are riding in the rear seat of my hack, and to be very frank and open with you Mamie, I wish they are in almost any other hack in the world because Noisy with his big mouth is spilling out his life, which is not my business, but it comes to me that this Nolan is going to figure that I have heard too much and that he has already dealt me in for half of Noisy's payoff.

I do not know what to do, but then I recall what one of them correspondence books which you make me study in order to improve my mind says. It says that no matter what situation you find yourself in, you should grasp at the slightest opportunity without sitting around waiting for the big chance to happen.

Well, I know that I have not got much time to sit around waiting because we are getting close to Thirty-fourth, and I have an idea that once we reach the address which this Nolan has given us, there aren't going to be many more opportunities.

So on the next corner I see Cassidy, who is a cop with a mean disposition and who does not like me in the slightest, and would dearly love nothing better than giving me a flock of tickets. There is a light truck ahead of me and when we pull into the intersection I bang into him, not hard, because I do not wish to damage the hack, but enough so that it makes plenty of noise, and the driver sticks out his head and starts to review all my ancestors.

The noise jolts Cassidy awake and he starts forward on the double, and I think my troubles are over, but this Nolan character is a quick thinker, and the next thing I know he has a gun out of his pocket and is poking it around the glass side against the back of my neck.

"Get going."

He does not mean tomorrow. And he is not fooling, so I throw the cab in reverse and shoot back till I bump the car behind, and then I pull out and make the turn and we are away.

Well, Nolan settles back in his seat and he says almost pleasantly, "Get us caught and you will be so filled with holes that you would make a good sponge," and I believe him and resolve not to get us caught.

Behind us Cassidy is whistling like mad, and I know he has recognized me and also gotten the hack number and that we will be on the radio with a pickup order. If we can only keep driving around, sooner or later we will be stopped. But Nolan knows the town as well as I do and when I try and make a wrong turn he calls me, so I see that the curtain is up and this is probably the last act for yours truly, Hymie Beerman.

Funny, the things you think of when you know that death is waiting just around the block. I get to wondering whether the kids will ever get to Harvard College like you wish, and whether my best suit will fit your no-good brother after I am gone, and it is not pleasant, entertaining such thoughts I can bear witness.

Noisy finally catches on that everything is not borsht with sour scream, and he is squirming around until I fear he will tear the meter from the hack.

But his squirming does not do more good than my planning because there is this Nolan character in the rear seat with his gun and believe me, he is the complete master of the situation.

I pull up in front of this number which he gives me on Thirty-fourth and I see it is a very old fashioned apartment which is only two steps removed from a very cold water walk-up.

I don't know what to expect then, but this Nolan is entirely the master of the situation and he orders us both out of the hack and in through the door.

I AM hoping there will be a janitor or a door man or at least an elevator jockey around, but there is no one. The place seems absolutely deserted.

Nolan seems to know his way about which surprises me because I have it figured out that this Dolly dame has been probably giving him the double business, playing about with this Brandy Jim, and if she has taken it on the lam, why would she choose a hole-up that Nolan knows the combination to?

But anyhow I have little time for concentrated thought because he shoves us into the serve-self elevator and we ride up to the fourth floor.

Of course, I have never seen this Dolly dame before, but the instant she opens the apartment door, I know it is her. She is a type which is not uncommon in Third Avenue bars and such places. She has large blue eyes, and a lot of blonde hair and gams which should get her in the front row of any chorus.

"Rocks," she says when she sees Nolan, "Rocks, honey. I thought you'd never get here."

Well, this was not working out like I had it pictured at all. I thought the dame was running out on Nolan, and instead it seems she has just been waiting for him to show up. If I am wrong about part, I can be wrong about the whole, so I figure maybe Nolan does not do for this Brandy Jim and is not running away from the heat, but just coming east to take a look see at his sweetie.

And then I recall the gun which he is still holding an inch and a quarter from my back, and that gun is not a prop or nothing but the McCoy. And there is no need that he should be flashing it here or there unless he is hot from something.

And his words are not any which will reassure me because he says, "Inside, you," and we march in.

The blonde is some surprised that he arrives with an escort, and she wants to know how come.

"It's this way," he says. "This jerk," and he indicates Noisy, "knows me from Chi, and he also knows you and Brandy Jim. Of all the muggs who could come in on the train, he had to be the one, and this other hackie has got an ear full so that it isn't safe to leave him loose."

The blonde is inspecting us now and she makes Noisy and lets out a small squeal. "Why, he drove me and Brandy out to Winnetka, the day that Brandy gets the stuff."

"That's what I'm telling you," says Nolan, "so, we have to get rid of them."

"Not here," says the blonde. "The manager knows me, and he will be very put out and suspicious and such if he finds dead bodies lying around."

"That's too bad," Nolan tells her, "because this yap bumped a truck on purpose and a cop got the cab number. We can't go buzzing about town with these two, and we can't hang around long with the cab parked out front, so just grab the stuff and we'll blow."

"The stuff?" she says, her eyes big and wide. "What stuff, honey?"

He stares at her with the kind of look I have seen them snakes at the zoo use when they see a piece of meat, but his voice is still soft and velvet when he purrs, "The emeralds and such that Brandy Jim lifts and gives to you to keep."

Well, the blonde just catches her breath. "There is some mistake," she tells him, "because Brandy does not give me any of the stuff. I suppose it is on him when you gun him down and that you would have it in your pocket."

They stand there, looking at each other and the air of the place is far from happy and rosy.

"Do not play games," says Nolan. "This is serious and I will not be amused if I find you are kidding me."

"But I'm not kidding," she says. "I have not got the stuff because Brandy Jim does not trust me a little bit."



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Nolan gets very cold and his voice sends shivers up and down my spine. "You are lying," he says. "I know because Brandy Jim lives long enough to cuss you for a double crossing wench. Now, I will give you two minutes to produce the junk, and we will forget this scene because I have a forgiving disposition, but it is not one which should be strained too far, so do not try any more of these little games if you do not plan to wind up in the morgue."

Well, the blonde sees that the game is finished and she nods and turns on a smile which I know she could not mean. "All right, honey," she says. "I was just trying you out to see if you are as smart as I think, because I am a girl which could not go for a dumb guy. I have the stuff safe in the bedroom, and I will get it now." She turns and goes to the door.

Nolan doesn't like the idea of her going in there alone, but he is in something of a spot, because he has me and Noisy on his mind. He compromises by moving to the door where he can watch the girl and also keep his eye on us.

From where I stand, I can see that she has stopped in front of a small chest of drawers. She pulls out one, searches around under some woman's stuff and then turns. "Here you are," she says and flips a gleaming bracelet to Nolan.

It is some bracelet I guess, all gold in little webs with a lot of green stones peppered over it.

Nolan catches the bracelet in his free hand and he lets out a whistle which tells how impressed he is. "Baby, this is something." He is so busy for a minute looking at the bracelet that he takes his eyes off the girl.

She doesn't waste time. She has also gotten something else out of the drawer while she is getting the bracelet. This something is a gun, and she has the drop on him before Nolan knows what the score is.

"Easy, Rocks."

He's caught, and he knows it. He lets his gun slide and she speaks to Noisy who she knows from Chicago. "Tie him up."

Now, Noisy is very good at talking, but his mind does not seem to work very fast and he just stands there with his mouth hanging open.

Not me, I grab opportunity even before it knocks. I step behind Nolan and pull his arms around in back of him. I haven't got a thing else to use so I use my tie.

The girl watches with approval. "You're all right," she says. "Is it your cab which is out front?"

I tell her it is and she jerks her head toward the door. "Can you keep your mouth shut for five bills?"

I nodded. I am not certain I will get the

five bills after the way she has crossed up on Nolan, but I am so glad to be walking out from that apartment that I don't care. Besides she has this small gun and there is a look in her eye which tells me that she will not hesitate to use same.

"Okay," she stoops and picks up the bracelet where it has fallen from Nolan's hand. "Let's go, hot shot."

NOISY starts to follow us, but she waves the gun at him. "You stay here. You don't think fast enough to travel with us."

Personally, at the moment I am sorry that I have thought so quick because I would rather be in Noisy's shoes than mine. But it is too late now, because this blonde is in a hurry and I seem to be in the same spot I was except that instead of Nolan pushing me around and about with his gun, it is the blonde.

We do not wait for the elevator which is slow but she chases me down the stairs and out across the lobby. The cab is at the curb and she pulls the rear door open while I slide under the wheel.

I kick the starter, but in my hurry I flood the old hack and she does not buzz right now. By the time I get the engine running I am horrified to hear a shout and Nolan comes dashing out of the door.

I cannot figure how he has gotten loose, but I find out later that this lamebrain cousin of mine allows Nolan to talk him into loosening the binding on his wrists because his arms are going numb or something.

Anyhow, Nolan then conks him and takes out after us. He would have caught us too, but the blonde who is quick witted and who does not seem to mind mixing a little mayhem with her thievery leans out of the cab and puts three bullets from her small gun right into Nolan's chest.

He stops with a very surprised and unhappy look on his pan and then he falls forward on his face, which is the last I see because I am very busy getting away from there fast.

Well, there are people here and there on the street, and while New York citizens are accustomed to almost anything, and will hardly turn around at most doings, still there is some excitement, and several witnesses get my license number and also have a good look at me.

The blonde is conscious of this, and also no dummy, and she leans forward and tells me to step on it and not get us caught because I am now in this up to my neck and they keep a small chamber in Sing Sing especially for people like me.

Now, as you know I am not one who is easily nonplussed, but this is a situation which demands careful thought and consideration and I have time for neither at the moment. I

know that every copper in Manhattan will be on the outlook for my hack and that a number of them know me by sight. I am afraid that the orders will go out for them to shoot first and to ask questions later, and while I do not think that most of them are much in the way of shots and that maybe I can do better at any shooting gallery in town, I do not wish to take the chance of having them practice on me.

Besides, the blonde is in the rear seat and she is urging me to get out of town as fast as the hack will travel. She says something about Jersey but I nix that and tell her that all the tunnels and bridges and such will be watched and that although this is probably the best hack in New York it is still not a ferry boat or even one of them ducks which the army uses during the war.

The best thing, I says, is to lose the hack as soon as we can because the cops will be watching for it. She should go one way and I will go another and we can meet later in some private place like Penn station and she can give me my share of the take.

Of course you understand that I do not wish any of the take, that my sole and only impulse is to find the nearest cop and have him place me under arrest so that his brothers in arms will not be cracking at me on sight. I do not know whether I will wind up with fifteen years or life, but at least I will not be dead on a sidewalk like Nolan is.

Well, this blonde is too cute, and she says that the last thing in the world she wishes is to lose me because she has grown quite fond of my company, and that we will stay together until we are free of the city.

I start to sweat then, because I know that I am the main witness against her and that she will not take kindly to me running around loose here and there, but I do not know what to do, so then I have a brain storm and I tell her we will have to ditch the hack and take to the subway because it is faster.

I pull up Forty-second and we leave the cab in a no parking zone and duck into the subway entrance which will take us to the "shuttle."

I pull a dollar from my pocket and dash up to the change booth, and I have a stub of a pencil in my hand which I always carry shoved up under the edge of my cap and I write on the bill, "Phone Times Square. Murderer on Train," and shove the bill at the change guy.

My body is between the blonde and the bill and I wait for my change. I know the guy in the window will look at the bill close because those guys are always suspicious.

Well, he reads what I have written and he opens his yap and I am afraid he will give the show away. I just frown at him. I don't dare shake my head because the blonde will see me and maybe cut loose with her little gun.

But he finally catches on and don't say anything but just gives me a fist full of nickels and we go through the turnstile and walk down the steps. I am hoping we will miss the first train so he will have more time to phone to Times Square, so I kind of hang back, but it does no good because a big guy sees the blonde coming and he holds a door open for us, being a gentleman.

Well, we press onto the platform and the door slides shut, and the blonde digs the gun into my back, just to remind me that she is there and will stand no foolishness. And that train races into Times Square. Honest, I never realize how fast that Shuttle can move when you don't want it to.

We get there, and we're on the far track, and the door slides open and I don't see a cop anywhere. I'm telling you, my heart is so low, I am walking on it with every step. We move out on the platform and along the train. Ahead of us is a stairway, but to reach the Seventh Avenue side you gotta go round the end of the train and through into the other station.

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And the blonde is heading for Penn Station. We round the train where it is a narrow passage about the end of the tracks and a guy steps up on each side of me and puts the arm lock on.

I don't need more than a glance to see they are plain clothes men and I'm just about to shout that it is the blonde they want and they should move quick or she will get away.

But my mouth comes open and I guess I am so excited that no sound comes out. The blonde if she would have used her head could have dashed out of the stairs behind her and got lost in the street mob in the square about before I can get my tongue unglued.

But I guess she figures I have crossed her somehow and her rage is greater than her sense because she unlimbers the little gun and takes a crack at me. She misses and hits the cop on my right in the shoulder. His pardner don't miss. He comes down on the blonde and at that distance even a flatfoot can't miss.

Well, you know how crowds are, and we are right in the middle of one. I figure I could probably wrench free and scam before anyone knows I am gone, but on second thought I recall that if I am free, every cop in New York will maybe use me as a target. So I just stand there and yell that I want to see Captain Scott.

CAPTAIN SCOTT is not glad to see me. In fact considering that he is an old friend and that I have done him favors here and there, his attitude is one which is at times very hard to understand.

"Hymie," he says. "You are a menace. You are hell on wheels and I think seriously that I would be doing the citizens of New York a favor to see that your license was revoked."

"Now Captain," I say. "You know that you could not do a thing like that because without my license it would not be legal for me to drive my cab."

"That," he says, "is the general idea. For three solid hours you have had the full police force of Manhattan in an uproar, to say nothing of the flashes that we sent to Brooklyn and Queens and other way stations. The papers have picked it up and you are featured on all their pages as the driver of the Death Taxi and a number of the readers will always believe that you were a partner of this blonde killer and that you were helping her willingly in the hope that you would share in her loot."

"But Captain."

"And further, there are witnesses to the Nolan shooting who will swear that it was you who fired the shot and not the blonde."

"Listen," I say, "I have read in a correspondence course which my wife makes me take that eye witnesses are unanimously unreliable and that they never get things straight. I will swear that I was an innocent victim with circumstances and entirely unwilling to accompany anyone anywhere. Besides, wasn't it me that wrote the warning on that dollar bill and gave it to the subway change artist at Grand Central, and didn't he identify me as the one who gave him the bill with the warning?"

Captain Scott sighs. "He identified your cap," he says. "All he knew was that the man who gave him the bill was wearing a taxi driver's cap. That's what he phoned to Times Square and that is the reason those two detectives seized you. But there may have been someone else on that train wearing a cab driver's cap. You're not the only hackie in New York."

"You surprise me," I tell him, "for it is well known that cab drivers ride cabs and not subways which we naturally consider our enemies, and besides, you can have your experts check the handwriting on that bill and they will find that it is mine, although it is somewhat shaky I will guess because I am very excited at the time."

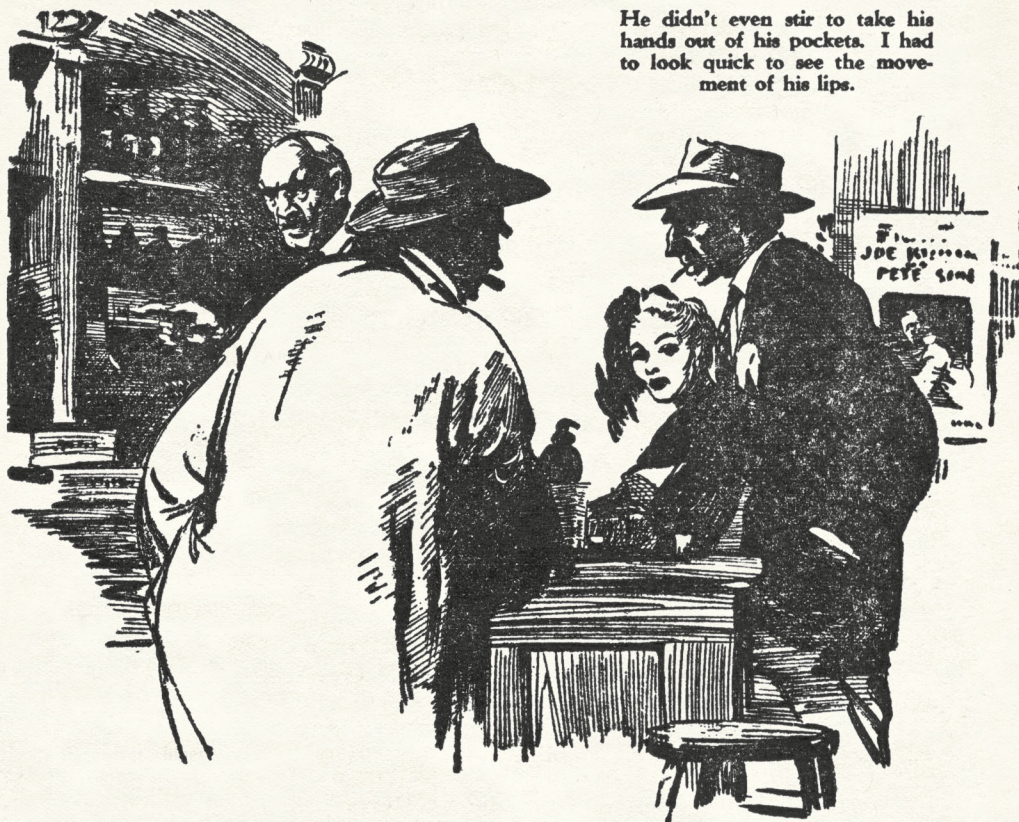
He sighs again, and I know from his expression that I have him licked and he will not revoke my license. He says, "All right, you managed to scramble out of the hot water again this time, and the reporters will probably make you out a hero, but you had better thank your lucky stars that your talkative cousin was picked up out at the apartment where this Nolan was shot, and that he told us everything that happened."

"I will thank him for nothing," I say, "because today I have learned something which already I have known. Relatives are poison any way you take them, and if this lame brain had not flapped with his mouth so often and so loud I would not be in any trouble at all."

"So you can tell Noisy from me that I will consider it a personal favor if he will go back to Chicago and never cross the Harlem river again."

So that is the reason, Mamie why Noisy will not be here to eat your corn beef and cabbage dinner, and if you think we cannot do justice to it, you can even go get your mother and let her join in, because I have found that if I have to have relatives around, I almost prefer yours to mine, although we both know that they are not bargains. But at least, they do not know gamblers and such from Chicago, and I have come to the studied conclusion that while New York may be bad, Chicago is a wicked city.

I'LL SEE YOU DEAD!



He didn't even stir to take his hands out of his pockets. I had to look quick to see the movement of his lips.

"You can't pin anything on that guy Brill, because he's always ahead by at least one corpse . . . most likely your own!"

I'M A mild guy. I have an even temper, a wife who never learned to spell n-a-g, a little girl about that big, and a dahlia garden I fuss over as if it grew beefsteak and butter. I'm a good steady plodder, and well thought of in the Department because I'm straight and keep my head. A little over a week ago they made me detective second grade, and me only thirty-seven. That's not bad.

But there always comes a time when you throw everything overboard and go completely haywire and. . . I want to get it off my chest. I worry about it sometimes. It bothers me.

It was a month, two days and three hours

ago. I remember the time to the minute. I have reason to. Five thirty-two in the afternoon. I was down in Charley's Bar and Grill on Market Street having my usual two beers before going home to dinner, after which I always read the funnies to the kid before shooing her off to bed. Charley and me were standing there exchanging the weather, when Charley leaned on the bar and said casually:

"That character down the end of the bar next to the phone booth, the tall, skinny crumb. Came in an hour ago, ordered a rye high and never touched it. He's been lampin' you steady since you came in. Know'm?"

I took a quick glance at him. He had a

● ● By LARRY HOLDEN ● ●

long gaunt face, all bone and angles like a piece of scaffolding, and he sat hunched over the bar, his big hands in his pockets, his hollow eyes fixed on us. He looked like something you'd find hanging next to the front door after a death in the family. There was something familiar about him, but maybe all skeletons look alike.

"Could be," I said to Charley. "But there's nothing like finding out for sure."

Charley strolled up the bar and I knew he'd throw out a front of conversation to hold the other customers while I did my chore. I picked up my beer, went down the bar and slid onto the stool beside the guy. Close to, he looked worse, sick—two coughs this side a lunger's grave.

"Something on your mind?" I suggested.

He didn't even stir to take his hands out of his pockets, and I had to look quick to see the movement of his lips.

"Al Crane?"

"That's me," I said.

His eyes folded for a minute, and he seemed to be praying over something, or maybe just making up his mind. Finally he said, "Let's go in the back."

"This is all the back there is, friend."

"The washroom, then. Let me go first."

He dismounted awkwardly from the stool and walked to the washroom with stiff, gangling strides, but that's about the only way you can walk if you keep your hands in your pockets. Maybe he was cold. I waited until I finished my beer, then followed him. He was leaning against the radiator under the window. I gave the empty booth a brief glance, closed the door and put my back to it. "Well?"

"I couldn't go down to headquarters or out to your house. I have to stay alive." He gave a brief shattering laugh, cut it off short and went on in his dead voice, "Then I found out you came here every day."

"Why me?"

"They say you're okay. Are you?"

"Sure. I've seen you around, haven't I?"

"Me? I guess so. I used to play piano over at the White Mule. Go there much?"

I shrugged. "Now and then." What the hell was he getting at?

"Remember a little blonde thrush called Mona Morgan?"

"Morgan? Yeah. Seems like. Deep voice, torchy. Pretty good."

"Well," a pain seemed to strike him and he squeezed his eyes until it passed. "Well," he said tightly, "she ain't no more. She's dead."

I looked at him sharply. It hadn't been physical pain. More as if Mona Morgan had been a voice and then some to him.

"That's too bad," I said carefully, watching him. "Flu or something?"

"She's in the river. No," he caught the

tightening of my jaw, "you wouldn't know about it. She won't come up for awhile yet. She was only put in last night." His mouth turned small and pinched the way it does when you're minding your own agony.

But I'll tell you right now, I thought he was unbuttoned someplace, and I wouldn't have given a nickel for his screwball story.

"You don't say," I said. "Who did it?"

"Brill."

My eyes must have stood out on stilts, for he looked into my face and laughed that short, shattering laugh again. "You'd like to tag that hood, wouldn't you?"

I still didn't believe him—not on the Brill angle. Not a slick operator like Brill, not that crook. "You actually saw him do it, no doubt?" I said.

"Not himself, no. A couple mugs named Moxie and Statts threw her in, all tied up like a birthday present. I saw it and couldn't do a thing about it. But Brill had it done."

I grabbed his lapels, jammed him hard against the wall and said harshly, "You saw this and didn't report it?"

HE LOOKED down at my hands as if I were pinning a flower on him, but even his amusement was sour. "Sure. I saw it," he said mockingly, "but how much you want to bet ten guys saw them *not* do it? How far did you get with Statts on that stick-up last year?"

He was right about that. We hadn't got from here to there. He was Brill's man, and Brill could dream up alibis faster'n a rabbit could get pups.

"And how long do you think I'd live after I ratted?" he asked fiercely. "Not that long!" he made an ugly noise with his mouth. "I want to stay alive long enough to hand you Brill, and that's what I'm going to do. Tonight! You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

I let him go. Now it was getting familiar. "You're going to give me Brill!" I jeered. "The hell you are! You only *want* to. He's slipperier than six feet up a greased pole. You ain't got a prayer."

"Listen. Wait. Listen a minute. He killed that girl. She was his woman till she got nosey, then he killed her."

"She was your girl first, wasn't she? And he beat your time. Is that the story?"

He stammered, "She wasn't my girl. I was just a beat in the piano while she sang. She had nothing to do with me. Nothing."

"Then why so generous? Or are you just stooling on general principles?"

He slowly took his hands from his pockets and held them in front of me. I glanced down at them, then quickly away. It made me sick just looking at them. They were all twisted and curled and knotted like old dahlia bulbs

forgotten in the cellar. He couldn't even have wiped his nose with those hands!

"Six months ago I was noseey too," he said dully. "Moxie held one hand flat on the desk and Statts held the other, while a punk I'd never seen beat them with a gun butt. Brill was too smart to handle deals like that himself. I doubt if he ever knew just what did happen to me. But he knew I'd been taken care of—plenty!" He put them carefully back into his pockets, looked at me bitterly, then shuffled to the door. "They used to say," he mumbled, "They used to say I was a good as Tatum on boogie. That's what they *used* to say." The door opened, he shambled out, the door closed. I gave him ten minutes, and went home.

After dinner I read the funnies as usual to the kid, but my mind wasn't on it and she kept fighting and whining until the wife said reproachfully, "If you don't want to read to her, Al, why not say so, and I'll do it." But you know yourself you can't treat a kid like that, so I pulled myself together and finished off in style, then took her up to bed. I sang my usual four-five bars of Rock-A-Bye-Baby and turned off the light. But just before I did, I looked down at her blonde curls spread out on the pillow and for a minute I had the funniest feeling that she wasn't a baby anymore but was grown up and singing in a deadfall like the White Mule, then all of a sudden she was in the black water of the river, fighting the ropes that bound her hands and feet together. All this in a flash, all in the time it takes for a single, backward glance before reaching out for the light switch. It gave me the damndest feeling. I've never been able to understand it.

Now it was over an hour and a half since I left Charley's, and I kept telling myself the guy was nutty as a peanut bar, and to forget it. Anyway, what could a guy like that turn up where the best cops in the whole city had fluffed?

But I couldn't get interested in my paper, and all I was doing was sitting behind it, waiting like a high school belle for the phone to ring. Then, when it did, I was out of my chair and on it before the wife could put down her sewing.

"Crane," I said. "This is Crane speaking."

"Al?"

"Yeah."

"Well say, listen. This is Ray Dorman, and I got four tickets for that Girlie Frolic over in Schutzen Park. Sorry I didn't call you earlier but the guy just dropped them off. Couldn't go, or something. Suppose me'n Martha come right over to pick up you and the wife and . . ."

"Sorry, Ray. Another night."

"Hey, wait a minute. It's only one night, Al, and . . ."

"Sorry, Ray." I hung up as he was starting, "Now what the hell do you think of. . ."

I couldn't help it. I had to have the line clear for that one call no matter what—just on the outside chance that the guy did have something on the ball. Don't ask me why I didn't run him in when I had him pinned in the washroom. That's what I should have done. That's what any cop in his right mind would have done. But I had a pretty fair idea that if I put the arm on him then and there, he'd have clammed up so tight you'd have thought he was welded. And there was an-



"TOO MEAN TO DIE"



At last! Rex Sackler—famous for years as the peep with padlocked pockets—meets his match. That irresistible force of frugality runs smack into an immovable object in the person of his latest murder client, William Harrison Teviz. And from the moment of impact, Teviz makes the nickel-nursing nemesis of crime look like a prodigal playboy on a bender. Sackler's misery made him so careless that once he even paid his own subway fare! D. L. CHAMPION does it again in this swift-paced novelette.

It was a little out of character for William Carmody to hide behind a lady's skirts (not that they're much protection these days) but he was very anxious indeed to get *something* between him and the lady's boy-friend—a gentle type who wished the dapper dick the best of everything, including a lovely funeral! Read all about it in ROBERT C. DENNIS' *An Oscar for O'Leary*.

And you'll find many other thrill-filled stories and features in the big May Black Mask—on sale now!

BLACK MASK
25c

other angle, too. There was promotion in it. The guy who grabbed off Brill was up for more than a shiny red apple.

Sure. It's promotion. That's what I kept saying. It's promotion, Al. But deep inside, I knew it was something else, something personal between me and Brill.

The wife gave me a searching glance when I went back into the living room and sat on the edge of my chair again. She pursed her lips and didn't say anything, but when the phone rang for the second time, she was up before me. I heard her say, "Hello." Then, "Just a minute." She came to the door. "It's for you, Al." She said quietly.

I recognized that toneless flat voice the minute it hit my ear. "He just showed up. I been waiting. I'm down at the White Mule. How quick can you make it?"

"Half hour. Three quarters at the most."

"Okay. I'm down the end of the bar. I'll watch for you. Don't talk to me when you come in, but keep your eye on me. I'll go upstairs. Give me five minutes, then follow me. Got it?"

"Sure. But see here, fella, I want to know what I'm . . ."

"See you then, Crane." He hung up.

Screwy. Screwy as they come. I swore as I checked my gun before slipping it in the under-arm holster. That was the guy I was depending on to lead me to Brill—a consumptive hoople with a grouch. I was lucky if all they did was blow my head off.

I KISSED the wife goodbye, and for a minute she held me tighter than usual. But all she said in her calm voice was, "I'll have a cup of coffee and a piece of pie for you when you get home, Al." She didn't say right out that she was going to wait up for me; she never wanted to let me know she worried. But she must have seen that business with the gun and the way I'd been acting. I felt like a heel walking out, leaving her there to eat her fingers till I got back. I walked out the door quickly.

The White Mule was one of those funny places. I mean, humorous. There were kicking mules and minstrel darkies all over the walls, and stuck here and there were fireproof plastic palms, and the orchestra, called Mickey Finn and his Eight Swallows, was beating the tar out of Moanin' Low, and they had a dog that howled when you pulled its tail. The bar was called The Trough.

I mounted a stool, ordered a rickey and looked casually around. He was sitting down at the end where he said he'd be, curved hollow-chested over his glass, those useless hands hidden again in his clothes. His eyes looked closed, like he was praying again.

After a few minutes—when the barkeeps were busy down the other end—he got up and slouched over to the stairway that was partially hidden by one of those palms. At the top, he knocked at the first door. It opened slightly. I could see the crack of light. He put his shoulder to it and went in fast. The door closed.

My breath was coming faster. I put my left arm on the bar and kept my eyes tight on the minute hand of my wrist watch. I gave him five minutes to the second, then got up and followed him. I stopped outside the door, took the gun from the holster and put it in the side pocket of my coat. I leaned my ear to the door.

I heard him saying, ". . . time is now. That's all Brill. That's all I came to say. I wanted you to know why. She was a clean kid before. . ."

Brill's harsh voice broke in, "And for the last time I'm telling you—get out! Get out while you're still together. Beat it!" But his voice didn't carry the usual authority. There was a tremble in it.

"Scared, Brill? I'm giving you better than an even chance. All you have to do is open that drawer in front of you. I don't care if you do or not. You only have until I count three, and then I'm letting go. One . . . two . . ."

I yelled, twisted the doorknob and lunged in as the gun roared. Brill sat white-faced behind the desk, and crouched in front of him was my guy, his hands sunk deep in his coat pockets. Then slowly he leaned to the left and slid toward the floor. He seemed to take forever. The gun in Brill's hand wove a small curl of smoke.

I snapped, "Drop it, Brill. You, too." The flat-nosed gorilla who stood behind the girl slowly drew his hand from under his coat and held it, empty away from him.

Brill said blandly, "Sure." And he laughed. He threw the gun on the rug in front of me with a derisive gesture. "Fingerprints and all. Go ahead and make something out of it, copper. It was self-defense. You can ask them." He waved his hand and grinned.

The girl said, "Self-defense. He's got a gun in his pocket."

I went down on my knees beside the body. I turned it gently on its back. I looked up at the girl.

"You'll swear to self-defense?" I asked.

"Why not?" she said lazily.

"This is why not!" I jerked the crippled, useless hand from his pocket and dangled it before their eyes. "What jury is going to believe he could hold a gun in *that*?"

And that's the way it was. That's the picture. It bothers me.

WHERE ACTION PAYS OFF!

By Mullin.

MEN 17-35!

...FOR AN ON-THE-GO, UP
AND AT 'EM LIFE, JOIN
THE COAST GUARD!
TO MEN 17-25 (NAVY AND
COAST GUARD EX-PETTY
OFFICERS 17-35) THE
COAST GUARD OFFERS YOU
A LIFE OF ACTION AND
TRAVEL...

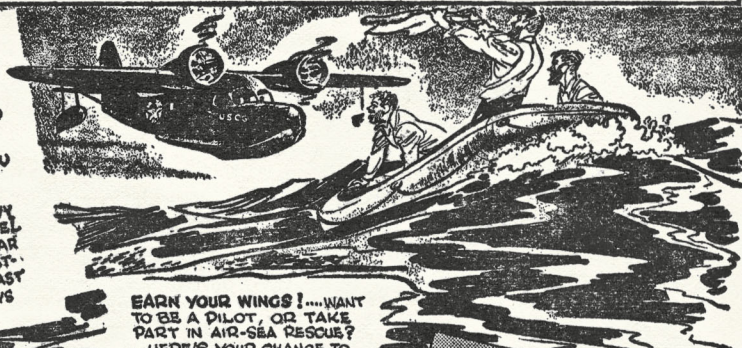
EX-COAST GUARD, NAVY
AND MARINE PERSONNEL
PAID \$50. FOR EACH YEAR
SERVED IN PRIOR ENLIST-
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GUARD WITHIN 90 DAYS
AFTER DISCHARGE.

BETTER FEED
TH' CHIEF A FAT
ONE... WE DON'T
WANTA' PULL
EXTRA DUTY
TOMORROW!

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TRAVEL,
SPORTS...**

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GUARD... THE ONE SERVICE THAT
PAYS ITS OWN WAY!

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...THE COAST GUARD OFFERS 1,001
PEACETIME JOBS FROM RESCUE TO CATCHING
SMUGGLERS...YOUR CHOICE IF YOU QUALIFY...



EARN YOUR WINGS!...WANT
TO BE A PILOT, OR TAKE
PART IN AIR-SEA RESCUE?
...HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO
QUALIFY AS A SKILLED
AIRMAN, RADIO MAN OR
TECHNICIAN.

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RATE "PETTY"
BABES!

RADIO, RADAR, LORAN
OPERATORS, ELECTRONICS
TECHNICIAN MATES,
ELECTRICIAN MATES, MOTOR
MACHINIST MATES!...
SPECIAL PETTY OFFICER RATINGS
NOW AVAILABLE FOR YOU!

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RATING OF SEAMAN 2/C-
...AFTER BASIC TRAINING
YOU CAN BECOME A PETTY
OFFICER WITHIN A FEW
MONTHS.

...A NUMBER OF COAST
GUARD OFFICERS ARE
FORMER ENLISTED MEN...

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SERVICE OFFERS...
G.I. BILL OF RIGHTS
BENEFITS...
ALL PAY AND RETIRE-
MENT BENEFITS, FAMILY
ALLOWANCES, ETC.

PLUS

...OPPORTUNITIES FOR
QUICK RECOGNITION AND
ADVANCEMENT (IT'S A
SMALL SERVICE)...
...BASIC TRAINING IN
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...ACTION!



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ACTIVE
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She leaned up against him and walked blindly where he led her. He jerked his head to me to follow. He had a gun and there was nothing else to do.



Dangerous Crossing



By ROBERT C. DENNIS

Frankie Gomez taught me—the hard way—to clip only those whose path I'd never cross again. But when I tried it, my sucker had even a better idea. . . And, to tie it up just dandy, she threw in, for free, her own corpse!

IT WAS about the middle of the afternoon when I limped through the dusty little border town without bothering to learn the name of the place. I didn't even take a last look at Mexico. I was giving the country back to the natives. It wasn't all I'd given them. . .

When I got across the toll bridge into Del Rio, a rawboned Texas immigration inspector told me I'd just left the town of Villa Acuna. The Customs man didn't waste any time on me. One look told him I didn't have anything to declare. I was lucky to get back with my shirt!

Frankie Gomez, that thick-skulled, second-rate pug—and his two thousand cousins—had got the rest.

I started walking toward the center of town. I hadn't done much else but walk getting out of Mexico. Now I had to get back to Los Angeles—on a dollar and forty cents. It wasn't going to be easy. In fact, I was a three-to-one shot to get vagged by the first peace officer who saw me. I needed a shower and a shave and a clean shirt. I'd slept in my clothes for two nights. The dust of Mexico from Monterrey to Villa Acuna was ground into me. I looked like a dollar and forty cents.

At the Southern Pacific railroad crossing I saw a switch engine fussing around making up a train for the West Coast, but I passed that up. A thirty-five-year-old prize fight manager is too soft to be riding freight trains.

The outskirts of Del Rio were just a lot of real estate that only the prairie dogs would want, flat and dusty and tree-less. The scattering of service stations and juke joints looked like something left over after everybody had gone home. A knifing wind, hatched in the Panhandle, hounded the skeleton of a tumbleweed across the open plains. The pale December sun was too high in the sky to give any warmth. Ahead of me, Highway 90 pointed to California, a thousand miles away. I turned into a service station.

A man in a white duck uniform with an orange patch on his shirt blocked off the doorway. He handed me a flat, empty stare. I pointed at a rack of road maps hanging beside the door.

"Spare one?"

"One," he said. He should be so generous. They didn't cost him anything.

"What's the next big place?"

"El Paso." He didn't throw any words away. I decided to find out how far that was, from my map.

A car rolled in behind me and stopped beside the gas pumps. The attendant pushed himself away from the door frame and went over and took down the hose. He let the driver, a woman, tell him to fill it up. He didn't talk to her either. She was staring sideways at me. She had hair that had to be called blonde, but wasn't really. Her face might have been pretty but somehow it just didn't make it. For one thing, she didn't know how to put on her make-up. Particularly, she didn't know how to put it on to cover up the shiner on her left eye. Somebody had really hung one on her. When she saw that I had spotted it, she stopped trying to hide it and turned to look at me.

"Are you hitch-hiking?" she said abruptly, "I'll give you a ride."

I looked at her and I looked at her car. It was a '35 Buick with a Texas license plate and

it was hard to believe it had been a good car once. It had the same defeated look as the woman. I didn't know there was anything there for me. I'd learned—the hard way, from Frankie Gomez—that the people to clip were those whose paths would cross mine just once. There were no kickbacks that way. Frankie had waited till we'd drawn a big sack of pesos from the home folks who'd come out to see him fight some local talent, and then he'd declared me out. He didn't need a manager any more. He was in his own back yard and he made it stick. Him and all his relatives!

I wasn't going to get much here, clipping a sheared lamb. She had about a dollar and forty cents, too.

"Get in," she said impatiently.

The attendant, holding the hose in the gas tank, was watching me with his hard, flat stare that wasn't quite so empty now. I got into the car beside the woman. The attendant came to the window and said, in two words, how much she owed him.

The woman had twenty cents change coming, but she didn't wait for it. Getting away from here was worth that much to her.

I wondered what was her hurry. I said, "Are you going far?"

"Far enough," she said. "I hope you can drive. I'm not feeling well—I may need you to take over. That's why I picked you up."

I TOOK another look at her. Except for the shiner, she looked healthy enough to me. She was thin under her salmon-pink dress, the thinness of a maverick pony, stunted, but strong and wiry. She drove with a kind of unthinking recklessness, as if she didn't have a lot of time. I asked, "Live in Del Rio?"

She shook her head. "I'm from Stoddart—about fifty miles southeast of here. My husband's the town marshal."

I didn't know why she threw that in.

The speedometer showed sixty-five. I took a glance out the back window just to see if there *was* someone chasing us. If there was he was a long ways behind. Just before turning back I saw the suit cases in the back seat. There were two of them, and a clothes basket covered with a white cloth. I didn't like it. She had a husband back in Stoddart, somebody had given her a black eye, and she was running away from something, with two suitcases in the car. That could only mean trouble, and I'd had enough trouble for a while.

I unfolded my map and studied it. About forty miles ahead there seemed to be a fairly good-sized place, for that part of Texas, called Sanderson. I thought that would be a good place for me to get out. I told her so.

"You can't!" she said, getting excited. "I'm

sick. I'll need someone to drive for me."

"You'll get along all right," I said. "Sanderson's as far as I go anyway."

"You're lying!" she cried, face flushing. "You're going to California. All hitch-hikers are going to California. You want to get out because you're afraid. Can't you see I'm in trouble? I need help!"

She was in trouble all right. But she wasn't getting any help from me. Let her pick up someone else. I'd pick up someone else too and not a sheared lamb the next time.

"I don't want to tangle with a town marshal," I told her. "Not the kind who hit women in the eye. What did you get him sore about?"

I shouldn't have said that. She gave a little gasp and dropped over the wheel. I didn't know what was wrong with her, but at 65 miles an hour I didn't have time to find out. The car edged playfully toward the far shoulder. I grabbed the wheel but the pressure of her body on it prevented me from steering. She was dead weight.

I grabbed her by the collar of the salmon-colored dress and jerked her back. Her foot slid off the gas pedal and we were gradually losing speed. But we were all over the highway and rocking like a run-away prairie schooner. I couldn't get my foot past the gear shift and her leg to get it on the brake. I just had to wait till we ran out of momentum, holding her with one hand, steering with the other.

When I got the car stopped and up on the hard dry shoulder, I saw her lips were blue and she was having trouble breathing. I'd seen enough fighters look like that after taking a hard right just over the heart not to spot a heart attack.

I jerked open the glove compartment to see if she had any medicine or smelling salts. There wasn't anything there but her purse, and nothing in her purse that would help. I had her stretched out on the front seat now, and she didn't look good. Her whole not quite pretty face was blue now. I leaned over the back of the seat and pulled the white cloth off the clothes basket. It was full of food, provisions mostly, and three quarts of whiskey.

I didn't waste any time getting the top off one of the bottles and forcing a few drops of the liquor between her cold lips. After that she seemed to be breathing a little better. Some color came back into her cheeks, and presently her eyes fluttered open. She looked at me blankly for a moment, and then fear crept into her eyes. Her mouth worked, but she couldn't say anything. I gave her a little more whiskey.

She started to talk then. She was heading

for a place called Comorro. It was off the highway, she said, south of Sanderson. It was some kind of a mine. That's where her father worked. She wanted me to drive her there. She'd pay me, she had lots of money.

I didn't say anything. I just put the bottle of whiskey in her hands and got out and started walking down the highway in the direction of Sanderson. Somebody would stop for her. Or she could take a rest and drive on herself.

I wanted no part of it. I just wanted a fat sheep to wander across my path once. I'd clip him for bus fare to Los Angeles if I had to sell him Frankie Gomez' contract!

I glanced back once, but she was lying down again on the front seat and I couldn't see her. I walked a full hundred feet away, but the last thirty didn't count. Every step, I knew I was going to go back.

She didn't say anything when I opened the car on the driver's side and motioned her to get over. She didn't say anything for a hundred and fifty miles. We went through Sanderson without stopping. Just the other side of a wide place in the road called Marfa she told me to turn south toward the Mexican line.

A few minutes later we came to another turn-off, a dusty, graveled road that curved back eastward. It was desert country here, with a line of mountains backed up against the horizon.

And then we came to the Comorro silver mine. I needed only one glance to tell me that no one had taken any silver out of it in the last twenty years. The desert had crept back in and taken it over. The silence of dead things was there, and in the fading afternoon light the tottering, weather-beaten buildings looked like crumbling grave markers in a forgotten cemetery. It had the haunted loneliness of a little dog lying dead in a dusty lane.

I said bitterly, "Your father works here!"

"He did once." She sounded defensive and kind of defeated. Whatever she was running to didn't seem any better now than that which she was running away from.

I drove down what had once been a road between the buildings. She reached over and put the palm of her hand on the horn button. The sound shattered the stillness into fragments like thin glass. I thought for a moment the walls of the buildings would come tumbling down. She followed the long blast with two shorter ones, and the echoes fled howling out across the desert, and then the silence moved uneasily back in again.

A man came out of one of the buildings and approached us warily. The woman opened the door on her side and put one foot out on the running board. When the man saw her, he

relaxed and came over, pushing the car door closed and leaned his left forearm through the window. He was a medium-sized man in a gray shirt and gray dungarees. Lean and hard, with a mouth that was just a slash across his face. He had black hair, thin and wavy. His eyes were a little too small, a little too sharp, and a little too wise.

THERE was a bulge under his shirt just at the belt line, and there was a button undone there. He jerked his head toward me. "Who's he?"

"Just a hitch-hiker, Clyde," she said quickly. "I had to pick him up. I wasn't feeling so good. I had an attack back a ways and he drove me here. I couldn't do nothing else."

He didn't like it at all. "Did you bring some food?"

"In the back. There's some whiskey too."

Clyde took his forearm off the window and opened the back door without taking his gaze away from the woman and me. He barely glanced at the basket in the back before his eyes were back on us. "Whose suitcases are those?"

"They're mine, Clyde. I came away for good. I'm not going back. We'll go away now."

"In this car?" Clyde said. "A hell of a long ways we'd get! Where's your old man?"

"He's looking for you off toward San Antonio. He won't miss me till tomorrow. We've got that much start."

"And what are we going to do with him?" Clyde demanded, again jerking his head at me as if I were just an extra suitcase that she'd brought along. But he couldn't drop me off at the side of the road like he could an extra suitcase. "Does he know the setup?"

"No, Clyde," she said, pleading for him to understand how it was. "He doesn't know anything. He's just a hitch-hiker. I picked him up because I had an attack. I passed out and I couldn't drive. I wouldn't have been able to get here if he hadn't."

"You told me all that," Clyde interrupted.

I noticed he didn't ask her how she felt now or ask about her black eye. He should have been more appreciative. I'd have given away odds the marshal had hung it on her because of Clyde. The gray shirt and dungarees he was wearing spelled jail garb in large print. In these little tank towns the marshal usually lived over the jail or back of it, and he was his own jailer. That was one way to get over the wall: make love to the jailer's wife!

"You'll have to go back, Ida," he said flatly. "It's too soon."

"I can't go back." She started crying and getting excited again. "He'll kill me if I do. Look what he did to me already."

She put a hand on her cheekbone below her blackened eye. "I can't go back, I tell you! I can't!" She screamed the last two words, and then she slumped in the seat, and started fighting for her breath again. I got the top off the whiskey bottle and put it to her lips. She took a sip and said thanks with her eyes. I hadn't really noticed her eyes before, but now I saw they were dark and large, like a hungry child's.

Clyde reached over and took the bottle and had a real belt from it. "You need a doctor," he said. "You better come and lie down. That ticker of yours is going to bust its main spring one of these days."

He opened the door and helped her out. She leaned up against him, her eyes closed, and walked blindly where he led her, toward one of the buildings. He jerked his head to me to follow. He had a gun and there was nothing else to do.

Inside the shacks he had made himself up a shake-down on the floor with a couple of gray blankets. I thought they had probably come from the Stoddart jail too. He made Ida stretch out on the blankets. He held her head up and gave her a few more drops of whiskey. Then he took a man-sized drink for himself, and handed me the nearly empty bottle.

"She's got to have a doctor," he said. "I'll go and get one."

Ida stirred on the blankets. "Let him go, Clyde. Don't leave me."

"He'd never come back," Clyde said. "Then we'd both be stranded here. No, I'll go. I'll get a doctor in Sanderson and have him back here in two hours. You'll be all right."

She had a hold of his hand and she wouldn't let go. "You'll come back, won't you? You won't go off and leave me?"

"Sure," he said impatiently. "Sure." He didn't even bother turning on whatever charm he'd used to talk her into springing him from his cell. She couldn't do him any more good. He'd clipped her but good, and their paths weren't going to cross again. He ought to have known Frankie Gomez!

He straightened up and she had to let go of his hand. He walked outside without a backward glance. Ida started crying silently without even the will to make it loud enough to be a protest. She didn't care any longer. She was just too sick and defeated.

I put the bottle of whiskey down beside her. When I got outside, Clyde was getting into the car. The shadows of the drunken mine buildings ran out across the plains, still sharply etched in the last light of afternoon. A tumble-weed, brother of the one that passed me in Del Rio, was caught between the legs of the rusted remains of a wheelbarrow. It had a trapped and frantic look.

I said, "I want a ride out of here."

"Somebody's got to stay and look after her," he said, "until I get back with the doctor."

"You're not coming back," I told him. "Let's not con each other. She's as good as done right now. You're running out. I want to go, too."

He didn't say anything. His hand lingered near the unfastened button of his gray shirt.

"I don't care how many jails you've busted out of," I said. "Just get me to hell back on the highway."

He had his hand inside his shirt now. "Stay out of my way, bo," he said. "Now and for good. You're lucky I'm leaving you alive. You can't do me any harm this time, but if you ever show up again, you'll be a threat and I won't give you a second chance. It'll be me or you. Remember that."

He thought he was talking to a bum. If it hadn't been for the gun, I'd have beat his thick skull in. But he had that gun. There wasn't anything I could do about that.

HE SLID in behind the wheel, backed the car around in a half circle and took off down the empty road, leaving a dust cloud suspended in the stagnant purple twilight. I stared after him, swearing helplessly. I was really into it now. I couldn't just stay here till somebody found us. That might be forever. If I walked out, it'd have to be without Ida, and then I would never be able to prove that I hadn't run off with her in the first place. The service station attendant had seen her pick me up.

Ida opened her eyes when I came in and looked at me briefly and closed them again. She said, "He isn't coming back, you know."

"I know," I said. "We're stuck here."

"I'm sorry," she said. "For you, I mean. I got you into this. And I'm sorry."

"We're both in it," I said roughly.

"It doesn't matter about me," she said. "I don't care any longer. I'm tired of running away. I've been running away all my life. I ran away from home when I was fifteen because we lived at the mine and nothing ever happened. Day after day I thought I'd go crazy. I got a job slinging hash in San Antone in a hot greasy dump where I got handled as often as the menu. I thought I was running away from that when I married Lee . . ."

That would be the marshal, who probably got most of his exercise beating her up. She'd run away from him with Clyde, but now that had turned out like all the rest. She'd never really run away from any one special thing or person. She'd just run.

I said, "What did they have this Clyde character in the jail for?"

"Clyde Delwood . . . For murder. He held

up the bank in Stoddart and killed the manager, but he didn't get out of town. He cracked up his car and Lee grabbed him." Then she started to ramble. ". . . When I was a little girl at the mine . . ."

I knew it wouldn't be very long now. When they start seeing their life pass before them, it doesn't take long. I lit a cigarette and gave her a puff, and then I squatted on my heels in the dark shanty, and waited.

But when it came, I didn't realize it for a minute. She didn't make any fuss. She just stopped breathing. She was all through running. I lit a match and looked at her lying there in her salmon-pink dress that was as drab as her hair and complexion, and I thought she was the second Stoddart citizen that Clyde Delwood had killed. Ida had died of heart trouble but Clyde had done it just the same. I pulled the blanket up over her face and let the match burn out.

I didn't think I could walk the fifty miles or more to the highway. I had done too much walking since Frankie Gomez and all his relatives had run me out of Mexico. I picked up Ida's purse and went outside.

Comorro's soundless, forsaken street was filling up with shadows, and the sharp-etched look was gone. In all my life I'd never encountered such silence. It was the lair of all loneliness. Ida had run away from that loneliness once, but there had been life here then. Now she had come back, after all her running away, and now even her spirit would be lonely here. It was enough to give a man the creeps.

I went over and kicked the tumbleweed free of the wheelbarrow. Tomorrow's wind would do the rest . . .

Then I heard the far-away, muted moan of a freight train whistle, the sound of loneliness itself. It would be the hotshot that had been making up in Del Rio when I passed through there hours ago. The tracks couldn't be very far from the mine. A spur probably had been laid into Comorro to carry the ore away in the old days. That would be how Clyde Delwood got here.

I put the purse under my coat and started running. I found the spur and went stumbling and tripping at a dead run over the rotting ties. The freight whistled again—much closer now. I didn't think I was going to make it and I wouldn't have, if it hadn't slowed for a block signal. I caught it before it picked up speed again, swinging aboard a flat car about six cars back from the engine. It seemed to be loaded with some kind of machinery. A road grader, I thought. A couple of 'boes were asleep beneath it. I found a corner for myself and lay down. I was riding the rails after all, but I didn't mind. Just anything to get away from here.

I tried to sleep but Ida's purse kept sticking into me, even when I put it away from me. I hadn't looked through it but she had offered to pay me to drive her to Comorro, so I knew there was money in it. She was the kind of people to clip—our paths would never cross again that was sure, just as Frankie Gomez would never cross mine if he could help it.

My body picked up the off-beat rhythm of the flat car, but I still couldn't go to sleep. I lit a match and shook down the purse. There were several hundred dollars in it. I stood up and started to throw the purse and all the money over the side of the car. Then I couldn't do that either. I'd have it mailed back to Stoddart, Texas, care of the town marshal, when I got to Los Angeles. It knocked hell out of my brand new theory, but everything was all right then. The deal was closed. I went to sleep . . .

My dream picked up the crash just before the shock jolted me awake. I'd been knocked against the blade of the road grader hard enough to dent my ribs. It was pitch dark, with a lot of Texas stars or maybe they were the New Mexico stars now, high above me, in a cold, black sky.

The train had stopped. The two 'boes were dropping over the side of the car, jabbering excitedly. I heard one of them say something about a collision. Then I swung down to the ground. Off to the right a few lights marked a small town, so I knew we were near Highway 90 again. I peered through the darkness toward the head of the train. The engineer and the fireman were standing there in the

gleam of their headlight, and from down the track behind me a couple of lights bobbed irregularly as the brakies came puffing and running.

And then I went up and saw what he had hit. It was a '35 Buick, with a Texas license plate. There wasn't a hell of a lot of it left that resembled a car. The side had been caved in against the driver and he was dead for all time.

IF I'D been religious or superstitious I might have made something of it. The hand of fate, the mills of the Gods, that stuff. But I wasn't. It was just coincidence. He'd been a wanted man, driving a hot car, and probably drunk on Ida's whiskey. Getting out of Texas had been the important thing and he'd misjudged the speed of a freight train—any freight train. That's about all there was to it.

I dropped Ida's purse full of money into the back seat. It would get back to Stoddart faster this way. Then I started walking down the highway, in the direction of the twinkling lights.

I had no idea what town it was. I was just not going to ride any more freight trains. I could hitch-hike to Los Angeles from here. I still had my dollar and forty cents. A hundred feet farther on I came to a highway sign facing away from the tracks. I struck a match to see if it gave the name of the town.

It didn't. In big black letters, it warned: *Dangerous Crossing Ahead.*

But it was OK now: my crossing was safe behind me, and I felt a lot better.

DEATH UNDER PAR

A bullet hazard and playful wives didn't faze Private Detective Jim Bennett—but he just couldn't take a corpse before breakfast.

Jim Bennett Novel

By Robert Martin

also

SUITABLE FOR FRAMING

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HOTEL MURDER

By
FRANCIS K. ALLAN

CHAPTER ONE

Just a Little Blood

IT WAS seven o'clock, and colder than a polar bear's pants outside. I'd searched every floor of the hotel, plus the dining room, lobby and penthouse. Nobody had seen her since the middle of the afternoon and I was getting a nervous feeling between my shoulders. Finally I hung myself over the bar and groaned for a rye and water. Freddie mopped his way toward me, his red face glowing like a lantern and his white hair standing straight up like a tomato with cream-cheese topping.

"You got trouble?" he asked. Freddie is not always extra fast.

"It's Daisy again. She waltzed out of here, first getting five hundred cash fish from the desk. Since then, nobody knows." I looked at the bottom of the glass and groaned for another. That is when the telephone rang at the end of the bar. Freddie gave a listen, then cocked his eyes at me.

"She's found. Wants you. In fact, she sounds sorta excited."

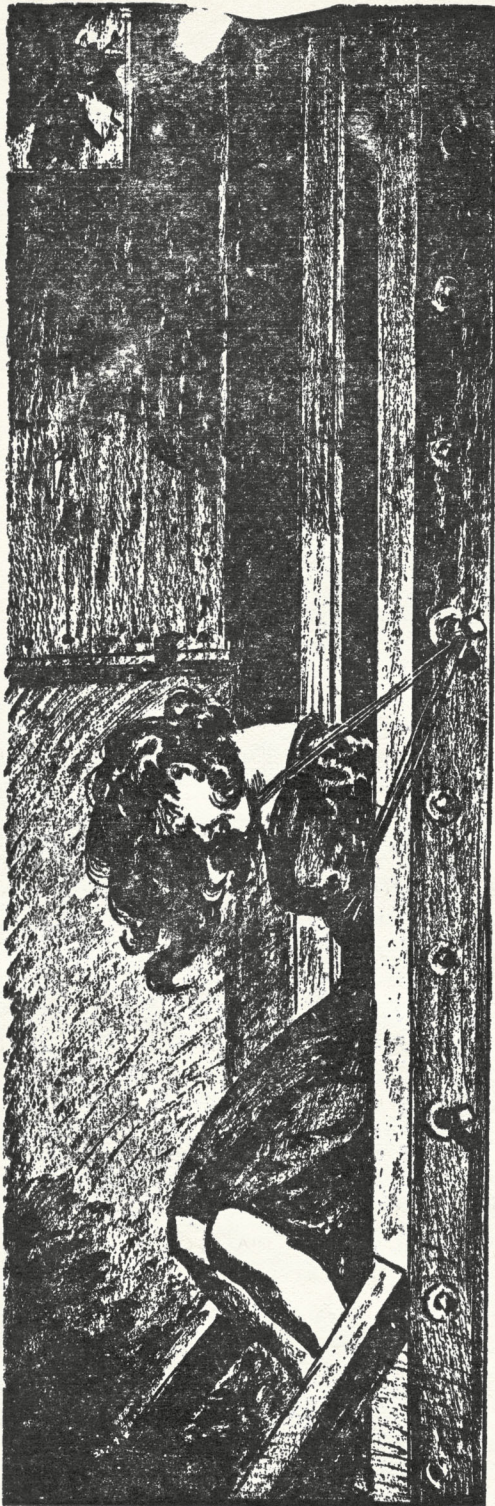
I hooked the receiver. "Where have you—" I started.

"Oh, Wiggles, I . . ." That's her name for me. "I'm afraid something is wrong. She's acting so strange. She . . . I wonder if she's dead and—"

"What?" I yelped. I swallowed my drinks



She was suspended where two tons of lead and steel would slide down to crush her. The weight was coming now and I could do nothing!



"I don't buy that," Darkin snapped. "You're a phony house dick if I've ever seen one, and a little session downtown might help you recall what you did with the girl's money, along with Whispery Stone's bank-roll. I'm going to make you come clean and tell why this screwball flea-bag has a shiv-studded corpse in every corridor!"

again. "Who? What do you mean, dead? And where are you?"

"I don't know exactly. Wait." She was gone maybe ten seconds. "Oh, yes. I'm at the Grinley Apartments on Third Avenue," she chirped very brightly. "I think it's the third floor at the back. I just started talking to her, and then she went to the telephone, and now she's just lying there. Kind of cold, Wiggles, and it looks like blood. I—"

"Listen, you— You don't touch anything! Don't do anything! Don't say anything! I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Stay still."

She said I was so wonderful and gosh . . . I slapped down the receiver and hunted the address of this Grinley Apartments place. It was Bowery stuff. Not the location for Daisy. As I went out fast, this little blonde at the table was looking at my S-turn nose, my hands and shoulders and I heard the guy with her saying:

"His name is Rocky Cochran. He's the house dick here. Used to be a fighter, I think. There was a lot of stuff in the papers about him a month ago. He—"

I left him yammering to the blonde and caught a cab out on Fourth Avenue. "And use both horses," I said. It made my teeth cold, just thinking. Daisy . . . Some crazy

***Unusual Novel of Death in a
Manhattan Madhouse!***

joint in the Bowery, and a gal with blood that looked dead. "Somewhat faster," I suggested to the cabby.

You do not know Daisy? You are very smart, Mack. Just imagine a slender golden buzz-saw. Innocent blue eyes, and angel face, and exactly zero-nothing between the ears. That is Daisy, plus two million dollars in cash and the Gondola Hotel. She inherited all that when Sandy Sandford was murdered last month. Since then life is like a nightmare in a concrete-mixer.

We got there in twelve minutes. It was a four-story pile, red bricks, a second-hand clothing joint in the basement, and a long hall leading back to a stairway. The walls were the color of flat beer and the only light globe was going blind. Yesterdays garlic was in the dusty air and somewhere a guy was fighting with a tired-voiced gal. I went up the steps in a hurry to the third floor rear. There was a slice of light under the door on the left.

"Daisy?" I gave a soft knock. She edged the door, first slow, then fast as she recognized me. "Oh, Wiggles, Wiggles," she sobbed. She calls me that because of my roaming nose. She will just beat a hundred pounds, fed and watered, and tonight her blue eyes were scared.

I slapped the door shut behind me and gave a fast eye to this room. It was junky but clean as a puppy's bone. A cot, a paper-padded chair, an old dresser, and a rickety table with a hot-plate and a pan of cold oatmeal. There was a picture on the dresser of a black-haired gal in a tiger-skin, bare-footed and holding a sword, acting like she was singing.

"The blood? The Nellie who won't wake up?" I asked fast.

"In the next room. The telephone rang, and she went in there to answer. When she didn't come back after so long, I looked in and—"

"Stay here and quietly." I ducked into the hall and listened. The fight was still going downstairs. I turned the knob and peeked into the next room. It was bigger than the first room, and the furniture was better. And all over everywhere were paintings—on the walls, stacked in corners, and under the bed. It smelled like paint, and there was an unfinished job on a wooden stand: A sketch of the El and a couple of gin-happy bums staggering down the walk. Greenwich Village stuff, you know. And then I saw this Nellie.

She was curled up there on the floor near the little telephone table, and she was strictly murdered. It looked like somebody had combed her dark hair with an axe. Blood everywhere, and her eyes coldly open. Her hands stretching out, her fingers half-curved. She was wearing a tired blue bathrobe and

ragged house-shoes. And then I gave another look to her face.

Now, I have looked at faces, but never such as this. Something had happened, a long time ago and very bad, it looked like. The lips were parched. There weren't any brows. The flesh was thick and lumpy-brown. Like the stuff that comes out of a volcano, you know. It was like somebody had practiced with an acetylene torch on that face. And then I saw—the fingers were a little like that, too.

I swallowed, trying to get my stomach back downstairs. And also giving this a hard think. The telephone—Daisy had used it . . . So I rubbed it around with my handkerchief. I didn't see anything else. I mopped the door handles and backed away. My face was wet as a baby's bed.

"Is she—" Daisy started. I shut the door again.

"Very much. What have you touched in here? Is anything in here yours? Think and do not delay."

She frowned that lovely angel way. I guess I've touched everything," she said. "I did have five hundred dollars, but I gave it to her. Then—" The telephone began to scream in that death room. I froze, listening to see if anyone would come to answer. It kept screaming, louder than a siren, it seemed.

"We're moving," I said suddenly. I heard footsteps clattering up the stairs. I snapped out the light, grabbed Daisy's hand, and hustled her toward the stairs. At the landing a girl passed us, running lightly. It was too dark to see much, but I could tell her hair was black and she left a trail of perfume—not sweet, but cool and clean-smelling. She was humming, sort of breathlessly, as she ran.

I kept Daisy hustling fast. We were on the last half-flight of stairs when the scream came from upstairs. "Wiggles—" Daisy started.

"On your way!" I growled. I knew the girl had found the dead company. We went three blocks before I grabbed a cab. "Now, just in small words and whispers, what happened?" I panted.

"Why, I don't know," she said innocently. "I just did what she said. I came with the five hundred dollars and she started to tell me about the man who was going to cause the trouble. And then the telephone rang and she didn't come back and . . . well, that's all. Just like that, don't you see?" She gave me those beautiful eyes.

"Haven't you left out a little something? For instance, who was she?" And Daisy said she hadn't the slightest idea. Never seen her before. I started grinding my teeth. "But how did you happen to go there?"

"I got the note. It came this morning, and

it said she would telephone me later. She phoned about three o'clock and told me to come to that room and bring the money. Honest, Wiggles. She—"

"She wrote you a note. Then she called you. She said come see me with five C's. So you grabbed five C's and went. Is that right?"

She sighed happily. "I *knew* you'd understand."

I stared chewing my nails and counting. "But I don't! I don't! I never understand *anything that you—*" I grabbed my jaw and talked to myself to get calm. "Daisy, *why* did she call you and talk about the five C's?"

"She was warning me about the man, don't you remember? The man who was going to cause me trouble. He'd done something terrible to her."

"What man?"

"Oh, I don't know *what* man. Just some man. She had to go to the telephone, see? She didn't get time to tell me."

"She didn't tell—" I was screaming again. I gave myself another headlock. "Very slow. Very careful. What *did* she tell you?"

"Why, she said . . ." Daisy gazed dreamily out the window a moment. "She was real sweet, Wiggles. She told me how much she hated to take the money, but she didn't even have money to buy food. And she kind of cried and held her hands over her face. Something was funny about her face, I think. Then she told me she was trying to help me. She said a man was going to appear in my life very soon and he would cause me tragedy. That's what she said—tragedy. And then the telephone rang and . . . Well, now you know all about it," she chirped.

I just shuddered. We got back to the Gondola and I paid the cabbie.

"But I'm sure she'll be all right by tomorrow," Daisy decided very brightly. "A little blood doesn't mean anything. She'll just—"

"Daisy, no. No. No." It is very hard for me to be calm under such conditions. "Listen, and please remember. This is bad. This is murder. Murder doesn't get better tomorrow. No. People don't talk about murder, either. I . . . I've got to think about this. But forget it, understand. No pretty conversation. You were *not* there. Do you think you can remember that?"

"Oh, Wiggles, sometimes you act so serious." She patted my cheek. "Everything will work out perfectly. I— Oh, I'm late!"

"Where are you going now!" I was getting hysterical.

"I'll tell you later. I've got to hurry, but it's such a wonderful idea!" And she went waltzing off toward the elevator, leaving me standing there with a tickling bomb in my

stomach. All of a sudden I felt like a guy going crazy. Daisy does it to you. This secondhand morgue doesn't help, either. Look around at this place. See?

Gilded ceiling, but old like a chorus blonde whose man has gone forever. Dark walls. A scent of dust and old flowers, like roses turned to death. And the elevator banging its sore ribs away up there in the shaft. It would drive a vampire to gin.

And look around this bar. Look at 'em. See that thin old gal with the straw-yellow hair and the rusty velvet dress? . . . That's Illya Gresham. She still thinks it's London and she's doing Shakespeare for the queen. It's okay so long as she's quiet, but when her bright eyes get to sparkling and she talks that thin screamie way . . .

There are a dozen, almost like her. They used to live here when this was plush velvet and they were in champagne. They have crawled back, now. This is their last stand. They sit here every night, whispering, staring into yesterday, holding their wine or beer. Just waiting for their last curtain.

And then something like tonight happens. This Bowery murder with Daisy fitting around, and a lot of talk about an unknown Patsy who's going to bring tragedy. It gives you an ashes-and-razor-blades taste.

"A double-rye and save the water," I said to Freddie. He leaned across the bar and gave me a sore-throat grunt. "Take a look at the guy in the corner," he said.

I turned and squinted through the smoke-haze. The guy must have been seven feet tall. He looked like a wax mummy. Thin as a frozen flagpole, and skin the color of a sick oyster. A long head without a strand of hair, and eyes like polished coal. He was wearing a monacle on a black ribbon, and a suit like an undertaker's tuxedo. He was just sitting there, a drink in front of him, staring at the smoke-haze and never moving a muscle.

"Who is he?" I asked Freddie. "Is he alive or dead?"

"His name is Whispery Stone. That ought to make you remember."

"Whis— The big gambler?" I started to look again. Freddie was pulling the *Evening Star* out from under the bar.

"You don't know anything yet. Take a fast peep at Andy Anson's Broadway column for tonight. Little Daisy's playing in the big league."

"Huh?" I said and grabbed the paper. There it was, leading-off the column:

Daisy Field, Manhattan's newest girl of gold has decided to shake the cobwebs out of the ancient Gondola Hotel hostelry she recently inherited at the murder-death of her stepfather, Warren Sandford. And little Daisy has her own bright ideas. Give a listen . . .

Crowbar Mary Maxson, colorful challenger for the Ladies Heavyweight Wrestling Crown, has been invited to use the Ambassador Suite at the Gondola when she arrives in Manhattan tonight. In case you haven't heard, Crowbar Mary is an odds-on favorite to lift the Crown from Groaning Gertie Gussman when they tangle in the Arena two nights hence. Daisy informs us that Crowbar Mary will be a guest of the Gondola, and may be persuaded to make public appearances in the lobby.

I started strangling. "That ain't all. Keep reading," Freddie said. Then I saw the next paragraph.

Daisy further informs us that her interest was attracted by yesterday's comments in this column concerning the legendary gambler, Whispery Stone, and in consequence she has also invited Whispery to become a guest of the Gondola. Whispery Stone, as we noted yesterday, flew in from California to make a wager on the girl's grunt-and-groan feature. And Whispery, as you may have heard, is quite an unusual citizen. It is rumored that he never bets less than a hundred thousand dollars. Years ago he was injured mysteriously in Shanghai and cannot speak above a whisper. Furthermore, he carries with him constantly a Chinese purse, said to have been the gift of an Oriental lady of fortune, and rumored to contain enough cash to buy a good bank. There's more, but that's enough. You might drop around to the Gondola these days. It's quite a place since little Daisy took the wheel.

"She— She—" I started, chewing my tongue. I stopped as Whispery Stone stood up. His monacle glittered like a mirror, and there was this beaded purse, dangling by a silver chain from his wrist. A woman's purse, blue and red and gold and orange. He didn't look this way or that. Not a muscle moved in his sick-oyster face. He stalked out into the lobby, waxy stiff as a mummy, with this purse dangling from his wrist. I felt like somebody had dragged a dead fish across my eyes.

I slapped down my glass and started for the penthouse where Daisy lived. It's on the fourteenth floor. I was moving too fast to ring the bell. I stalked into the living room and stopped, fast. They were in the study—Daisy and this bow-tied moustache I'd never seen before. He was giving her some lip in a lispy voice.

"... but you misunderstood me, Miss Field. I meant people of wealth and distinction. I definitely did *not* have in mind professional gamblers or woman wrestlers or—that sort of thing. I—" Then he saw me. His wet lips came apart another couple of inches and he mopped his pinkish face. "And

may I ask, please, who *you* are, sir?"

"Oh, this is Wiggles," Daisy said. "He's wonderful. He writes poetry and every morning he studies to be a genius, don't you, Wiggles?" She gave me a beautiful smile. "And this is Mr. William Swim."

I stared at Swim and he gave it straight back at me. "Wiggles? . . . he said finally. "A rather odd—"

"Cochran. Rocky Cochran to you," I snapped. "I'm the house dick."

"Oh, yes. I recall." He pulled out a wet smile. "A pleasure, sir."

"I forget to tell you," Daisy put in. "Mr. Swim is going to be our . . . our cultural director. And he's got the most wonderful ideas!"

"Perhaps I could explain more clearly," Swim said. "I mentioned a program to Miss Field yesterday. It was my idea that the Gondola needed to be . . . well, given a little polish, you know. An effort should be made to attract a more desirable type of guest. People of wealth, of distinction. But unfortunately," and he mopped at his pink face again, "I think Miss Field misunderstood me. I find that she has invited a professional gambler. Also a woman wrestler." He shuddered. His double chin shook. He had blond curly hair, a fuzz of pale moustache, and an extra thirty pounds below the belt. He looked like a guy who could sell a million gallons of perfume, but not an ounce of concrete. And so he was going to be our culture boy . . .

"Listen—" I started. Then came a scream you could hear all the way up the elevator shaft. It kept coming. Like everybody in the lobby was getting bit by snakes, A hundred screams. I grabbed at the door and started running. I heard Daisy and this William Swim guy behind me. Now I could hear somebody yelling downstairs: "Hit him! Throw something at him! Get him before—" Then a lot of glass broke.

"I will quit. I will quit tomorrow," I told myself as I ran.

As I churned into the last flight of steps, I got a picture of it. First, here was Sam, our stuttering desk-clerk, his shirt torn, his tie gone, and he was racing around in a wide circle in the middle of the lobby, beating wildly at his head. And hanging onto his left ear was the ugliest toughest old parrot that ever got off a boat. The parrot was gawing and Sam was screaming, and somebody kept yelling, "Hit him! Throw something at him!"

I thought fast, grabbed the Brooklyn telephone directory, and fired. There was a thick sound as the book smacked into Sam's face between the eyes. He quit running and flopped on the floor, very quiet. The parrot gave an angry squawk and waddled over toward a woman the size of a freight locomotive.

tive, where he sat on her shoulder. Then a little guy about the size of an under-fed midget swept off his silk-topped and fluffed up his black beard. He gave out with this squeak:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, attention! I am Prince Baba, manager of the unconquerable Crowbar Mary, next Champion of the World! We have now arrived in your midst. I present Crowbar Mary!" He bowed toward the locomotive with the parrot. The parrot cursed. And Crowbar Mary opened up with a smile that looked like the inside of rusty furnace. Daisy let out a happy yelp and rushed across the lobby. And William Swim just stood there, his bright eyes sticking out a yard. "Disgraceful! Utterly disgraceful!" he lisped.

"You better get your culture-stuff to working," I snapped. Sam was crawling around hunting for his upper plate and giving me the bitter eye. Crowbar Mary waved her arms and made sounds like words.

"I just wanna say to all you folks, I'm gonna take Groaning Gertie, the bum, apart like a old baked hen! Ya hear me, folks! I'm gonna be the next champ! Tomorrow I'll be right in this lobby, and all what wants to can step up and feel me biceps! I thanks you."

The walls were still shaking as Daisy danced toward the elevator, followed by this phony-dandy called Prince Baba. Crowbar Mary thundered along behind, heaving and blowing, and the parrot giving the Spanish curse. I leaned against the wall, shuddered, and closed my eyes.

And while I was standing there, my eyes still closed, the cool clean scent of perfume drifted by. All of a sudden my eyes popped open. Here was a thin girl—slender, dark hair, and dark frightened eyes. Maybe twenty-one or -two. Her head was bare and she was wearing a cheap brown raincoat, and she was tip-toeing while her eyes slipped anxiously around the lobby. Like frightened birds in a storm—that was the look of her eyes.

And then I saw in her fingers. There was a match-book with the Gondola Hotel name on it. I whiffed the perfume again, then I knew. This was the girl who'd passed us on those Bowery stairs. And she'd found the Gondola match-book in her room. In the room with the body.

"I wonder . . . Do you have a room?" I heard her ask very softly.

No luggage. So . . . didn't like that. "Please. I need a room terribly," she begged. "I can pay in advance." But she barely could. I saw the crumpled bills. Maybe ten dollars, counting some twice. Her fingers were trembling, and I noticed her hand was cut. All of a sudden—it was just a hunch, understand—I got the picture. She was ducking the cops on the murder job, and she was taking the desper-

ate chance of coming here, hoping to find the killer.

I started to give Sam the no-dice sign. Then I saw those lost birds in her eyes again, and the soft curve of her cheek. I walked over. "We ought to have something, Sam. How about 58?" Then I gave her a smile and watched. But no, she didn't know me. It had been too dark on those stairs. My smile got better.

"I'm Rocky Cochran. Call me the house detective," I said. "You know, we usually have rules about girls without luggage but—" Then I pretended to notice her cut hand for the first time. I frowned and she tried to hide it behind her. "You mind if I ask you a few—" I stopped. I thought she was going to run, she was so frightened. "It's okay." And this time I thought she was going to cry, the way her lips trembled when she tried to smile.

"Thank you. Thank you so very much," she whispered. "I . . . I had to go somewhere tonight."

I stood there and watched her go up in the elevator. Sometimes I think I am getting dumb and sentimental. I shoulda dusted her out. I know dynamite when I see it, so what did I do? Just like an idiot:

"If anybody should come around asking, forget that girl," I said to Sam. And then, just in case things weren't bad enough, the door popped open and this worn-out old bulldog shuffled in. I straightened to give him the fast bounce. Me—I know a busted-down pug when I see one. But then I did a re-take on his clothes.

So help me, they were custom-made. And behind him staggered a little cabby with enough luggage to go to France, and I don't mean five-and-ten shoe boxes, either. This was strictly Fifth Avenue stuff. And the old bulldog dragged out a handful of large-scale green.

"Me, I got a reservation," he sounded like a walrus with pneumonia. "My name is Jones. Dike Jones." He was maybe forty. Cabbage ears, watery eyes, and enough gold in his mouth to start a bank.

I watched him vanish into the elevator. After that I staggered into the bar and screamed for a rye. I had a feeling things were getting very horrible. Then all of a sudden I was sure. A hand came down on my shoulder. I jumped around, and it was this fancy-face called Andy Anson, the Broadway columnist, standing there with a Homburg hat and a gold-headed cane and a smile like a soapy wash rag.

"Cheerio, old Rock," he warbles to me like a Harvard politician. "Did I overhear a fog-horn announcing himself as Mr. Dike Jones?"

"And what does that make?"

"You've never heard of Dike Jones?" He

popped up an eyebrow, peeped behind him, then leaned against my ear. "Dike Jones, alias Benny the Bet, alias Count Deborry, alias many more. One of the smartest criminals who ever changed fingerprints. And a master of disguise! He can look like a congressman, a banker, a bum or a prizefighter. Once he did a sixty-grand con-job as a woman. In short, Dike is tops. And why is he here?"

"How would I know. I only work—" I left my mouth hanging, while I started remembering what the murdered woman had tried to tell Daisy. Something about a guy who would come around with a load of tragedy. And here comes this Dike Jones, and upstairs is Daisy with a through-ticket on two million cash mackerel.

"Furthermore," Anson droned on, "I've heard that Whispery Stone is carrying two hundred grand in his sack this week. He plans to bet on Crowbar Mary. Do you imagine Dike Jones could possibly be thinking of such a thing as—" He stopped. We both looked at this same Dike Jones shuffled through the door and sagged into a chair.

"Beer," he growled. I opened my mouth, closed it, then I said, "Excuse me." I went out fast.

Sam said Jones was in 52. I took the elevator and tip-toed along the corridor. It was twelve-fifteen and very quiet. I slipped out my fifth-floor passkey and edged into the dark room. I lowered the shade and turned on the bed-lamp. There were the bags, lined against the wall. I reached for one. It came up like a feather—empty!

I shook it. But all I could feel were millions and millions of molecules of air bumping against each other and all saying the same thing—empty.

I tried another. Also empty. There were five bags, three of them empty. The fourth held two suits, six shirts, socks, handkerchiefs, ties, underwear. And the price-tag was on everything. From Dublin, Inc., Fifth Avenue. Nothing had been worn.

The fifth bag—a little brown job—was on the bed, open. I leaned down and took a peep, and my blood-pressure started bouncing. First was a .45 revolver. A pair of white cotton gloves. A beautiful set of keys. A knife that could have carved a whale. A roll of copper wire, and another pair of cotton gloves. But very sticky with blood. These gloves had done some permanent business, and not many hours ago.

I straightened up to do some thinking. I was just in time to see a shadow streaking down the wall toward my head. I ducked and let out a yell. Then a four-engine bomber flew through my skull, dropped its load, and went out my eyes. I settled down to the floor.

CHAPTER TWO

Killer Contest

THEY WERE trying to choke me! A dozen of them! I came out of the fog, threw out my deadly left, slugged with my wicked right, and hurled myself into them. Somebody was going to pay dearly.

"Stop it! Wake up! I'm only trying to help—"

I got the haze out of my eyes, and there was the little lovely with the cool perfume and the dark frightened eyes. There was a towel in her hand, and she was backing away from me. I wasn't in Dike's room anymore. "Huh? Where are they?" I barked. "They can't—"

"Please, you must be quiet. Your head is cut. I was trying—"

"Where did you come into this? And what's your name?"

"I'm Jean Marlin. I'm just trying to help you, because you were so kind to me. I—I heard a cry down the hall, then it sounded like someone fell. Next, someone ran down the hall and down the stairs. I tip-toed up there, and you were lying on the floor. So I pulled you back here and . . . Well, that's all." She swept back her black hair and looked at me anxiously. "If you'll sit down again, I'll try to fix that place on your head," she said half timidly.

My brain felt like a concrete mixer rolling downhill. I flopped back into a chair and her cool fingers started working again. And I could catch that same piney cool perfume. I just wanted to go to sleep right there. "Tell me if it hurts," she said gently.

"Sure." I closed my eyes, and I got to thinking. Here she was, doing all this for me. And I knew she was scared. Less than ten bucks in her sock, and a body in her room downtown. I wanted to say something, and I kept hunting around for an opening.

"My name is Rocky," I started. "Maybe I told you." She murmured something and kept moving the towel. "You new in New York?"

She hesitated maybe ten seconds. "I . . . Not exactly, Rocky."

"You . . . You looked kind of worried when you walked in tonight."

She didn't answer that one, but her fingers stopped moving a moment. I could feel them turn stiff. "I think it's going to be all right, now," she said suddenly. She wanted me to go, I knew. I stood up and turned around, smiling.

"Thanks. If you ever need any help from a guy with a face like mine, you just let me— Say, what's the matter? You look like you're going to cry. Is anything—"

"I'm all right. Perfectly all right. Please, will you leave. I . . ." Then her voice broke and she turned against the window. She didn't make a sound. It was just her shoulders, shaking as she cried, and the waves of her dark hair trembling.

I just stood there for maybe a whole minute, my fingers digging into my skin. Okay, I said to myself finally. You started it. Now, go on and get yourself into this murder-ground, you fool.

So I touched her shoulder and slowly turned her around toward me. "Look, you . . . Jean. Maybe you could do with a little help right now?"

She tried to turn her eyes away. I held her. "Please, please, I don't want to cause—" Then her voice broke again and she held onto me, crying softly out loud now, "I just . . . just don't know what to do or . . . or where to go . . . or anything," she sobbed. "They were taking me to jail. They said . . . said I did it. Said I took the money and—"

"What money? And what jail and why?" I asked carefully.

"Five hundred dollars, but I'd never seen it before, honestly. But they found it there on my dresser. They said . . . said I'd killed her to get her money. But I didn't! I just found her. And then . . ."

"Yeah? What happened then, Jean?"

"After I found her, I must have screamed. People came. Someone called the police and . . . and that's when they found the money on my dresser. I tried to explain but . . . but their eyes—their eyes just burned at me, and one of them smiled a crooked way and said, 'You must have needed it bad, sister. But you can't spend it where you're going.' That's what he said." She tried to blink. "I was standing by the door. It was dark in the hall, and people moving around. They took their eyes off me for a moment and . . . and I ran. I heard them shouting, but I couldn't stop. I *couldn't*! I knew it was wrong to run, but I just *couldn't* stop. And then I got on the subway and came here. You see—" She stopped. "I don't know why, but I . . . just came here."

But I knew the reason. She'd found the match-book that Daisy or I had dropped in her room. She was hoping. I rubbed my jaw and squinted down at my shoes. "Look, Jean, who was the woman who got killed? Did you know anything about her?"

Slowly she shook her head. "Almost nothing. She moved in about a month ago. She was . . . Something terrible had happened to her face. Burned, I think. She was so pathetic, and she hardly had enough money to eat. But she was so proud and . . . and just lonely and sad. Some nights I'd hear her in her bed, crying softly to herself and whispering softly. Sometimes I could hear a few phrases: 'Oh,

why did you do it? . . . Why? . . . I'd have given you anything. I'd have given it all to you, anyway . . .'

 She would whisper things like that."

"What was her name?"

"She said it was Martha Johnson, but the way she said it . . . and something about her eyes . . . I don't think it was her real name. She was so pathetic and lonely. No money, no job. Nothing. No one came to see her. I can't understand why anyone would have hurt her."

But I could understand. Somewhere in the background it was Daisy and the two million. And this little Jean was caught with the rap.

I opened my mouth, closed it, then hauled down a long breath. I came up with my best publicity smile. "Don't worry, Jean. I have a hunch something will happen. Maybe the big round is still coming up. And I'll be around when you need me." I walked out, but I didn't feel like a smile. Ten little men kept cracking rocks inside my skull. My tongue felt like mildewed sawdust, and her frightened eyes kept tip-toeing around my brain. They'd find her. Sure. They always find 'em. And what would happen then? It would be Daisy or Jean for the rap, depending on whether I played quiet-rat.

And I never liked playing quiet-rat.

It was almost two o'clock in the morning. Sleet was rattling at the window as I punched for the elevator. The lobby was only half lighted, and the bar was empty except for the regular Patsys. And there sat this bulldog, Dike Jones, exactly where he'd been, only his chin was sagging eight inches and his eyes were in a beer-fog. I just stood there staring at him, trying to make him look at me. And finally his eyes crawled over my cheeks. He worked his flabby lips around until some words fell out:

"Lotsa money . . . Said I won . . . won big contest, see . . . Gonna be a big shot . . . Big shot this month, huh . . ." Then his chin flopped and he began to snore.

Anson was right. This kitty had plenty on the acting-ball. Anybody but me would have thought he was drunk. I just gave him the ugly eye and walked over to the bar. I was about to give Freddie the rye-sign when a chair scraped on the floor and crashed against the wall. I jerked around just in time to see this Whispery Stone flatten himself on the floor, busting his monacle as he went and spilling a drink down his bib. He just groaned and made like a tub of bourbon.

"Some nights," I said very bitter, "it is worse than being dead." I walked over and bent down, giving him a fast palm across the cheeks. He replied, "Uhhnnn . . ." He was positively thorough for the evening. I put him together and laid him over my shoulder, then got a good grip on this colored purse that was

supposed, according to Anson's column, to hold all the cherries.

As I stalked across the lobby, Prince Baba pops out of the elevator, brushing at his black beard. I almost stepped on him. He jumped back, fired me a hard look, then cackled like a soprano chicken.

"Ah, alas, the wrath of the grape! A wise man will stick to Vodka." And he pranced into the bar. I took Whispery up to the seventh floor, unlocked his room, turned on the light, and rolled him onto the bed. I pushed cold water into his face. Nothing happened. Finally I started hauling off his clothes. A .38 cannon popped out of his coat pocket, making me very nervous. I laid it over in a corner. At last I got him under the covers. Then I saw the purse again. Two hundred grand was supposed to be in there, and Whispery was over there solid with slumber. You could have raced elephants in here.

I picked up the purse. Crisp sounds came out.

Now, there is something about two hundred G's. In cash. In the hand. I decided I should see such a thing, so I ran the silver cord open, unbuttoned the inner lining, and let my fingers stroll around.

Beautiful clean G-notes. But only a hundred and forty of them. Whispery was traveling light, maybe. I sighed and closed the purse, but it had made me nervous. I shook him hard. Still no report. I started sweating, thinking of leaving the dough around and him drunk. That was when I noticed the half-bottle of twelve-year old Scotch on the dresser. Now, Scotch is very tight lately. But I started thinking.

I was doing him a big favor. If I sat up and watched his bankroll, he would certainly wish me to have a small gargle of his Scotch. Certainly.

So I eased off my shoes, slid down my tie, pulled up a chair, and leaned back with the bottle. Anyway, I needed some solitude to do my top-drawer thinking. You see, I am taking thinking lessons from the professor on the next floor. He has an encyclopedia lay-out, and from him I am learning to be a genius. Already I am very talented, through the L's. So I thought, and had a spoon of Whispery's Scotch.

Presently I was getting ideas like mad, but all of a sudden I felt myself getting very cotton-like in the throat. Also there were several more lights than I remembered, and these kept revolving around against the ceiling. A tingling, like sounds underwater, started playing in my ears. I tried to get up. Nothing happened. Then the lights began to fade.

I am very, very sleepy, I thought. And that is the last I remember.

IT WAS Crazy Illya Gresham's screamy voice that finally dug down to my brain and waked me up, but slow. I just sat there, my hands dangling down and my eyes hanging on the lower rope.

"Go away! You are the police, and I have done nothing!" Illya was screeching. "I am a great actress. Tomorrow I will appear in London, but tonight I must get my sleep! Go away!"

"Listen, sister, we're only asking you if you've seen this Cochran guy. The house dick. Have you seen—"

She started yelping back at them, but I had heard enough. I started to get up. My legs went left, right, then down, and I smacked the floor. My stomach felt like a pin-cushion in a hot oven. Somebody had been pouring hot asphalt down my tonsils. I grabbed the dresser and dragged myself up. I leaned there, trying to get some starch back into my knees. Never, never did I feel so horrible. Like I'd been dead for seven years and had taken a turn for the worse.

Suddenly heavy footsteps started down the corridor outside. They stopped exactly outside this door. "But a guest is sleeping—" I heard Sam protesting.

"You said this was Whispery Stone's room, didn't you?" this block-of-granite voice broke in. "And you said Cochran lugged him upstairs from the bar. Okay, let's give a knock." Which he did.

I staggered and started toward the door. Then I saw one thing. I mean, I didn't see it. The purse! Gone!

I crawled on the floor. I looked in my pockets. Everywhere. Gone!

I glanced at Whispery. Maybe he'd waked up and gotten—

My brain stopped ticking. Very slowly a wave of cold glue came crawling up my throat. I leaned across the bed. I could see a foot down his open mouth, and a million miles down inside his empty black eyes. His face was gray. Then I touched him. His skin was like cold damp leather. And he wasn't breathing.

"Open up in there!" the block of granite was shouting. Doors were starting to slam all along the hall.

Suddenly I got a terrible intuition that this granite-voice was going to be hard to chat with, especially meeting him like this. Fast I tip-toed to the window, eased it up, and caught a volley of sleet in the face. From the looks of the sky, it was getting close to dawn. The fire escape was like an ice-skating rink. I edged out and froze my feet. I'd forgotten my damn shoes. Next I froze my fingers. Just as I got the window down, the door flapped open and old granite bulled in. Behind him Sam, then maybe a dozen people in gowns and

robes. I stayed there just long enough to see the dick's brows climb into his forehead. He was one of those big loose-armed guys with a double mattress for shoulders and a chin that could shovel snow. A long sleepy face and hungry blue eyes.

He gave a slow look around, like he was slowly eating the room, then he shuffled to the bed and reached out a ham of a hand. The fingers waited a few seconds on Whispery's face, then the dick stopped looking sleepy. He snapped at Sam to shut the door. Then he pulled down the covers. I almost jumped off the fire escape.

In the chest-middle of Whispery's under-shirt was a big stain that wasn't ketchup.

The dick stood up straight. Then he reached down and picked up my shoes. His lips moved. Sam's lips moved. And I moved. I skidded down the fire escape to the fourth floor windows and took a peep down the hall. Just as I started into the building, a cop strolled out of my room. So they had this part covered.

I was burning and freezing all over. And to think, I quit fighting to get in a quiet profession. I scrambled back up the stairs, all the way up to the thirteenth floor. I needed one thing more than a pair of shoes, and that was an alibi for recently. And who did I have to go to? . . . Yeah, Daisy . . . Just like drowning yourself to wash your face.

I slipped into the thirteenth corridor, took a glance, and hustled up the stairs to the penthouse. I started to knock, then heard voices inside. I tiptoeed along the hall to the kitchen door of the penthouse, sneaked a look into the darkness, and closed the door behind me. From the dark side of the living room door, I could hear Daisy's angel-bright voice saying:

"... but it's so exciting, having things happen like this. And the police need *something* to do, or they'd be bored. I don't know why you act this way at all."

"But it's so . . . so sordid!" This bleating sound came from William Swim. "Don't you understand, it is not *good taste* to have all this violence and publicity. The police, indeed!" he wailed. "Just answer me, would you ask your *mother* to come to a place like this?"

"Oh, don't you know? I don't have any mother."

William Swim groaned. I heard him prancing around nervously. It sounded like he'd walked into the study, so I risked edging the door.

"Daisy!" I gave a fast whisper. When she turned, I gave her the soft sound. "In here, fast. No talk."

She gave a bright smile and ducked in. I pulled her back to the kitchen. "Now, fast before Swim starts hunting," I panted. "There has been a misunderstanding downstairs. That Whispery Stone guy is dead—"

"Dead!" Her blue eyes got round. "You mean, *completely* dead."

"There ain't any other style. Just quiet and listen. There are a couple of minor details. Such as, did I kill him? If—"

"Oh, did you, Wiggles? Did—"

"No! No, no, no! Please do not even mention such a thing." I mopped my face. I get very nervous, trying to discuss things with Daisy. "I did not kill him. But people are suspicious sometimes. So listen and kindly do not become confused when the dicks drift up here. This is what you will say when they ask you. Now . . ." I dragged down a hot-tar breath. "First, I've been up here for several hours. You can't remember exactly how long. Second, I came up to tell you that I'd put Whispery Stone to bed after he'd gotten drunk. I came to ask you what to do about his money-bag . . . Are you getting this?"

"Oh, yes. I think it's wonderful. What else?" She kept smiling.

"Tell 'em we . . . we talked about it and decided we shouldn't handle somebody's money when they didn't know. Then . . . Let's see . . . Then we had a beer. Just you and me. I got sleepy. Say that. I got sleepy and you thought I was so tired, you'd let me sleep. You got that?" And she nodded, very sweetly. "Now, when they get here, come back here and wake me up. And Daisy . . . Please, please, make it look good. Leave us have no mistakes, please."

"Don't you worry a minute, Wiggles. I know just what to do." The way she smiled made me feel not so sure. She bounced out. I got four bottles of beer from the icebox, emptied them down the sink, pulled a chair to the table, and laid my head in my arms.

But never did a guy feel less like resting. Never.

I didn't rest more than five minutes. I heard the solid knocking, then granite-voice boomed from the living room. Swim put in his high squeaks, and Daisy gave with a golden laugh. Then I heard the army coming back this way. I stayed there, squinting my eyes shut and making like a dream. The door opened. It closed.

Swim gave with gasp. "But when I came back for a drink—"

"See! For hours," Daisy warbled. "Doesn't he look exhausted?"

"Yeah. Just tired to death, and I do mean death," came the growl. These feet walked all around me, then this sledge-hammer dropped on my shoulder. "Wake it up, Cochran. Come on, you've had enough."

"Uh? Huh? . . ." I blinked, giving them the dim eye. I dredged up a yawn and stared around. "I *musta* been taking a nap," I said carefully.

"Sure. A guy needs his beauty-hour after a tough day of—"

"Now, I am going to explain everything perfectly," Daisy began happily. "First, oh, hours ago, Wiggles came up here and said that Mr. Whispery Stone had become intoxicated. I mean drunk. So he'd put him to bed in his room. Mr. Stone's room. Then Wiggles came up here to ask me what to do about the money Mr. Stone had. I said no. I mean, I said nothing. Don't do anything—that's what I said. Just like that." Again this beautiful smile. "So then—"

"Wait!" the dick howled. "When I want to know something from—"

"So then we had some beer—Wiggles and I. Right in this little kitchen, we had beer. After that Wiggles seemed so tired and sound asleep that I thought it would be a terrible shame to wake him up, so I just left him sleeping. Just like he was when we came in. Isn't that right, Wiggles?"

"It . . . Yeah. Exactly right." She'd sounded as convincing as a radio commercial. The dick pushed his hat back and planted his legs, like he'd come to stay.

"Now, if I may intrude myself a little," he began sarcastically. "My name is Darkin." I said it was a pleasure and held out my hand. He didn't want any. His voice moved along like a bulldozer. "May I get personal and ask where you left your shoes, Cochran?"

"In Stone's room. I didn't want to wake him, so I took them off and tip-toed around. After I got in the hall, I noticed I'd left them, but I didn't want to disturb him."

"That was very considerate." Still sarcastic. "Perhaps you can tell me about this money Stone had. A large sum?"

"I don't know. I heard that it was, so I worried—"

"Ah, you worried. But you know nothing about the fate of the money?" And I said no.

"And when you undressed Stone, did you observe any marks of violence, Cochran?" Again I said no.

He started moving his shovel-jaw around, like he was hunting a place to chew a deep hole. His eyes were black and careful, and Swim kept making raspy breathing sounds in the corner. Daisy just smiled.

"I wonder, Cochran, if you have ever heard of a place called the Grinley Apartments. On lower Third Avenue—close to the Bowery."

My jaw came unhooked. And a funny bright chirp came out of Daisy. "Oh, of all things!" she piped.

Darkin spun around on his heel. "You sound interested, Miss Field. Have you—"

"Never heard of the place!" I threw in frantically, making hard faces toward Daisy. "Seldom go to the Bowery. Never have

liked the place. You know how it is when—"

"Shut up!" Darkin growled. "Continue, Miss Field. Why did you seem so interested when I mentioned the Grinley Apartments?"

Then a light of baby-blue understanding came into her eyes. "But I don't remember anything about it, really, officer. Not a thing."

He made a grinding sound in his chest as he turned back toward me. "We will forget it for a minute. I came here originally on another matter." Now his eyes were very hard, and his voice had slowed to a crawl. "Sometimes during the early part of last evening, a woman named Martha Johnson was murdered in the Grinley Apartments. In her room was found a scrap of hotel stationery from the Gondola. In the process of our investigation of that detail, we learned from a cab driver that you went from here to the Grinley Apartments last evening around seven or seven-thirty. Now . . . Would it inconvenience you to explain *why* you went there, and what you were doing in the dead woman's room, Cochran?"

Things got very quiet around the kitchen suddenly. I swallowed. It was like somebody had torn a sheet of sandpaper. Here it was . . . Which would it be—Daisy or Jean? . . . I felt sweat waking up on my face. I swallowed again.

"Well, it was like this . . . Like this . . ." I stopped again, giving myself an opening for a fast idea. Then I got it! An answer the guy couldn't touch. I worked-up a weary, cynical smile, like it says private ops do and started slow. "It was like this. This Johnson dame called me on the telephone about seven in the evening. The minute she spoke, I realized she was desperate. She said she'd heard of my confidential work. Could I get down there, and fast? . . . So I hooked a cab. Going to her aid, you understand? But when I got to her room, she was gone. I waited around for maybe thirty minutes. Probably dropped that scrap of paper then. When she didn't show, I cancelled it off as a crack-pot call and came back here. Yeah, came back here," I said solidly again.

Darkin's lips twitched. "Listen, you thick-eared phony—" he started. He got control of himself, and his lips flattened into a gray line. "So right out of nowhere, she called you and said come down?" I nodded. His lips curled again. "And on this other deal, you just put Whispery Stone to bed, took off your shoes so not to wake him, and tip-toed out, leaving him there with a sack of cash."

"I am glad you are beginning to understand," I said gratefully.

I will not repeat what he said. He chewed hard at his tongue then turned suddenly to Swim. "You! Who are you?" he barked.

"William Montgomery Swim, Junior," he

CHAPTER THREE

The Terror of Toledo

bleated quickly. His rosy face was very serious. There was perspiration at the roots of his curly blond hair. "I am the cultural . . . the social director here." He looked anxious to please.

"When we first walked in here, you started to say something about how you'd come back here for a drink and Cochran hadn't been here. *Didn't you?*" He looked like he was going to eat Swim.

My breath froze. Swim's bow-tie wobbled as he swallowed. His little mustache twitched. At least he squeezed it out. "Er, no, sir. What I started to say was, When I came back for a drink, Mr. Cochran was asleep and I didn't wake him. Yes, sir." He sighed and mopped his double chin. My pump started working again.

I thought Darkin had busted a vessel. His face puffed out like a frog, and his cheeks got purple. His neck swelled. He opened his mouth to blow the walls down. And the door opened with a bang.

"What about it?" came the roar. "I hear it's been a killing, huh?" In thundered Crowbar Mary, waving her two-ton arms and grinning like a subway opening. The battered parrot was hanging onto her shoulder and bobbing around, looking ugly.

"Who is that woman—" Darkin started wildly.

"I wanna see the body!" Crowbar roared. "I likes a murder better—"

The parrot stuck out his neck, cocked a blood-shot eye at Darkin, then gave a nasty shrill. There was a splatter of wings, then a loud yell from Darkin as the parrot dive-bombed his ear and stuck there. Everything tangled. Darkin tearing around the kitchen, beating at his head, and Crowbar yelling to see the body, and Swim moaning about how disgraceful it was. All the time Daisy was laughing like mad, and the parrot kept cursing into Darkin's ear.

It ended with a solid smack as Darkin missed a turn and rammed the icebox with his head. Down he flopped. The parrot let loose and waddled back toward Crowbar. Darkin grabbed his ear and jumped toward the door. Half-way out, he turned around and waving his fist.

"I'll be back! We're not through with this!" he screamed. The parrot leaned out again. Darkin vanished slamming the door behind him.

"See?" Daisy gurgled. "I told you everything would be just fine!"

"Just fine! Just fine, you say! And what—" I strangled, got my tongue back into my mouth, and gave her a violent eye. "Wait till he gets that ear mended! Wait till—" I strangled, and this time I choked. I grabbed the door and got out.

THERE was nothing else to do, and dawn was painting muddy pictures at the windows. So I crawled into my room to get some sleep. It looked like four whales had been giving a cocktail party here, and somebody had gotten sore.

The dresser drawers were open. My forty-eight dollar suit was on the floor like a bathmat. The mattress was up-turned, and the sheets were ready for a hard wash. It wasn't hard to guess what had happened: The city boys had been hunting for the place I'd hidden the dough.

I was too tired and nervous to care. I put on my overcoat, raised the window, and laid myself out on the floor. In less than nothing I was working on the wood.

Morning was something different. Mornings are always bad, I say. I felt like something the dogs had chewed over. The clock said ten-thirty. I did a slow shave, crawled into a fresh shirt, and made it down to the bar. I couldn't have looked an egg in the plate. I hung myself over the bar, where Freddie was putting the last touch on the glasses, and whimpered for a breakfast beer. Then came this wheeze beside me: "Gimme a aspirin. Make it two. Gimme also a rye."

I blinked around. It was the bulldog, Dike Jones. And so help me, he looked like he just crawled out of his all-night chair over there. Tie all hanging down, suit crumpled, and a putty-fat look around the face. His hands shook as he hoisted the drink carefully. What an actor he was! Like Anson had said . . . But this time . . . I wet my lips and got the tar out of my throat.

"You look like you'd done a few rounds in the ring, maybe," I said, being very friendly. And with that he bobbed his head, slapped down the glass, and threw a foggy left and right.

"For eighteen years, the Terror of Toledo!" he barked. He grabbed his glass again, panting from all the road-work.

"And how come you're here? With the Fifth Avenue garments?"

He wobbled, held onto the bar, and fixed me with a bleary eye. "Contest," he said solemnly. "And I won. This month I am like a dude."

I'd heard part of this from him before. I had another beer, figuring a way to feel him out. "Which contest?" I said.

"I dunno. The Barney, he just walked up and said. Said I was the winner. Yeah." Then he fumbled for another drink.

"Which Barney. Tell me about it."

"Well, like this . . ." He gargled the rye,

coughed, then gave me his bleary eyes again. "Two days ago I am standing on Broadway and Forty-four, wondering about the next drink. And up comes this Barney. A gentleman is what he is, you can see from his rig. And he says, 'Hah, you are the winner!'" Dike pulled on the rye again. "I can't remember any contest, but the Barney tells me. Says I bought a two-bit ticket, which I have forgot. And anyway, I have now won myself five hundred in cash, plus new cloths, plus new lunch-kits to carry the stuff in, and also a reservation at this place called the Gondola Hotel. I am supposed to stay there until the steam ship arrives, and then I go to Bermuda. See, I have won a trip to Bermuda. . . ?" Again he sucks at the potato-poison. "The Barney says, all I gotta do is like he says, and when I get to Bermuda, the other five hundred is waiting. So I go back to my room, and there is the lunch-kits, also the clothes, also the envelope and the five hundred. So what can I lose?" He fed me his gold-plated grin and gargled again. "This month I am putting on with the dog."

"Sure, sure," I agreed. The guy was good. Anybody but me would have believed his story. But I had him hurt, and I kept pressing him like when I was in the ring. "And what about the work-tools in that little suitcase?" I said pointedly. "Did you win them in this contest?"

"I dunno. I ain't seen them, but I guess I did." He blinked and seemed to wake up from dreaming. "Whatta you mean, work-tools?"

That was when I got mad. Remembering him slugging me, and probably murdering the Johnson dame, and then giving the last push to Whispery. I didn't have anything solid on him, but I was going to let him know I had him ticketed. So I put a clamp on his arm and leaned over.

"Look, Dike," I growled, "I've got the stuff on you. I know who you are, why you are, and what you do. See? . . . It's just a matter of time between me and you." Being subtle, that was my idea, see?

He jerked back his arm, stared at me a minute, wet his lips, and started backing away. "Geeze, Mack," he said to Freddie, "this guy is punchy, huh?"

What an actor! Anybody else would have fallen for it. But me—I just kept giving him the cold eye as he backed out the door and hustled toward the elevator.

The way I figured it, I'd thrown him off balance. From now on, it was just a waiting game until he made a fatal slip.

I was between the fourth beer and some careful thinking when the early-noon edition of the *Clarion* came in. Freddie started reading it, then funny sounds came out of

his throat. "It says that gal in the Bowery was once a grand opera singer. Plenty of potatoes once, says."

"Which gal in—" I grabbed the paper and gave a look. It was on the third page. A photo of the room and her body there on the floor. Then another photo of the picture I'd seen in her room—the one in the tiger-skin and barefooted with the sword.

EX-DIVA MURDERED IN BOWERY HOTEL!!!

I gave the story a close gander. They'd found some papers hidden in her room, and sure enough, her name wasn't Martha Johnson. It was Martha McCormack, and ten years ago she'd had the grand opera business in her fist. Fifty grand a year, not counting tours. Worth maybe a quarter of a million dollars, it said. Then something had happened. Nobody knew for sure.

All they knew was, Martha McCormack had gone to Mexico for a vacation. She'd gotten sick down there. Nobody knew what. Later she'd turned-up married to a guy nobody knew. She was out of opera, now. Just moving around, traveling. And then one morning some Ohio cops had looked over a cliff and seen the wreck of a touring-trailer down there. It had gone over the cliff and burned. And nearby they had found Martha McCormack, about half-and-half between alive and dead. And very burned. She had survived. But she'd never talked. Nobody had ever known what had happened to her husband. She'd left the hospital, unable to pay her bill, and nobody had ever heard of her until now. Now, they'd found her—murdered in a Bowery flop-joint.

I laid down the paper. "Whatta you think?" Freddie asked.

I just looked down into my beer. But I knew . . . A con-man, a wonderful actor, had tagged her in Mexico and worked her into a wedding. After that, her potatoes became his. And presently, after he'd jumped out, a touring-trailer had taken a dive over a cliff. With Martha. And a certain con-man had drifted along with the quarter-million.

And the con-man? . . . I didn't even need a guess.

I laid down my beer and squeezed my fingers against my palms. Then I heard this roar from the lobby. "Now, everybody what wants to feel me biceps, step right this way!"

A parrot said the same thing in Spanish. There was a lot of noise in the lobby, and this little dandy, Prince Baba, came scurrying into the bar and piping for a brandy. "She'll murder Groaning Gertie tonight! My little darling is the next world's champion!" He dug a hole in his beard and poured the brandy

in opening his eyes wide as it went down. I stalked out through the lobby. There was Crowbar, planted in the middle of the lobby with her arms cocked up. Her grizzled yellow hair hung over her piggy eyes, and she was wearing a pair of crimson shorts and an undershirt that would have hidden a circus tent.

"Just feel me biceps!" she roared. The parrot glared at me. I ducked into the elevator and went up. I wanted another talk with Jean. Such as, had a man ever sneaked around Martha's room? And if so, would she take a peep and identify the guy as Dike Jones?

I knocked three times and finally gave a whisper: "It's Rocky."

That opened it up. Her eyes told me she hadn't slept all night, and then I saw the two hard rolls on the dresser, plus a half-slice of salami. Her cheeks turned slowly red when I looked back at her.

"I was afraid to leave the room," she said softly. But I knew that wasn't the whole story. I remembered the ten bucks, if you counted some twice. And while I just looked at her, she held her little chin higher. "Please, Rocky. You don't have to look at me that way." Proud, see?

"I don't *have* to," I said back at her. "But if you don't mind, I will." I wanted her to smile. I wanted the hunted shadows to drop away from her eyes. And then she gave me the smile, like she could see what I was thinking. But it didn't last long.

"The police were here last night, weren't they?" she whispered.

I started to give it the easy brush-off, but slowly she shook her head. "I know it. I heard them. It was about the thing at the Grinley, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but they don't know you're here. They were just asking—"

"I knew. I knew," she began to whisper. Her fingers tightened in the folds of her dress, then she swept back her dark hair. "They *must* have followed me! They know I'm here and . . . and . . . Oh, Rocky, where can I go? What can I do? I—"

"Take it easy. I want you to remember carefully. Now . . . Can you remember seeing a man around Martha's room the last few days? Or even a stranger around the Grinley? A curious stranger, looking, casing the place? Can you?"

Her brows came together. "I don't . . . There are so many people in the Bowery, I hardly . . . But wasn't there . . . There was a man!" she whispered suddenly.

"What did he look like?" My eyes hung onto hers.

"He . . . But I . . . I don't know," she stammered hopelessly. "I passed him on the stairs, yesterday at noon. I can't be sure

where he'd been, but I remember. Her door—Martha's door—has a thin squeaking sound. And I'd heard it as I came up the stairs. Then I passed him, and he was going down. He was . . . Just average, I think. Not large or—"

"But maybe you might recognize him if you saw him?" I put in.

"I think . . . I might. I could try and—" I grabbed the house phone and got Sam at the desk.

"Call Dike Jones. Tell him somebody wants him in the lobby," I said. "Important, tell him. And forget about me." I hung up and grabbed her hand. "We're taking a walk and a look into the lobby."

We used the stairs, fast. I figured we'd beaten him down, so I steered Jean around the lobby to the little back corridor that leads down to the basement. I parked her behind the oval-glass door. "Wait here. I'll walk him around where you can see if he's the guy."

I left her there and took a lean near the bar door. Crowbar was letting them have her muscle, and grinning like the rocky end of a canyon. Daisy was flitting around, saying wasn't it wonderful. And this Prince Baba was giving me the what-goes look, blowing into his beard and tapping his little foot slowly. I had a hunch, standing there, he wasn't as cute as he looked. Smart little eyes. Smart fast hands. In fact, smart all over.

It was five minutes. Then ten. And finally the elevator opened and Dike poured himself out. Eyes like two barricade lanterns. No shave. He staggered, swayed against the wall, then hauled himself up to the desk. "Uh? . . . Who says he wantsta see me." There was a jigger of gin on every word. I knew Jean could see him from there. I left Sam arguing with him and idled along the wall. Baba kept twitching his beard in my direction. I slipped into the shadowy rear corridor.

"Well, was that the— Hey, where are—" Then I stopped. She was gone, but something was left. Two, three small dark drops on the tile floor. Still warm. I got off my knees in a hurry. It was *blood*!

Whatever had happened, there was only one way she could have gone—down the concrete stairs to the basement. I took them three at a time. The basement was a mixture of darkness and flashes of flame from the furnace. And hot as a July subway. The furnace was blasting away like a locomotive on a long grade. I found the light-switch. The old globe made sickly yellow shadows in the corners. Here were busted chairs, mops and brooms, the scent of oil and fire. But nothing that looked like Jean.

But this is the only way—I stopped thinking and stared at the hell-red door of the

furnace. Something horrible started happening in my stomach. If somebody—

And then I heard the clatter of the old freight elevator high up in the shaft. Suddenly I twisted around. I'd forgotten about the elevator. It kept battering around up there. Fast I crossed the basement and started punching the automatic-buttons. There's a glass section in the metal door, and while I stood there, I gave a look down into the shaft-pit. And there was just enough light to let me see!

My stomach dropped through my heels. I let out a yell that should have blown out the furnace-fire. She was down there in the pit! Tied with a piece of wire! Unconscious, with her head hanging forward and her dark hair loose around her shoulders. I could see a thin trail of blood down her temple. But that wasn't the thing that froze my teeth.

She was tied so that she was half-erect—tied by wire to the steel-track that guided the elevator-weight! And her head was bound tight—exactly where the two tons of lead and steel would slide down to crush her. And the weight was coming down! I could hear the elevator clattering upward—far upward!

And you can't punch the button to cancel a signal that's already working! It was coming down to kill her, and there was nothing I—

The rest was like one of those slow-motion nightmares. I grabbed this steel shovel and started slugging the door like a wild man. I busted the windows. I got a wedge on the door and almost broke the shovel. But the inside latch snapped loose. I slammed the door back, sent a glance up, saw the black ugly weight gliding down past the third floor, and then I jumped the six feet into the pit.

I almost tore her neck off getting the wire loose. The shadow of the weight passed down the shaft-wall. There it was! And in that last instant, I pulled her loose and we sprawled flat on the greasy floor of the pit. The two-ton weight glided across the scrapes of wire and gnawed them into nothing.

I JUST lay there, looking far up the shaft at the bottom of the elevator up there. Finally I started living again. I stood up and got the hot tar from my throat. My stomach came out of my shoes. I picked Jean up carefully and hunted a pulse. It was still working. There was an ugly cut in the fringe of her dark hair, and she was breathing as softly as a sleeping bird.

I balanced her over my shoulder and crawled out of the shaft. I had to stop again and get the rubber out of my knees. And all the time thinking . . . Dike Jones must have spotted us and recognized her. So he hadn't come straight to the lobby. Oh, no . . . He

come down this freight elevator, slipped up behind Jean and slugged her, then set her up to be smashed to death. And then . . . Yeah, then he'd waddled into the lobby from the front elevator, and looking so drunk you'd never have thought he could find his hat.

What an actor! Terrific!

I kept punching until I got the elevator down. We went up to the fourth floor and I gave a careful look down the corridor. It was empty. Fast I hustled into my room and hung Jean on the bed. I made with the towels and cold water, but she was not getting up. My hands started getting sticky while I remembered things about concussions and fractures. But if I called a doctor, then—

"Don't move too fast, Cochran," a stony-cold voice said from the door behind me. "Get your hands over your shoulders."

My tongue slid down in my stomach. I reached, and very slow I turned around. Darkin was closing the door behind him, and the biggest .45 in New York was glaring at me cock-eyed.

"Get in that corner!" There were knives and razors in his voice. I was trying to get my tongue back and explain he was mistaken. Meanwhile I jumped into the corner. He stalked to the bed and leaned over. I could see something happen in the muscles along his jaw. Also in his eyes. I was starting to get very upset. He twisted around and let me have the poison end of a slow smile. "Now. Now," he said softly. "Now I get the whole picture, Cochran."

"I will explain carefully. I do not want a misunderstanding about this matter," I began very politely. "Furthermore, I—"

"Suppose I explain," he said flatly. "This is the babe that did a duck-out at the Grinley Apartments where Martha Johnson, formerly known as Martha McCormack was murdered. And in this babe's room. Now—"

"Precisely. Very unfortunate, and I assure you—"

"Shut up!" His snow-shovel jaw worked up and down. "Martha McCormack had plenty of dough once, before she got hurt in a wreck. People thought she'd lost it. But maybe she didn't. You want to know what I think?"

I didn't, but he was going to inform me, anyway.

"I think she was ashamed of her burned face. She became a recluse. Then you and this dame learned who she was, and figured there was dough to be had for a killing. So you had a killing. Now you get extra ideas. Why split the take? Why not choke this dame to death, and then—"

"No! No! Positively no, never!" I yelled. "Kindly permit me to—"

"Look at her throat! Look at those marks!

And if I hadn't walked in here exactly when I—" he cut in like a knife.

"Don't bounce that gun like that!" I strangled. "Listen to me! Somebody else tried to kill her! I pulled her out of the elevator shaft where the guy had her tied. See? He was sending the elevator weight down to crush her. And I saved her life! I—"

"Beautiful," he barked sarcastically. "And if I asked you, I'm sure you could tell me exactly who the killer is?"

"Yes, indeed." I was very glad to see him cooperate. I wiped my lips with a salty tongue. "Dike Jones," I reported triumphantly. "You have certainly heard of the great Dike Jones. A terrific actor of a criminal! A master of masquerade and—"

"Listen, you thick-eared stumble-brain, Dike Jones is spending ten years in an Oklahoma penitentiary, so don't feed me that. If—"

"No! Wrong! Maybe he escaped! He's here! With a bag of murder-tricks! I saw 'em. I—" I hauled down another breath. "If you—"

"I don't want any," he snapped flatly. "You are taking a stroll with me. Maybe a little conversation will help you remember what you did with McCormack's money. And Whispery Stone's bank roll, too! Get on your heels and walk out that—"

Which is where the door opened and a fast cloud of gold rushed in. Daisy. "Oh, Wiggles! The most terrible thing! Prince Baba thinks that somebody is trying to—" She got a load of Darkin and the cannon. "What is that man doing to you?" she demanded. "If he—"

"Take it easy, Miss Field," Darkin growled. "Cochran is under arrest. I'm taking him downtown, and I don't want any trouble with—"

"You *can't* arrest Wiggles! I just . . . I just won't let you!" she yelped. "I need him. You're just being silly and—"

"Stand back, Miss Field!" he shouted. "I warn you, I won't—"

"Oh, piffle. I think you are sweet, but give me the gun and run along and—"

"Miss Field! Damn it, listen—"

"Daisy!" I yelled. She reached right into the Betsy. Darkin snarled something that should have melted his teeth. He jumped back, trying to keep her off the gun, and that was when he tripped himself on the chair. His legs went forward and his shoulders went back. The gun started spitting at the ceiling. I grabbed Daisy and jumped onto the rug, getting out of bullet-alley. Just as we hit the floor, Darkin finished his back-flip and hit the dresser. The big mirror swayed as he grabbed wildly, then the cord tore loose from the nail. *Swack!*

After that there was a long minute when the pieces of broken glass dripped like dandruff off Darkin's head and shoulders. Slowly he settled down in the middle of the floor, laid his long chin against his chest, made a sleepy-baby sound, and started dreaming.

"You— You—" I wailed. "You've sent us all to Sing Sing! You—"

"But I was only protecting you," Daisy said beautiful. "The idea, taking you to jail. And anyway, Prince Baba is terribly upset. He—"

"To hell with Baba! They'll give me life, anyway! They—"

"He thinks somebody stole Hercules! He says somebody's trying to upset Crowbar and fix it so she'll lose the match tonight and—"

"Who is Hercules? What does—"

"The parrot. And Crowbar just loves him and can't wrestle unless he's at the ringside to encourage—"

"And I should worry about a damn parrot when—" I jerked around, and there was Jean—sitting up in bed with a glassy-green look on her face and moaning to herself. I grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

"Wake up! Listen! Try to remember! Who hit you? Did you see him?"

She just gave me a horrible blank stare and finally shook her head. "So dark . . . I couldn't see . . . Didn't hear anything."

I bit my teeth and tried to do some rapid thinking. From the looks of Darkin, he would be dreaming for at least thirty minutes. But when he waked up . . . I shuddered and started moaning. My only chance was to move fast, keep ahead of him. Keep away from him. And *nail Dike myself!* It was us—me and Jean—or him.

And in the meanwhile, here was Jean. And she wasn't ready to go dancing . . . I blinked at Daisy. She opened her mouth: "You simply *must* find Hercules before—"

I grabbed her shoulders and talked fast and low. "Daisy, I'm in a hurry. Not much time and plenty to do. You can't understand, so don't talk. Just listen. Carefully . . . This girl—her name is Jean—must be hidden. No one, and I mean *no one* is to know where she is. Now, get this: Help her to the freight elevator. Keep away from people. Don't be seen. Take her up to the penthouse. Hide her in that concealed liquor closet off the living room. Nobody's been in there since prohibition. I can't hang around here. But if you get a phone call from Joe Rocky, grab it fast—it'll be me. Do you understand, now?"

Oh, but she understood perfectly, she said, and it was going to be simply cunning, teasing the police this way, wasn't it? . . . All of this with a beautiful blue-eyed smile.

Last, I grabbed Darkin's cannon and shoved out of there. I stopped at Dike Jones' room.

No answer. I used the key, but he wasn't in. I started sweating worse. I *had* to get him, and very soon. I romped across the lobby. "Which way did Dike Jones travel?" I asked Sam.

First he had to settle his false teeth and think. "I heard you saying something about a ticket for the wrestling match tonight. Must have gone to buy one. That was an hour ago, now.

A wrestling ticket! . . . And a thousand places in Manhattan where they sell 'em. An hour from now every cop in three states would be swinging his stick for me. I started to say something, then a wild-bull bellow roared down the elevator shaft. Mr. Darkin was now awake and talking.

I went out and grabbed a cab for Times Square. The next few rounds were going to be tough indeed, I had a feeling. I chewed my teeth and tried to remember how to be a genius.

I ducked the cab at Broadway and Forty-second and took the I.R.T. to Thirty-fourth. In a garlic-scented little bar near Penn Station, I sat down to pant with a beer. A little Billie came in with the late papers. I started reading.

They were giving the match a big spread. Pictures of Crowbar in her grunting suit and Hercules sitting on her shoulder. And another picture of a small elephant named Groaning Gertie, the Champ. She could have got a job scaring hell out of tombstones. The odds were two-to-one in favor of Crowbar, it said. Groaning Gertie was past her prime. And then I saw this paragraph down at the bottom of Dapper Wilson's Sports Hints:

Those canny gentlemen who will give-and-take your wagers along Broadway are reporting a strong flow of new Gertie money this morning. Crisp new G-notes, we hear. Never before in the history of the mat has there been so much coin wagered on a girls' get-together. Somebody should get rich, and somebody should get much wiser before midnight tonight.

"G-notes! Fresh new G-notes," I started mumbling. "They came out for betting this morning. Maybe Whispery's G-notes, huh? And Dike's betting on Groaning Gertie. I wonder . . ." I just sat there, and after a while I started thinking about that damned parrot, Hercules. Maybe, like Daisy had been yelling, Hercules *was* stolen. Maybe, also, it *would* upset Crowbar and make her easy. Maybe, in short, Dike had gotten interested in parrots. So . . .

I had another beer and phoned the Gondola. "Daisy, this is Joe Rocky," I said softly. "Can you talk without anyone—"

She gave a high squeal and said everything

was simply wonderful. Darkin had gotten awful excited and made a lot of phone calls and maybe the police were looking for me. In fact, she said, Darkin had even slapped her when she'd told him not to get excited. He said she'd get two years for something. But everything was all right, except nobody could find Hercules and Crowbar was getting hysterical and Baba was screaming about calling his congressman. Jean was okay, and sleeping in the liquor closet. I hung up and called back.

This time I growled like a sick lion: "Is Mr. Dike Jones in?"

No, sir. Mr. Dike Jones was not in. He had stepped out several hours ago and hadn't returned. Any messages? No message, I said.

I worked my way through a couple of hours of beer. It was a strictly beer-and-cash joint, with this long-faced Patsy behind the bar, looking like the world had kicked him in the teeth and kept the change. He didn't like customers, and mostly he just snoozed near a little radio that was giving with cowboy music. Which was okay with me until the news report came on. This fast-tongue announcer hustled us around the world, then grabbed a deep breath, and said:

A special bulletin from Police Headquarters! Attention! Rockingham Cochran, also known as Rocky Cochran, escaped from the clutches of detectives earlier today after brutally beating Detective William Darkin and leaving him unconscious. Darkin was attempting to arrest Cochran for questioning in regard to a series of murders. Among the known victims are Martha McCormack, former opera singer, and Whispery Stone, legendary gambler, whose body was found at dawn this morning in his room at the Gondola Hotel, where Cochran was employed as a house detective. Full details on this newest crime-spree are lacking, but it is known that Cochran is heavily armed and desperate. We have been asked to broadcast the following description of Cochran. Citizens are asked to co-operate with the police in notifying them of Cochran's appearance. He is thirty-five years old. Six feet tall, weighing about a hundred and ninety pounds. Black hair and eyes. Round face. His nose is outstanding—a large nose which has been broken frequently, and somewhat resembles an "S." Last seen wearing a brown suit, white shirt, a red bow-tie. He is known to be armed, we repeat, and—

The door opened and a cop strolled in. "Got any gum, Mack?"

I went down to the door after a pack of cigarettes I would have dropped if I'd had time. For about two minutes the cop and the sour-faced Patsy talked it over while I sweated around in the cigarette butts. Finally the cop went away. I crawled back on my stool, but shaky. Patsy dragged himself down the bar

HOTEL MURDER

"You want another—"

His jaw hung. His eyes opened up. His throat made with a sound and he kept looking at my nose. I sat there like a butterfly on a pin. Suddenly he twisted around and glanced toward the door. The cop was unpeeling a stick of gum on the curb. Patsy started walking away, oh, very casual-like.

"Hey!" I barked. He jumped, gave a little yelp, and broke for the door. "Help! Help!" he was screaming. The cop jerked around. The other customers in the bar threw away their glasses and started moving. I tossed a fast look around and lunged for the back of the joint. I locked the door of the men's room, slapped up the window, crawled out, and dropped into Thirty-third Street. By the time I'd gone a hundred feet, everybody in the garment district was yelling and pointing at me. A cop was whistling. I ducked into the subway and took what came. By the time I got to Fourteenth Street, my nerves were whanging like bass-fiddle strings. Never were my teeth so cold.

I found a bean-and-bread shop and gave Daisy another call. Things were terrible. Baba was trying to get the F.B.I. Hercules was still missing. Why didn't I stop all this nonsense and come back and help hunt for—I popped down the receiver and called Sam. No, Mr. Dike Jones had not returned.

I was in a hard sweat when I went into this newsreel theater. But it was a dark place to wait. I came out at seven-thirty. It was dark and cold as a banker's smile. Again I gave Sam the ring. Again no Mr. Dike Jones. Then I got a horrible hunch!

Dike had gotten the dough and moved along his way, leaving me to pick up his murder-check. Maybe I'd never see him again unless—

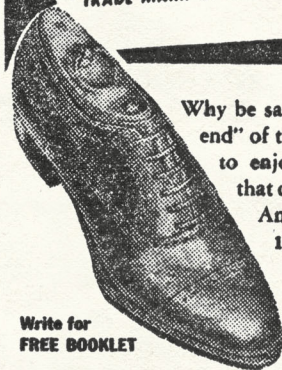
The championship match! He'd be there to watch his bets!

I grabbed a late paper and found the announcement. The main event would start at nine o'clock. I ducked into a permanent fire-sale trap and bought a flop hat, a tie that wasn't bow or red. I picked up a second-hand black raincoat. I went out looking like a talent-scout for a chain-gang.

I was up at the Arena on West Forty-ninth Street by eight-thirty. There was nothing left but upper balconies. I had one and took a lean in the shadows inside the foyer. Inside people were screaming at the prelims. The ermine trade was streaming in, lugging opera glasses. It sounded like the place was packed—at least twenty-five thousand people. It was crawling close to nine o'clock. Then, at the last minute, in popped Dike Jones, half-hidden under a big overcoat. He had his hat



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DETECTIVE TALES

pulled low. He glanced around but didn't see me. I was ten steps behind him when he hustled up the concrete ramp and into Section G. He sat down about eight rows from the back.

I didn't go to my seat. I stayed behind the rail where I could keep Dike spotted. I had everything figured, now... After the match was over, I'd trail him. I figured he'd collect his bets and then he'd lead me to wherever he was staying since he'd slipped the Gondola. When I had him spotted, I could give Darkin the call. We'd move in and open his pockets. And his suitcase with the murder-tricks. We would talk, maybe with a little persuasion. Tomorrow it would be in the papers—all about how Cochran did a genius act and caught the killer. And my picture. I was feeling two hundred percent better.

There was a big roar from the crowd. I took a glance. The match was on. I couldn't see too much from where I was standing, but Crowbar was planted near the middle of the ring, her two-ton arms out like she was hugging an invisible barrel. And Groaning Gertie—a black-haired little violet of about three hundred pounds—was waddling in, swaying from the hips and giving with hungry sounds.

Gertie led with a slow bear-hug and got a paw on Crowbar's wrist. Then something happened fast. Crowbar sank down on one knee, reached over and under at the same time, gave a fast spin, and Groaning Gertie rose and fell with a very loud smacking sound. All the way up here I shuddered. Gertie got up, shaking her head and making more noises. Again she started out with this wrist stuff. Crowbar started that sink-on-the-knee act. And then, from down in front of me, came this wild squawking scream. Like an eagle was caught in a concrete mixer. You could have heard it in Brooklyn.

And Crowbar heard it. She stopped like a statue and then slowly she straightened up and looked staring up toward me. Bango!

Gertie came in, gave her a kick in the stomach, grabbed her by the neck, got up steam as she started spinning, and then walloped her down on the mat like a pile driver. The Arena groaned. Gertie gave a roar and started beating her chest. Crowbar did nothing. She didn't have it anymore.

And just then I saw! Dike Jones was stuffing a pillow case back inside his overcoat, and the pillow case was flapping and squawking like mad.

I will give you one guess where Hercules was.

They lugged Crowbar out. Everybody sat around and waited about twenty minutes, then the announcer climbed back into the ring.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he yelled, "due to

HOTEL MURDER

injuries received in the first fall, the challenger is unable to continue. And so—The Champion—Groan-ing *Gertie!*"

Gertie beat her chest some more. The crowd started screaming it was robbed. And Dike Jones jumped out of his seat and came hustling up the aisle. I hid my face, then got in behind him fast.

From the Arena he took a cab to a sporty bar on West Forty-seventh. I put my nose against the window. When he came out, he was patting his pocketbook. Next he made a recreation club on Sixth Avenue. His wallet flattened again. He did that six times, with me right behind him. When he got through, it looked like he was carrying a football on his hip. And so help me, Patsy! He went back to the Gondola! Yeah!

What an actor! He was double-slick!

I saw him step into the elevator. I took a hard breath, wet my lips, and hustled in. Sam looked, looked again, and let a choked yelp. Nick brought the elevator back. His face came apart in sections when he saw me.

"Which way did he go, and don't believe everything you read," I snapped. "Fast! Which floor did Dike Jones take?"

"Fi-five," Nick strangled. We went up. He was glad to let me go. I tip-toed along the lobby to Dike's door and pulled out the .45. It was loaded like freight train. I listened. I heard the bed creaking, then everything got still. Without a sound I slid out my fifth floor pass-key, unlocked the door, and stepped inside the darkness. So he was getting in some sacktime after a hard day of killing. I snapped on the light. There he was, under the cover, face toward me, already asleep.

I glanced around. On the dresser—right there in plain sight—stood the bag of tools. I walked over to the bed, stuck the noisy end of the .45 in his ear, and spoke. "Get up, you killer! This time you picked somebody a little too smart for—"

"All right, Cochran! Drop that gun!" a voice grated behind me. I didn't need a look. I was getting to know Darkin's voice.

"This time I'm glad to see you. This time I've got the proof," I said. "In this bed we have Dike Jones. On the dresser, as you will see—"

"Move against that wall and shut up!" He was not yet ready to make friends. His eyes were like scraps of blue broken glass. His face was sleet-gray. I didn't want to rub it in. I backed against the wall. He edged toward the bed, keeping another cannon planted on my chest. He leaned over the bed, stood still a long second, then suddenly ripped back the covers. I had been smiling.

I quit. I felt my eyes jump. My tongue

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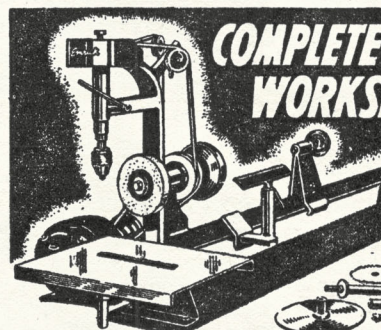
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turned around and went down. My stomach hit my heels. A sound—not a word—just a sound fell off my teeth. Then I just stared.

In the middle of Dike Jones' chest stood a knife, buried to the handle. Blood was still spreading out across his pajamas. He was permanently dead. And the final straw was—it was my knife! My initials! There in his chest!

Darkin let his ground-glass eyes slice around my face, and a little smile of final satisfaction settled on his lips. "Now, what were you starting to tell me, Mr. Cochran?" he asked bitterly-sweetly.

"Some . . . Mistake . . . Very terrible mistake . . ." I couldn't get my tongue unlocked. My knees kept bending. I was a cooked potato, and I could feel them heating the chair already. Somebody had double-crossed me. I tried to think, but I couldn't take my eyes off that knife.

"Okay, Cochran. Let's walk. And this time I'm shooting if anything happens." He gave a little twitch with the gun. I wobbled. I started to say something. It came out like this: "Uh . . . Er . . . Terrible."

The gun settled against my spine.

I walked.

They were lined up like vampires at a grave when we reached the lobby. Everybody. Just staring. Big hungry eyes. Wetting their lips with their tongues. Killer . . . See . . . That's the killer. They caught him . . . Illya Gresham was there. William Swim was there, bug-eyed and pinching at his pale moustache. Then the front door flew open and Daisy bounced in. After her came Prince Baba, looking like a porcupine that wanted to fight.

"Robbed!" he screamed, flapping his beard. "Some double-thieving, double-crossing, double—" and he slid off into Portuguese. Then Crowbar staggered in, her jaw wrapped in adhesive tape, two liver-colored pillows for eyes, and looking like she would kill the first guy to breathe in her direction.

"Hercules . . . Oh, my Hercules!" she wailed. "I know—"

"Wiggles!" Daisy piped. "Don't tell me that you're bothering the policeman again. I thought—"

All of a sudden the walls shook with something like thunder-plus. "That man!" That man over there!" It was Crowbar roaring. "Look on his pants! That-there green feather! It's me Hercules' feather! He's got me Hercules!"

Everybody looked everywhere, then Crowbar started across the lobby like a tank through mud. Her big arms reaching out, trembling in fury. Her mouth was twisting up and down. And William Swim gave one look down to

HOTEL MURDER

his pants leg and his face turned green. "Mistake!" he yelled. "Wait! Stop! Kindly—" Crowbar snatched at him. He exploded into a jump that left part of his coat in her fist. He whipped around the lobby, hunting a door. But Darkin and I had the front exit blocked. Prince Baba gave a squeak and dove at his legs. Crowbar closed in again. Swim screamed again and bolted up the stairs with Crowbar and Baba and Daisy right behind him.

"What in God's name—" Darkin exploded. "That man!" *That's the killer!* "I shouted. "Come on! Follow me! You'll see—" "Cochran! Stand—"

"Come on, you thick-headed idiot!" I plunged up the stairs.

I heard them pounding into a corridor somewhere above, Swim still screaming and Crowbar roaring. Doors began to slam. They were down at the end of the sixth floor.

I skidded into the doorway with Darkin and the .45 right behind me. Crowbar had Swim pinned against the wall and was pulling out his moustache, one piece at a time while he yelled. His face was very wet and white. His feet didn't touch the floor. He looked like a guy whose bicycle had run away from under him. And Baba was giving the room the hurricane treatment. Out came the dresser drawers, and down went the stuff on the floor. The suits flew out of the closet. The covers flopped off the bed. Then Baba split open a pillow and screamed.

Hercules hit the floor with a dull plop and stayed there. Hercules was dead. Crowbar gave one long look at this and tears came into her eyes. And her face had been like an angel's before, compared to now. She sucked a long breath, laid a hand around Swim's throat and he stopped screaming. Down he went on the floor.

"Stop her! Stop this!" he screamed. "I'll talk! I'll tell everything! Take this woman away!" She snatched him again. "I did it!" he yelled. "Save me! Take her away!"

Darkin grabbed one leg. I got an arm. Baba got a grip. Daisy rushed in and stepped on my neck. We got Crowbar away from the pieces of Swim. He moaned and crawled into the corner behind the writing table and stared bitterly at Crowbar. "Okay," Darkin snapped. "You want us to let her loose again."

Swim screamed and started jabbering fast. "I'm Dike Jones. I . . . I escaped from the Oklahoma penitentiary three months ago. I read about Daisy Field inheriting all the money, so I decided to get a position here as a . . . a cultural director and possibly find a way to . . . to get into the two million." He swallowed hard.



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"Keep moving. Crowbar is restless," I barked.

"I got the job. Then I saw a note on Daisy's desk. I recognized the hand writing. It was my wife's—Martha McCormack's. I—"

"You had tried to kill her, hadn't you? The trailer over the cliff," Darkin prompted. Swim nodded and swallowed.

"She'd learned I was here. She had guessed my intentions. She wanted to warn Daisy. So I followed Daisy to her address and killed her. Then . . . And then after that, I learned that Whispery Stone was here with a lot of cash. I started thinking. I worked out the idea of getting the money, betting on Groaning Gertie, and making Crowbar lose the match. That way, I'd have a bankroll again, even if I failed with Daisy. So . . . Well, that's all. I— Don't let that woman loose!"

"And what about this poor Patsy downstairs? The other Dike Jones?"

"He was just a punchy I found in Times Square. So groggy he couldn't think or count. I decided to dress him up and parade him around awhile as Dike Jones, then dump him into a concrete suit and let him down into the East River. That would maybe be the end of Dike Jones, see?"

Suddenly there was a rustling sound, then a weak gawk from the floor. Everybody turned around, and Crowbar let out a cry.

So help me, Patsy, that iron-tough Hercules was dragging himself back together, shaking his head groggily and spitting out a few curses. He stopped, and suddenly his eyes got red as he saw Swim. He gave a harsh caw, flapped his tattered wings, and roared into Swim's face.

Swim started screaming again. Hercules hooked onto his ear. Darkin ducked. Crowbar waddled forward and pried Hercules loose. Swim was screaming hysterically: "Take me to prison! Take me away! They'll kill me here!"

Darkin took him, giving me a cold black look as he went out the door. Hercules was singing like a buzz-saw in Crowbar's ear. Baba started fluffing his beard and wishing for a drink. I sat down, feeling ten years older than a mummy.

And here came Daisy, dancing over in front of me with her blue eyes shining and an angel smile on her face.

"Now, see!" she warbled happily. "If you'd just listen to me and not try to think, everything would be wonderful. And anyway, I told you to stop bothering the policeman like that. I told you not—"

I screamed, counted ten, and ran toward the bar.

THE END

(Continued from page 32)

kill her! But not him. He just done it to satisfy his own glitter-hungry ambition. And when it happened, I wanted him to know who was responsible for his downfall.

So after he'd got too far down the stairway to stop in time, I let him have it:

"Watch out for that tenth step!" I yelled. "It's a dinger!"

He was already finding that out. His foot hit it and it gave way beneath him, and the next thing he knew he was tumbling down through space, grabbing for the handrail that wasn't there. I could hear him screaming all the way down.

Then a hand dropped on my shoulder, and my heart jumped clear up into my throat. It was Sweeney. He'd seen me sneaking out of the lobby, and followed me here. His eyes looked dreamy.

"The tenth step," he murmured. "You sure called it, brother. What was that he said about seeing you with a hammer tonight?"

Well, they found my shoeprints leading down to the break, all right. The dust was too thick for Billy's to have spoiled them all. And they found the hammer in my dressing table. It still had shreds of rust and matching wood caught in its claws, from where I'd pried out all but one of the nails holding that step in place.

I tried to tell them it was just a kind of insurance, to keep Rosita from running out on me. That I hadn't meant nothing to happen to her, unless she tried to meet Rikki on the beach that night.

But the D.A. told the jury it was still a deliberate murder trap, and it had killed *somebody*, even if not the one I meant it for. He said the law demanded payment for a thing like that.

He made a darn good speech. They give me one to ten years, for second degree homicide.

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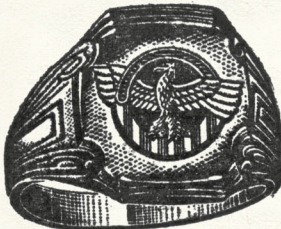
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THE CRIME CLINIC

IT MIGHT be considered unusual, even in
southern California, for a gentleman whose
desk was heaped with money to occupy himself
with so menial a task as affixing new rubber heels
to his own shoes. But then, Peter Potter had been
called just that. He did about what he wanted to
do, and furthermore enjoyed doing it. That
is, he had enjoyed himself up to the time these
two nattily dressed, yet sinister gentlemen barged
in and interrupted him.

"We're from the government, Mr. Potter.
There're a few questions we'd like to ask you."
The taller man pulled out a thin black wallet
and flashed an identification card. "Just what is
your occupation?"

"Well, you might call me a student of trivia.
The Internal Revenue Department knows me as
an inventor, but my wife says I'm a loafer,"
Peter Potter replied.

The tall man cocked an eyebrow in the direction
of the money-heaped desk, then pulled a
folded page of newsprint from his pocket. It was
a tearsheet of the classified ad section from yes-
terday's *Journal*:

Last chance to send in your dollar.

Peter Potter, P. O. Box 269.

Peter looked up from the paper with a twinkle
in his light blue eyes. "Yes, I inserted that ad-
vertisement. It also ran in two other newspapers."

"Why?" demanded the tall man. "What's your
angle?"

Peter shrugged. "I don't expect you to be-
lieve me, but it was done merely out of curiosity
—on a bet."

Disbelief was plain on his visitors' faces and
Peter continued rather defensively. "Yes, to
settle a bet. A friend of mine and I had an argu-
ment the other day about the power of advertising
and the gullibility of the public in general. He's a
professor of psychology and should know better.
I did it to prove my point to him, that's all."

"So what did it prove?" asked the tall man.

Peter gestured toward his desk with a grin.
"That's what came in yesterday—the last day.
So far, three thousand and twenty-three guileless
souls have mailed me a dollar each. That's not
counting what's in today's mail at the post-office.
I haven't got it yet." . . .

Well, Peter Potter never did get his mail that
day. Later, he realized that when he turned the
key in the Post Office box, he had literally
opened the door for a series of brutal murders
that sputtered and popped about him like a string
of Chinese firecrackers. But that didn't daunt
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Be alert to cancer's danger signals: 1. Any sore that does not heal, particularly about the tongue, mouth or lips; 2. A painless lump or thickening, especially in the breast, lip or tongue; 3. Progressive change in the color or size of a wart or mole; 4. Persistent indigestion; 5. Persistent hoarseness, unexplained cough, or difficulty in swallowing; 6. Bloody discharge from the nipple or irregular bleeding from any of the natural body openings; 7. Any radical change in normal bowel habits.

Next, support the American Cancer Society whose crusade to save lives is carried on purely through voluntary contributions.

Your active participation may save your own life . . . or that of a loved one.

Yes, One in Three may be saved!

Will you help?

THE AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY, INC.

47 Beaver Street, New York 4, N. Y.

Sirs:

- ☐ I enclose \$..... as my gift to fight cancer.
- ☐ Please send me, without cost, information on the "danger signals" of cancer, to protect myself and my family against cancer.
- ☐ Please send me the name and address of the nearest cancer information center.

Name
PLEASE PRINT

Street

City..... State.....

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